

# H-Net Reviews

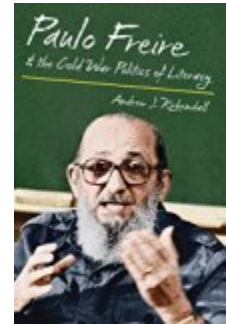
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

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.

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Published on H-Education (September, 2012)

Commissioned by Jonathan Anuik



Andrew J. Kirkendall follows Paulo Freire's (1921-97) career promoting adult literacy from northern Brazil to the world stage. Freire was thrown into poverty at age thirteen when his father died. As a young man, he worked for ten years with adult education programs with the illiterate poor who were excluded from political participation by the literacy requirement of Brazil's 1891 Constitution, a requirement that did not change until 1988. In the beginning, the Alliance for Progress, part of the U.S. post-World War II Cold War strategy, supported the efforts of Freire and others to educate the poor in Latin America but that support was abandoned under President Richard Nixon.

Freire and his colleagues experimented with teaching methods to replace traditional night schools with "cultural circles" where teachers would become "dialogue coordinators" and students "small group participants" (p. 39). His egalitarian idea was to promote "the work of 'man with man' and not 'for man'" (p. 21). Instead of using textbooks, Portuguese vocabulary would come from the students' lived experiences and slides depicting learners' daily lives, including people voting. The slides would be used to promote discussions. Quoting from a 1968 article by Waldemar Cortés Carabantes, Kirkendall writes that Freire's educational method "involved an attempt to 'produce a change in the consciousness' of the student. Learning how to read was only one element of the literacy program ... the adult student would also begin to view himself and his own reality critically. While looking at slide images representing his life, his 'customs, his beliefs, his social practices, (and) group attitudes,' the student would begin to 'discuss his reality' with his peers" (p. 70). Freire's success gained him an important role in Brazil's 1964 National Literacy Campaign. However,

almost immediately, a military coup changed things for Freire as Brazil's new leaders charged him with attempting to "communize" Brazil" (p. 56). Forced into exile, he continued to work on adult literacy for the Chilean government until 1969. The Chilean government's effort was "imbued with a profoundly Catholic humanism" (p. 65). Eight hundred thousand copies of introductory reading manuals were distributed that "tried to inculcate Christian democratic ideology" and included a basic history of labor unions (p. 72). According to Kirkendall, Eduardo Frei, the president of Chile from 1964 to 1970, rejected Marxism and liberalism and promised Chileans a society that was democratic but not individualistic, "communitarian but not collectivist," and supported Catholic humanism, which provided Freire a "congenial environment" (p. 65). Frei "lamented the fact that in 1965 only ten percent of wage workers belonged to unions" (p. 66). The manuals also advocated temperance and female domesticity and sought to replace the "magical" thinking of the peasants (p. 70). The goal was to train six thousand teachers. Frei accused his successor, President Salvador Allende, of trying to communize Chile and supported his overthrow by the military in 1973.

Freire also worked in Nicaragua, starting in 1979, where literacy manuals were produced that included revolutionary slogans, heroes, and martyrs. Upon their distribution, the schools were closed, and eighty thousand high school and university student volunteers were recruited for a five-month literacy campaign. Cuban volunteers also came and stayed for two years. In 1980, Kirkendall notes, "the language of revolution and the church blended together" in Nicaragua (p. 141). However, reactionary forces led to fifty-six volunteers being attacked and six volunteers killed. Under President Jimmy Carter,

the U.S. government provided more financial support for Nicaraguan literacy than any other country, but that support ended with Ronald Reagan's election as president in 1980.

In 1980, the changing political situation in Brazil allowed Freire to return home where he became involved again in the government's national literacy campaign, which focused on national unity and used the same key vocabulary throughout the country. He also became a founding member of the PT (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*) Workers Party to build "a socialist society" (p. 157). In 1986, he was awarded the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's peace prize. In 1989, he was appointed secretary of education for the Sao Paulo municipal government. He insisted that in education the "child's own knowledge and cultural frames of reference would be respected" (p. 160). However his efforts were undermined by 30 percent monthly inflation in Brazil at the time.

Freire is best known outside of Latin America for the English version of his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), and his work with adult literacy campaigns in Latin America and Africa that sought "to create questioning, critical, active adults" (p. 1). His efforts propelled him into the public spotlight and from 1970 to 1980, he worked for the World Council of Churches, traveling extensively and promoting adult literacy. Working in Africa for the council, he was hampered by the fact that the situation there was very different from Latin America: "Most African countries were too linguistically diverse and rural for Freirian techniques to be effective" (p. 112). He also worked with one-party states in Africa that were not committed to democracy. It is unfortunate that Kirkendall does not address the criticisms of Freire's work found in C. A. Bowers's edited volume, *Re-thinking Freire: Globalization and the Environmental Crisis* (2005). In his preface, Bowers writes that third world activists who contributed to his book "discovered that Freire's pedagogy is based on Western assumptions that undermine indigenous knowledge systems" and that the actual implementation of his methods uncovered the "colonizing nature of the cultural assumptions underlying his pedagogy" (p. vii).

While Freire achieved worldwide recognition for his literacy approach, it was not completely new. For example, Kirkendall refers to Frank Laubach's labors in the 1930s in the Philippines with "lightening literacy," where each newly literate adult was expected to teach another person to read (p. 6). The claim made by these types of programs of teaching people to read and write in forty hours of class time needs to be tempered with an examination of the actual reading level achieved. Similarly, scholars must examine what kind of follow-up existed to allow for the initial learning to be maintained and extended.

Conservatives tend to support literacy programs that result in economic development through an educated workforce and national unity while liberals like Freire supported it also as a means of human and democratic development. Freire certainly was interested in the economic advancement of his students, and an industrialist financially supported some of his first efforts in northern Brazil. Illiteracy was equated with both economic and political backwardness. The U.S. government comes across in this book much more interested during the post-World War II Cold War in opposing communism than supporting education and democracy, let alone social justice. Kirkendall sees complacency today in the face of an estimated one-fifth of all U.S. adults still illiterate.

The metaphors that teachers should be "guides on the side" rather than "sages on stages" lecturing is a common notion today that dates back long before Freire, but sometimes it is forgotten that guides need to be experts on the geography of their subject matter and have a responsibility to ensure that the destination they are guiding their students to is not unthinkingly destructive of local languages and cultures. The idea shared by Freire and many others through the ages that education should produce independent thinkers rather than indoctrination into a set of commonly held beliefs is important to return to again and again. However, one needs to be careful that independent thinking and questioning the status quo does not lead to a debilitating nihilism or revolutions that result in dictatorships. Bowers's critique of Freire's work needs to be taken into account when assessing the influence of Freire as a guide to what pedagogies are best for ethnic minorities as well as the poor.

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**Citation:** Jon Reyhner. Review of Kirkendall, Andrew J., *Paulo Freire and the Cold War Politics of Literacy*. H-

Education, H-Net Reviews. September, 2012.

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