Mikhail Bakhtin and Ideological Becoming

INTRODUCTION

Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), described by Zvetan Todorov (1984: ix) as “the most important Soviet thinker in the human sciences and the greatest theoretician of literature in the twentieth century”, employed dialogue as a fundamental category in his analysis of language, literature and society. Unlike Buber and Freire, Bakhtin wrote very little about his own life and spent most of it in obscurity in the outposts of the Soviet Union. However, he generated an oeuvre that has been highly suggestive for the humanities and social sciences. Although his primary focus was the novel, his ideas have been taken up in a variety of fields, including literary studies, linguistics, theology, sociology, philosophy and education. In the last decade or so, education theorists have begun to tease out the implications of his ideas for pedagogy (Sidorkin, 1999; Ball & Freedman, 2004; Rule, 2006, 2011; Matusov, 2009; White & Peters, 2011).

Before outlining Bakhtin biography as a context for discussing his key philosophical and educational ideas, two preliminary comments are in order. The first concerns the broader historical context in which Bakhtin lived and wrote. As a young man, he lived through the tumultuous transition from Imperial Russia to the Soviet Union, including World War One, the Russian Revolution and the Civil War, as well as the later privations of World War Two. The revolution marked a cataclysmic rupture with the past and brought into question every aspect of political and social life. The Soviet Union in the early post-revolutionary era was characterised by a kind of epistemic energy which enthused intellectuals and society at large to engage in fundamental questions about politics, aesthetics, philosophy, theology and culture. Clark and Holquist (1984: 35) describe the atmosphere among the avant-garde of young intellectuals as one of “euphoria, millennial enthusiasm and self-sacrifice”. This atmosphere contributed to the penetrative and far-reaching concerns of Bakhtin and his Circle in the 1920s: What is the nature of language, of culture, of art? What is literature and what is its role in society? What is the relation between art and life? What is the relation between self and other? How is one to act? What are the roles of theology and the Church in a revolutionary society? Intense philosophical debates took place not only within study circles but also in public fora. However, this intellectual blossoming was crushed by the increasing authoritarianism and uniformity of the Party line, beginning in the early 1920s but enforced ruthlessly by Stalin and his henchmen from 1929. Bakhtin had to adapt himself to living and writing in a context of severe repression and political correctness. This perhaps
partly accounts for his allusive and elusive scholarship where he suggests one thing and intimates another, a voice that is strident but with all kinds of simultaneous undertones and intonations.

The second and related issue concerns Bakhtin’s writing style, which has been criticised as being contradictory, repetitive and at times opaque. Bakhtin was not a systematic philosopher in the tradition of Hegel and Kant. He was strongly drawn to thinkers such as Buber, Kierkegaard and, in the world of fiction, Dostoevsky and Rabelais, who reacted against systemicity and emphasised the variety and multiplicity of lived experience. Bakhtin’s key ideas are about the many, the different: polyphony, heteroglossia, dialogue, the carnivalesque, multi-voicedness and vari-voicedness. In a late essay, he admits to a “love for variations and for a diversity of terms for a single phenomenon” and to an “open-endedness” of many of his ideas (Bakhtin, 1986: 155). This links to his insistence, like Freire, on the unfinalizability of human being, which is a precondition for selfhood and ethical responsibility (Morson & Emerson, 1990: 91). He draws the idea from Dostoevsky’s depiction of his heroes concerning “that internally unfinalizable something in man”. What applies to Dostoevsky’s heroes in fiction applies to human beings in their continuous becoming: “As long as a person is alive he lives by the fact that he is not yet finalized, that he has not yet uttered his ultimate word” (Bakhtin, 1984: 59, 60). Bakhtin resists closure and finalization of his own ideas, even by himself – “A man never coincides with himself” (ibid.: 59) – and insists on the plurality of unmerged consciousnesses in the quest for truth, thus leaving open space for continuing dialogue, not only with ancients and contemporaries but with those yet to come.

**LIVING IN TUMULTUOUS TIMES**

Mikhail Mikhailovitch Bakhtin was born in 1895 in Orel, a provincial town in Western Russia, into a well-to-do liberal family, the second of five children. He was brought up in the Russian Orthodox Church. His father traced his descent from the Russian nobility to the fourteenth century and worked as a manager in the commercial bank that Bakhtin’s grandfather had founded. Bakhtin grew up in the towns of Orel, and then Vilnius and Odessa on the borders of the Russian Empire, towns noteworthy for their multilingual, cosmopolitan cultures. As a school boy, he was introduced to Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* by his German governess. He also encountered the ideas of Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche. In Odessa, Mikhail’s German tutor introduced him to Kierkegaard and Buber, and he read the Russian literary critic, Vyacheslav Ivanov’s work on Dostoevsky and communication. Thus, even before he went to university, Bakhtin had read widely in literature, classics and philosophy. His elder brother, Nikolai, was a strong if agonistic influence on him. Nikolai, like Mikhail, studied classics in Petrograd, but then joined the White Guards during the Civil War and went into exile, eventually obtaining a PhD at Cambridge and becoming a professor of linguistics at Birmingham University, while Mikhail remained in the Soviet Union all his life. Nikolai wrote a poem to Mikhail in 1924 in which he called him...