

# H-Net Reviews

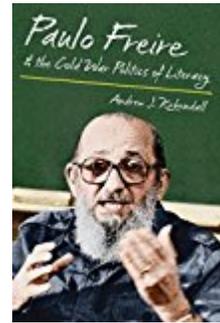
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Andrew J. Kirkendall. *Paulo Freire and the Cold War Politics of Literacy*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. xvi + 246 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3419-0.

Reviewed by Marian B. Mollin (Virginia Tech)

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## Democracy, Justice, and the History of Paulo Freire's World

Few books from the “global sixties” have gained a more widespread and lasting influence than *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire’s iconic 1970 text on education and social justice. Alongside such works as Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) and Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, Freire’s *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* became a transnational force for social and political change. As historian Andrew J. Kirkendall chronicles in *Paulo Freire and the Cold War Politics of Literacy*, Freire’s ideas about literacy training and humanistic empowerment helped shape liberation struggles in Latin America, efforts at state building and citizen empowerment in postcolonial Africa, United Nations and nongovernmental (NGO) perspectives on “development,” teacher education programs in the United States, and ecclesial reforms in the post-Vatican II Catholic Church. While aspects of this story are familiar to many, Kirkendall’s book presents them in a new light by placing Freire’s efforts squarely within the changing context of the Cold War world and by examining long overlooked dimensions of Freire’s career. In doing so, Kirkendall provides an insightful and historically informed explanation of the reasons behind Freire’s far-ranging impact, even as he analyzes the contradictions that putting the “Freire method” into practice brought to light. The result is a sweeping and ambitious study that spans the global and chronological reach of the Cold War, yet keeps a clear

focus on the meaning and significance of Freire’s work as an educator of the popular classes.

Kirkendall forcefully demonstrates how the dynamics of the Cold War, and the way they played out both in Brazil and on the global stage, shaped and transformed the trajectory of Freire’s career. As Kirkendall makes clear, Freire was very much a product of his time and place. From the start of his career as an educator in 1946 through his death in 1997, Freire responded to an ever-changing and intertwined series of local and global realities, of which a defining piece was the belief that literacy was necessary to support the kind of economic development that would create more modern and equitable societies in the so-called developing world. His first position, as director of an industrialist-funded worker education program in northeastern Brazil, reflected the way these beliefs shaped the priorities of Brazilian elites in the 1940s, who, in the midst of increasing democratization, hoped that combating illiteracy would calm an increasingly restive working class and promote “social peace.” These suppositions, combined with the influences of Brazilian nationalism, postwar European existentialism, and Catholic humanism, shaped Freire as well. By the 1950s, he had transformed literacy education into a vehicle to raise the consciousness of and to empower Brazil’s marginal classes, making a name for himself among educators across the region. The United States’

decision to promote development, and thus literacy, as a way to deter communist expansion heightened the significance of Freire's work and increased his prominence on a national level. Freire benefited from these dynamics in the early 1960s, when the United States funneled millions of dollars of aid into northeastern Brazil through the Alliance for Progress, but also suffered from them after 1964 when the Brazilian elite and the United States abandoned his country's burgeoning democratic experiment in favor of a military coup. Nevertheless, life in exile expanded his reach. Kirkendall recounts how the literacy programs that Freire supervised in Chile from 1964 to 1969 gave him a continental stage and transformed him into one of the most internationally recognized figures of the Latin American new Left. By the early 1970s, his influence had achieved global reach through his work with the World Council of Churches—where he guided the council's international education efforts—and the publication of his seminal text, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In the 1970s and 1980s, as anti-imperialist struggles increasingly defined the fault lines of late Cold War policy and debate, Freire took his literacy programs to West Africa and Nicaragua, where they became linked to the formation of revolutionary consciousness. By the end of his life he had come to stand not just as a Brazilian or a South American, but as a representative of liberation struggles across the third world.

Kirkendall saves his most pointed analysis for his assessment of Freire's work over the course of the educator's long career. In the first half of the book, Kirkendall applauds how Freire and his literacy programs personified the best and most idealistic impulses of the Latin American new Left of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly its commitment to human welfare, social change, and the search for a nonaligned "third way" between capitalism and communism. According to Kirkendall, Freire's quest for a more equitable society was most successfully manifest in the literacy projects that he established in Brazil and Chile during the hopeful years of the 1960s. Freire built off on the democratizing forces promoted by Joao Goulart in Brazil and Eduardo Frei in Chile as he structured programs around the tenets of dialogue, reflection, and communication. His end goal was to raise both literacy levels and the social and political consciousness of the programs' participants, students, and teachers alike, and thus move toward more just and participatory societies. Kirkendall argues that these efforts deserve praise, not only because of their successful educational outcomes, but also because Freire's ability to eschew partisan political identification, at least temporar-

ily, furthered "the democratization of both Brazil and Chile" (p. 89).

Kirkendall's positive assessment of Freire's work quickly wanes, however, once his analysis of the 1970s begins. The second half of the book vigorously criticizes Freire and his followers for abandoning what the author describes as their commitment to pluralistic democracy in favor of uncritical support for one-party revolutionary states. Kirkendall bemoans how, over time, consciousness raising too often led to radicalization and a decisive shift to the left, not only for Freire but also for progressive movements across Latin America. From Kirkendall's perspective, Freire's growing tendency to ignore anyone to his political right betrayed his pedagogical commitment to "dialogue." So, too, did his eager embrace of third world revolutions that disavowed capitalism and liberal democracy in favor of "liberation." In Kirkendall's telling, the contradictions between Freire's theory and practice only increased after 1975, when Freire took the lead in developing literacy programs in the former Portuguese colonies of Guinea-Bissau and São Tomé and Príncipe, and in revolutionary Nicaragua. In a compellingly told and largely overlooked piece of Freire's history, Kirkendall makes it clear that the Freire method did not necessarily translate well to other countries. In some instances, literacy rates did not appreciably rise; in all three of these cases, the projects served blatantly partisan purposes, with heavy overtones of indoctrination. Ultimately Kirkendall argues that by using his programs to promote revolutionary one-party political states, Freire compromised his personal ideals and the most fundamental tenets of his pedagogical beliefs.

In making this assessment, however, Kirkendall neglects important details about the growing global critique of Western liberalism, an unintentional result of U.S. Cold War policies in the developing world. Kirkendall thus criticizes Freire's move to the left and subsequent embrace of one-party revolutionary states, but does not fully explain why these shifts may have occurred. Most notably, he neglects to discuss how Freire's ideological evolution reflected a growing global disenchantment with the contradictions in Western liberalism, a disenchantment that went far beyond Freire or the larger Latin American new Left. As Freire and his allies came to learn, much that was promised by the United States was never delivered, and U.S. foreign policymakers frequently sacrificed their ostensible commitment to democracy and economic development in other nations for the sake of containing a perceived communist menace. As a result, from the mid-1960s on, many of those who struggled for

a more equitable world—in the United States, in Latin America, and across the developing world—came to mistrust the U.S. government and the Cold War liberalism it represented. These were not simply theoretical debates. Freire was certainly radicalized by the challenging dialogues that his literacy programs stimulated. But it is likely that his consciousness also evolved due to the experience of living through a U.S.-backed military coup; of suffering through arrest, imprisonment, and exile; and of seeing his hopes for pluralistic democracy snuffed out again and again by a combination of homegrown reactionaries and U.S. foreign policy. Kirkendall does concede that changes in the broader political climate played some role in Freire's shifting allegiances, explaining that "as [democratic] options narrowed, opinions hardened" (p. 89). But *Paulo Freire and the Cold War Politics of Literacy* pays scant attention to how U.S. intervention contributed to the narrowing of these democratic possibilities, not only in nations that experienced U.S.-supported right-wing military coups, but also in nations that experienced revolutions from below and then struggled to find ways to preserve their gains in the face of U.S.-backed threats. Freire and his allies may have abandoned the goal of "pluralistic democracy," but so did U.S. foreign policy. This was part of the reality to which Freire and his work were forced to respond.

Kirkendall's argument also raises the question of just how central "pluralistic democracy" was to Freire's utopian vision of social change, and thus how significant the apparent contradiction was between Freire's commitment to democracy and his practice of supporting third world revolutionary states. As a reading of *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* makes clear, Freire ultimately hoped that his pedagogical model would give the marginalized and exploited classes the tools they needed to enter the historical process, transform their realities, and overcome their oppression. His goal was, above all else, "humanization" and social justice, a small "d" "democratic" vision concerned with empowering the impoverished majority of Latin America rather than protecting the privilege of the minority elite. Thus, while Freire's literacy

programs could operate within a pluralistic democratic political framework, it is unlikely, based on his work in the 1970s, that Freire believed they had to. At the same time, Kirkendall dismissively characterizes Freire's "life-long engagement with the poor" as "admirable" (p. 167). This commitment to the most marginalized members of Latin American society and of the world, however, was not just admirable, but central to Freire's life and work. To criticize Freire for not pledging himself as fully to "pluralistic democracy" as he did to justice for the poor requires imposing a value structure onto his life that he did not necessarily ascribe to, and assigning more primacy to a goal than he was willing to do himself.

Nevertheless, on many levels, *Paulo Freire and the Cold War Politics of Literacy* is an impressive work of scholarship that sheds important light on the practice and significance of Freire's career. Kirkendall utilizes an extraordinary range of primary sources—including Brazilian, Chilean, and Nicaraguan manuscript collections; archival material from the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland; U.S. government documents; and textbooks and primers from Freire's various literacy campaigns—and secondary literature in order to place Freire's transnational efforts within a carefully delineated global historical context. Kirkendall's analysis of the impact of global forces on local and regional politics in post-World War II Brazil and Chile in the 1960s is particularly strong, as is his nuanced portrayal of the development and practice of the Freire method in both of these nations. Kirkendall's attention to Freire's international work in the 1970s under the auspices of the World Council of Churches also deserves praise: it covers important new ground and allows an honest assessment of the limits of Freire's pedagogical praxis as it moved to unfamiliar terrain. For readers interested in the politics of literacy, Latin American history over the "long sixties," the local and regional impact of international politics, or the movement of ideas across the globe, this volume has much to offer even as it raises important questions and concerns.

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