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BOOK REVIEWS

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WE MAKE THE ROAD BY WALKING: CONVERSATIONS ON EDUCATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE

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by Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, edited by Brenda Bell, John Gaventa and John Peters, 1990  
Published by Temple University Press, Broad and Oxford Streets, Philadelphia, PA 19122  
U.S.A. 256 pages

This book brings together two figures who, as activists and educationist, have revealed a lifelong commitment to transformative radical adult education.( [n1](#)) Both Myles Horton and Paulo Freire have a lot in common, as the editors of this publication point out in their introduction. Throughout their adult education work, Horton and Freire have underlined the distinctly political nature of educational activity, insisting that there can be no "neutral" education. They have also promoted the view of the learner as "subject" rather than "object" of the learning process. Furthermore, they both devised their adult education strategies within the framework of an ongoing struggle for the generation of radically democratic relations within the respective contexts in which they worked.( [n2](#))

As far as Paulo Freire is concerned, this is, to date, his third "talking book" in the English language( [n3](#)) My reactions to this style of publication have been expressed in another review of a "talking book," involving Freire, which appeared in a previous issue of this journal.( [n4](#)) They therefore need not be reiterated here. Myles Horton was definitely less prolific as a writer than Freire and it is possibly for this very reason that his contribution to transformative radical adult education has not been accorded the international recognition that it deserves. If only for this reason, I regard the publication of this taped conversation a most welcome initiative, more so on consideration of the fact that Myles Horton passed away soon after the two authors' final revision of the manuscript.

This book virtually represents Myles Horton's last testament with respect to his ideas concerning adult education and social change. It constitutes a fitting tribute to him. Although Freire undoubtedly makes his presence felt throughout the conversation, it is Horton who takes up most of the space, encouraged, in this regard, by the third anonymous participant who, at times, makes special efforts to bring out the best in him.

In their introduction, the editors, all of whom were close associates of Myles Horton, divulge background information concerning the development of this book and contextualize the two men's efforts in the field of adult education, providing, in the process, useful biographical data on both. This is followed by the transcribed conversation which is divided into six chapters. In the introductory chapter, Freire and Horton give their reasons for engaging in such a project, outline the major themes and indicate what they regard as the merits of "speaking a book." In the second chapter, Horton and Freire reflect on their formative experiences, outlining the major influences on the development of their ideas and pedagogical practice. The conversation deals, among other things, with the emergence of the Citizenship Schools, in Horton's case, and Freire's early literacy work in Brazil. The chapter also highlights the theological and philosophical influences on Myles Horton, notably the work of Reinhold Niebuhr. There are, of course, references to his stay in Denmark where he came into contact with Bishop Grundtvig's idea and, presumably, those of Kristen Kold, ideas one associates with the Folk High School concept. Yet we are provided with no sustained account, in this publication, of the extent to which these ideals from Denmark influenced Horton's thinking. References to the authors' formative experiences can be found in different parts of the book, especially in the concluding chapter where they reflect on some of the episodes which, they feel, had a bearing on their formation as activists and educators.

The third chapter consists of a discussion on some of the ideas that are central to the adult education philosophy of Horton and Freire. The conversation deals with a number of themes with which readers of Freire's other work would be familiar. These include the importance of generating ideas rooted in material practice, the need to convert "common sense" into "good sense," the issue of directiveness in adult education, commitment or neutrality in education, charismatic leadership, the distinction between organization and education, and the contrast between a prescriptive education and one geared towards empowerment. In this chapter, Horton stresses the importance of competence and directiveness. He insists that the adult educator should have a "vision of what ought to be or what they (the learners) can become..." (n5) Nevertheless, Horton underlines the importance of dialogue in the educational process, insisting that the ideas which the facilitator has should not be imposed upon the learners. In the chapter which follows, the one on "Educational Practice," he states:

"You can get all your ideas across just by asking questions and at the same time you help people grow and not form a dependency on you. To me it's just a more successful way of getting ideas across." (n6)

For Horton, therefore, the competence which the facilitators have should not lead to their becoming prescriptive. They should engage with learners in a problem posing education. It is the learners who should come up with the answers or solutions to problems and he illustrates this point by means of a memorable anecdote, which has been referred to elsewhere in the literature

on Highlander.( n7) He recounts how he once had a gun pointed at him by a frustrated learner who insisted that Horton should provide the solution to the problem posed, an indication that a problem posing education can create its own tensions.

Horton's views regarding competence and directiveness, within the context of a dialogical education, are supported by Freire's reiteration, in the section on "Educational Practice," of the distinction between authority and authoritarianism in education. This theme was introduced by Freire in the conversational book with Ira Shor and it marked a decisive break with his earlier work in which he had not rendered explicit the belief that educators and educatees are not on an equal footing in the learning process.( n8) Another important issue which emerges is that of showing discretion when facing people who, for years, had been accustomed to prescriptive teaching methods. Horton makes the point in his account of his introductory meeting with farmers who expected him to demonstrate his "expertise." Not to disappoint them and make them lose interest, he decided to deliver a speech, followed by a discussion, therefore doing as a teacher, "part of the old and part of the new."( n9) Likewise, Freire stresses the need to "be 50 percent a traditional teacher and 50 percent a democratic teacher,"( n10) at least in the first session with the learning group. This may be taken as a recognition of the fact, often pointed out with respect to his advocacy of a dialogical education, that adult learners, conditioned by years of exposure to "banking education," would not always be disposed to partake of a dialogical, democratic education. As Freire himself would put it, going by one of his earlier formulations, they would be fearful of freedom itself. These considerations can be taken as clarifications of Freire's earlier views regarding the social relations of education. Nevertheless, the central emphasis on a dialogical and empowering education remains.

The penultimate chapter deals with the issue of social change. I consider of particular importance the theme of commitment. Horton develops this theme through his account of his experience as a foreign observer during the elections which took place in Nicaragua in the early 1980s. There he experienced the deep rooted sense of commitment exhibited by popular educators who would risk life and limb in persisting in their efforts to educate for social transformation. It affirms his belief, shared by Freire, in the effectiveness of carrying out transformative adult education within the context of movements which can have a great mobilizing effect on people, causing them to be prepared to face death for the advancement of their cause. Horton had direct experience of such mobilisation and accounts of the coal miners', bugwood cutters' and the shirt factory strikes indicate that he and his associates faced their organizing and educational tasks, in relation to these strikes, with the kind of courage which he calls for in this section of the book.( n11)

In this chapter, a fundamental difference in the ideas can be noticed. Horton tends, through his examples and anecdotes, to portray the formal system of education, as well as other formal social institutions, in a pejorative light. The message which seems to come across from Horton is that transformative social practices are most likely to occur outside the formal system: "We concluded that reform within the system reinforced the system, or was coopted by the system."( n12) This explains his focus on adult education and the formation of potential leaders of social movements. Freire argues that one should engage in transformative action both outside and inside the system, and that opportunities to work within the system should not be missed. In his view, one should have one foot in the system and another outside. This seems to have been the philosophy throughout his life as an adult educator and is reflected in his recent work as

Education Secretary in the Municipal Government of Sao Paulo where he worked "within" the system in concert with agencies operating "outside" the system--social movements. His views on the issue of cooptation (he argues that cooptation represents a tactical moment in the struggle) must offer hope to all those adult educators, working within the state system, or in organizations which depend on state funding, who see themselves operating "in and against the state"--an engagement in a Gramscian "war of position."

Despite such a difference in point of view, there seems to be no tension running through any part of the conversation. There is, for instance, none of the tensions we discover in the discussion, by Freire and Antonio Faundez, on the literacy campaign in Guinea Bissau.( n13) This lack of tension in any part of the conversation is quite surprising, considering that one is confronted by two forceful personalities, people who hold strong opinions on various issues. The two seem ever so agreeable with each other.

The transcribed conversation lacks sustained analyses of particular forms of oppression. It is some what surprising, considering that the conversation involves Myles Horton, a person whose work in the 50s was closely connected with the Civil Rights Movement, that the issue of racism is not explored in depth. This would have presented Freire-inspired adult educators with a wonderful opportunity to examine closely the application of the Brazilian educator's ideas within the context of a major social movement After all, Freire has been arguing, in recent works, that it is in the context of social movements that transformative adult education ought to be carried out.

This is a book which I would recommend to be read by all those interested in the field of adult education for social transformation. As Henry Giroux states in one of the blurbs on the back cover, the book conveys a strong sense of hope. The two authors had been going through a difficult period at the time of the conversation. Freire had just lost Elza, his first wife and, as he stresses in the first section, a great source of inspiration to him. Horton had suffered a bout with colon cancer and was later to undergo brain surgery. Each of these experiences would be enough to dampen one's spirits.( n14) The two educationists/activists, however, come through, in this work, as people of vision who are also dynamic and ever so ready to scale new and higher mountains, to borrow a metaphor from this book. For Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, the quest for social transformation is an ongoing and a relentless process, requiring an all-consuming, life-long effort

## NOTES

*(1.) I should like to thank Carmel Borg and Budd Hall for discussing the book with me before I wrote the review. I should also like to thank Carmel Borg for commenting on earlier drafts of the review.*

*(n2.) For instance, both were engaged in projects, involving adult literacy, intended to render members of oppressed groups eligible to vote. In the case of Horton's Citizenship Schools, the oppressed were Blacks. In the case of Freire's pre-1964 activities, the oppressed were peasants in Brazil's impoverished North East.*

(n3.) *The others are: A Pedagogy for Liberation (with Ira Shor, 1978) and Learning to Question (with Antonio Faundez, 1989). In addition, there are three dialogues in Literacy: Reading the Word and the World (with Donaldo Macedo, 1987).*

(n4.) *Cf. my review of Learning to Question in Convergence, Vol. XXIV, No.4, 1991, p.80.*

(n5.) *We Make the Road by Walking, p.100.*

(n6.) *Ibid., p.147.*

(n7.) *Cf. Frank Adam (1972), "Highlander Folk School: Getting Information, Going Back and Teaching It" in Harvard Educational Review, Vol. 42, No.4., November, p.519.*

(n8.) *Ira Shor, Paulo Freire, (1987), A Pedagogy for Liberation, Bergin and Garvey, p.103.*

(n9.) *We Make the Road by Walking, p.162.*

(n10.) *Ibid., p.160.*

(n11.) *Cf. John M. Peters, Brenda Bell (1987), "Horton of Highlander," in Twentieth Century Thinkers in Adult Education, edited by Peter Jarvis, Routledge, p.251.*

(n12.) *We Make the Road by Walking, p.200.*

(n13.) *Paulo Freire, Antonio Faundez, (1989), Learning to Question, World Council of Churches.*

(n14.) *I am indebted to Carmel Borg for drawing my attention to this point.*

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