Book Review

Andrew J. Kirkendall. *Paulo Freire and the Cold War Politics of Literacy.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010. 264 pp. Cloth $34.95.

This book is the result of Kirkendall's extensive archival research of many of Freire's key residencies throughout the world and it offers a meaningful glimpse into the Cold War politics of literacy through the life of Paulo Freire. Kirkendall's treatment of Freire's work provides readers with a new perspective through which to view the impact of the educator's consciousness-raising approach to literacy and citizenship. Kirkendall provides a context through which readers can understand Freire's transnational political activities and, in particular, how his ideas were implemented. While it is impossible to determine the efficacy and influence of the "Freire Method," Kirkendall reveals the difficulties faced by developing nations in achieving universal literacy in the midst of profound social inequity and fragile democracy.

Kirkendall's book is as much a political biography of Freire as it is an examination of the post-colonial preoccupation with literacy for the purpose of economic development. While Freire's own reflections have been widely published and much has been written about his theories on the humanizing experience of learning, Kirkendall's book provides scholars with a rare view of Freire as a reluctant politician and historical figure. With Freire's life as a guide, Kirkendall reviews the development of the Literacy Movement as it negotiated the legal, social, political, and ideological milieu of the "third world." The book is chronologically organized with chapters dedicated to Freire's life in his native Brazil and his fifteen-year tenure as an expatriate educator in Chile, Switzerland, Guinea-Bissau, São Tomè, and Nicaragua. In each chapter, Kirkendall examines the political, economic, and social influences on post-colonial states and how these were negotiated through various manifestations of democracy and citizenship.

As Kirkendall effectively demonstrates, the perfect confluence of events allowed for Freire's literacy program to take root in Brazil where the population was largely rural and illiterate. With the end of World War II came an urgent call to industrialize and modernize the "third world" and Freire's inimitable, often misunderstood, response has had multiple iterations and interpretations in both industrialized and developing nations. The status gained by the communist nations of Soviet Russia, China, and Cuba was a force to be reckoned with, as many Latin American countries and others in the developing world looked to

models of rapid mass literacy as a mechanism to transform the national economy. This, combined with a Western fixation on a deterministic model for modernization, served as a call for an occupational transformation of the peasant class in much of Latin America as well as its self-actualization. Influenced in part by John Dewey's *Democracy and Education*, Freire believed that the path to understanding is through dialogue and contextual experience.

The ideology of "developmental nationalism" dominated the Brazilian political discourse and largely shaped Freire's belief in the ability for national policies to create social equity and to promote a "truer experience of democracy" with educational programs that emphasized consciousness-raising (p. 18). In part, the prolific nature of the Freire Method was due to its ability to be implemented with limited resources. Freire was lauded by nationalist newspapers for his work in the northeastern state of Sergipe and the strength of his culture circles through which teachers and students discuss themes that are relevant to the lives of the learner. However, the program achieved little beyond the training of teachers as concerns with the ideological tenets of the curricular materials prompted the United States to pull all financial support from the education programs and Freire was forced to leave Brazil because of the 1964 military coup.

Tracing Freire's work for the next decade and a half, Kirkendall recounts the Freire's work for the reformist Chilean government, the World Council of Churches in Geneva, and Nicaragua. During this period, Freire became increasingly politicized and critical of the "old Left" and rightist policies of the West and developed a penchant for working with one-party states on the creation of their literacy programs. He had wide influence during his term with the World Council of Churches and while his literary campaign was not successful in the linguistically diverse Guinea-Bissau, Freire had, ironically perhaps, more impact in the largely colonial society of São Tomè. Seasoned by these lessons, Freire's application of his theories working with the Sandinistas in Nicaragua proved to be one of his prouder ventures through which he hoped to "learn from the revolution" (p. 126). Kirkendall speculates that had the Sandinistas been allowed to continue their educational efforts, "Nicaragua's democratization process in the 1990s might have been more profound than it was" (p. 152).

In 1979, Brazil's Amnesty Law allowed Freire to return to Brazil, which was a different country than the one he left fifteen years before. Interestingly, the military government had modified Freire's literacy methods to incorporate key words that were common throughout the nation but without the emphasis on social mobilization. Military rule had become more flexible and more and more civilians participated in the Brazilian government. Freire was offered a position as Secretary of

Education in the municipal government of Sao Paulo and, as Kirkendall shows, was able to make some considerable improvements during his short term, including an increase in public school enrollment of over 15 percent, the building of seventy-seven new schools, and a "substantial" decline in student dropout and failure rates (p. 163). Kirkendall also attributes the evident increase in teachers' morale to Freire's direct contact with large numbers of educators, an unconventional behavior among most high-level administrators.

With the end of the Cold War, Freire continued to believe in the possibilities of a humanizing education. His work was profoundly and inescapably shaped by the socio-political realities of the Cold War. As Kirkendall notes, his language that evoked concepts such as "the oppressed" is encapsulated in the period (p. 169). It is likely, Kirkendall asserts, that Freire had more impact on literacy and democratization than he otherwise would have experienced had the Brazilian coup-de-tat not pushed him onto the international scene.

This work is intended for historians of Cold War politics as well as educational historians. Kirkendall provides extensive notes and detailed biographies of the political actors. Freire's theories about curriculum and the nature of *conscientização* as a curricular source remain largely unexamined. It would be helpful to readers to have a clarification as to how literacy is defined in the various social contexts in which literacy programs were being implemented. While a functional literacy was being espoused by the entities under which Freire did his work, Freire and his allies were pursuing a broader understanding of the term—a literacy of consciousness. A clearer understanding of the terminology and how the disparate meanings conflict and complement each other would support Kirkendall's complex description of the educational landscape during the Cold War. However, for scholars interested in the socio-political limits and possibilities for curriculum implementation, this examination of how Freire's ideas were mutually adapted by the political actors of the Cold War raises some interesting questions about the post-Cold War significance of Freire's work.

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