



5-2015

# A Failed Dream: Literacy Education in the Global South

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## Recommended Citation

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A FAILED DREAM: LITERACY EDUCATION IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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April 23, 2014

## A Failed Dream: Literacy Education in the Global South

In the late winter of 1983, a group of approximately thirty international adult educators gathered at the Highlander Research and Education Center in rural New Market, Tennessee. Throughout the two day conference, these activists discussed their respective work in empowering disadvantaged and disenfranchised peoples through education. While the sponsors of the meeting originally intended to focus on the connections between past and present movements in North America, a delegation of Latin American educators altered the path of this meeting. Recognizing the importance of the exchange of ideas between these regions, participants proposed to host an international adult education conference that would bring together passionate educators throughout the world to discuss the collective problems facing oppressed peoples and to search for collective solutions. Because Nicaragua had just completed its revolutionary education experiment with the Literacy Crusade of 1980, the conference participants decided to hold the meeting in Managua, allowing them to personally witness the cutting-edge of world literacy education.

From its inception in 1932, Highlander, formerly the Highlander Folk School, worked to empower adults in the American South through education. While the school's early efforts focused on labor issues, Highlander became increasingly involved with the Civil Rights Movement during the 1950s. Leaders from all over the South attended the school's workshops and, as the program intended, took their knowledge and experiences back to their communities. Critics felt threatened by the success of Highlander's programs. One of the school's most outspoken opponents Arkansas Attorney General Bruce Bennett,<sup>1</sup> accused Highlander of inciting

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<sup>1</sup> Hobbs, "Politics of Repression," 88.

the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1956 since Rosa Parks claimed her attendance at a Highlander workshop inspired her refusal to forfeit her seat.<sup>2</sup>

While Highlander's residential workshops inspired many leaders of the developing Civil Rights Movement, the Citizenship School program in the South Carolina Sea Islands served as Highlander's greatest contribution to African American liberation. Although many believed that the *Brown v. Board* (1954) decision sounded the death knell of legal segregation, continued discrimination of African Americans under the South's Jim Crow laws showed civil rights leaders that their struggle for equality was only beginning. This ultimately led to the widespread recognition that the disenfranchisement of blacks largely maintained white hegemony.

In a workshop led by Septima Clark in 1957, participants concluded that "a voteless people are a hopeless people."<sup>3</sup> Recognizing desegregation would not occur unless blacks won the vote, the Highlander Folk School sponsored the Citizenship Schools to help blacks overcome the Jim Crow legislation, particularly the literacy tests, which prevented them from voting. In these schools, students learned the basics of reading and writing as well as the principles and responsibilities of "first class citizenship," which required active participation in the social, civic, and political processes in one's community. While Highlander ultimately transitioned the Citizenship Schools to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the program, which recognized the transformative power of literacy education, made Highlander a significant institution in the Civil Rights Movement, as organizations throughout the South utilized Highlander as a model of adult education for empowerment.<sup>4</sup> The Citizenship Schools also

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<sup>2</sup>See footnote 15 in Lazar, "Septima Clark Organizing for Positive Freedom," 251.

<sup>3</sup>"Report on Workshop in Public School Integration, 1957." "Report on Workshop in Public School Integration, 1957." From ProQuest History Vault, *Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1954-1970, Part 4: Records of the Program Department, Series III, Records the Citizenship Education Program, 1956-1967* (hereafter CEP Records).

<sup>4</sup>Hale, "Influences on the Mississippi Freedom Schools," 315-29.

placed Highlander in the growing international movement for literacy education, as several former colonial regions, especially in Latin America and Africa, began demanding their rights and freedoms, largely through education.<sup>5</sup>

During the second half of the twentieth century, many countries of the Third World faced challenges similar to those in the American South. Marginalized groups in these regions questioned their degraded political and socioeconomic status. Literacy education featured prominently in these social movements, as the disenfranchised in these diverse regions realized that their inability to read and write largely bolstered the position of their oppressors. Latin America became the battleground for many of these movements, especially under the influence of adult educator Paulo Freire. A native of Brazil, Freire developed his pedagogy and literacy program in the Brazilian Northeast to assist disenfranchised peasants of the region in gaining political and civic power through education. His methodology would later be adopted by several African and Latin American countries, including Chile, Nicaragua, Tanzania, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau.<sup>6</sup> However, as some scholars have suggested, Freire's work "with one-party states [in the 1970s and 1980s], whose educational practices often seemed to disregard Freire's theories," often failed to accomplish their humanitarian goals of empowering the oppressed, as these programs deviated from the intended pedagogy and outlined approaches.<sup>7</sup>

The increased emphasis on literacy for social change influenced the missions of existing organizations, such as the International Council on Adult Education, and led to the establishment of others, including the Participatory Research Group, both of which collaborated with Highlander. While many of these organizations initially focused on specific regions, their scope

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<sup>5</sup> See Miller, Valerie. *Between Struggle and Hope: The Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1985 and Bhola, HS. *Campaigning for Literacy: Eight National Experiences of the Twentieth Century*. France: UNESCO, 1984.

<sup>6</sup> Kirkendall, *Paulo Freire and the Cold War Politics of Literacy*, 105-117.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 90-91.

increased throughout the twentieth century, as more and more activists recognized the similar challenges and shared strategies in adult education. Myles Horton, the founder and director of Highlander, was one of these leaders.

From its inception, Highlander incorporated ideas and concepts from other countries, borrowing heavily from the Danish folk school tradition, which Horton had studied through an extensive visit to the country in 1931. His experiences contributed to the development of an international awareness at Highlander, leading the school to participate in many international adult education conferences, including a meeting in Chicago where Horton met Freire.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, it motivated Horton to establish connections with popular education leaders throughout the world, including those in Nicaragua. Through these discussions, Horton became increasingly aware of the connectedness of adult education, linking the work of Highlander, Freire, and the Nicaraguans. The 1983 meeting at Highlander and the later conference in Nicaragua served as the culmination of decades of effort by Horton and Highlander to establish networks of progressive adult education throughout the world.

While its important work in literacy education has been noted by historians of the Civil Rights Movement, Highlander has yet to be understood as part of a wider transnational movement for social change through literacy education.<sup>9</sup> Highlander was both informed by this international movement and served as a model and catalyst for these changes. In this way, this study contributes to a growing literature that locates the American South into a wider Global

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<sup>8</sup> Horton and Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking*, vii.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion on the Highlander's role in the Civil Rights Movement, particularly efforts to develop grassroots leaders through the Citizenship Schools, see Lazar, Stephen. "Septima Clark Organizing for Positive Freedom." *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 9, no. 3 (2007): 243-59 and Ling, Peter. "Local Leadership in the Early Civil Rights Movement: The South Carolina Citizenship Education Program of the Highlander Folk School." *Journal of American Studies* 29, no. 3 (1995): 399-422. For an analysis of Highlander's pedagogy and philosophy see Adams, Frank. "Getting Information, Going Back, and Teaching It." *Harvard Educational Review* 42, no. 4 (1972): 497-520 and Levine, David P. "The Birth of the Citizenship Schools: Entwining the Struggles for Literacy and Freedom." *History of Education Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (2004): 388-414.

South. This concept provides a mechanism to break down borders and understand a region with a shared set of problems for a peasant underclass and a shared set of reformers with ideas for addressing these problems.<sup>10</sup> However, the experience in Nicaragua also shows some of the limits of the notion of the Global South. Despite the similarities between the peasants of the American South and places like Brazil and Nicaragua, the political structures in which they live have shaped the success of literacy campaigns in empowering the disadvantaged and disenfranchised.

### **Highlander Folk School**

Although recent historical research tends to avoid focusing on single actors, the origins of the Highlander Folk School largely reflect one man's search for an institution to effect social change in the American South. Born in Savannah, Tennessee, Myles Falls Horton (b. 1905) experienced the severe socioeconomic disparities of the rural South. However, his early impressions of the virtues of the poor and the oppressed led him to dedicate the rest of his life to aiding those individuals.<sup>11</sup>

Early in his youth, Horton learned to appreciate the value of education. Although not formally trained, both Horton's parents taught at a local school before losing their positions due to increased educational requirements for teachers. Their experiences influenced Horton's beliefs

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<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of Paulo Freire's program Brazil, including replications of his teaching materials, see Brown, Cynthia. "Literacy in 30 Hours: Paulo Freire's Process." *Urban Review* 7, no. 3 (1974): 245-56. For an analysis of Freire's work in Latin America and in Africa, see Kirkendall, Andrew. "Entering History: Paulo Freire and the Politics of the Brazilian Northeast, 1958-1964." *Luso-Brazilian Review* 41, no. 1 (2004): 168-89 and Kirkendall, Andrew J. *Paulo Freire and the Cold War Politics of Literacy*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010. For a general discussion of the Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade see Arnove, Robert F. *Education and Revolution in Nicaragua*. New York: Praeger, 1986 and Miller, Valerie. *Between Struggle and Hope: The Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1985. For an analysis of the political nature of the program see Baracco, Luciano. "The Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade Revisited: The Teaching of Literacy as a Nation-Building Project." *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 23, no. 3 (2004): 339-54.

<sup>11</sup> Horton, Kohl, and Kohl, *The Long Haul*, 2.

about education, showing him “by their actions that you are supposed to serve your fellow men, you’re supposed to do something worthwhile with your life, and education is meant to help you do something for others.”<sup>12</sup> Spending much of his early youth laboring in factories to help support his family,<sup>13</sup> Horton learned firsthand the plights of the industrial worker and farmer in the South.<sup>14</sup> These experiences informed Horton’s understanding about the needs of adults in the region, which only intensified with the Great Depression.

In 1927, Horton had the opportunity to utilize the awareness he had gained. While a student at Cumberland University, Horton coordinated a Bible school with the local Presbyterian church in Ozone, an extremely rural and poor community in middle Tennessee. Although he focused on children’s activities during his first summer, Horton decided to host a meeting for parents in his second year. At this gathering, Horton asked the participants to discuss important issues for their community, particularly sanitation and cooperatives.<sup>15</sup> Through this experience, he concluded that these adults rarely collaborated, perpetuating problems and stifling positive change. For Horton, Ozone revealed a need and helped him identify techniques, particularly a focus on discussion, which would influence his educational model for Highlander.<sup>16</sup>

Horton further developed his ideas while studying sociology at the University of Chicago, where he met fellow social activists, notably Jane Addams.<sup>17</sup> Desiring to return to the South and create an institution to empower men and women, such as those he taught in Ozone, Horton hoped to meet with and share approaches with the country’s foremost activists. Arguably the most significant connection Horton made while in Chicago was a chance meeting with two

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<sup>12</sup> Horton, Kohl, and Kohl. *The Long Haul*, 3.

<sup>13</sup> Glen, *Highlander*, 10.

<sup>14</sup> Horton, Kohl, and Kohl, *The Long Haul*, 8-10.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 21-23.

<sup>16</sup> Glen, *Highlander*, 11.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 16.



Danish ministers, Enok Mortensen and Aage Møller.<sup>18</sup> After discussing Horton's educational ideas, the ministers encouraged him to investigate the Danish folk high school tradition, believing that the latter's model largely reflected Horton's ideas for an institution in Tennessee.<sup>19</sup>

Dissatisfied with the available literature on the Danish schools, Horton travelled to Denmark to study the tradition established by Bishop N.F.S. Grundtvig in the nineteenth century. While he concluded that the contemporary schools had lost the fervor of the original institutions, which arose after the fall of the country's monarchy, Horton's yearlong stay in Denmark provided him with a list of specific folk school practices he wanted to incorporate into his future institution. These included "students and teachers living together, group singing, freedom from state regulation, nonvocational education, and social interaction in [a] nonformal setting."<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, Horton saw the connection between these characteristics and the seeds of social organization he began several years earlier in Ozone. With this realization, Horton returned to the United States in 1932.

While Horton realized the need to pioneer an institution that responded to the specific problems of the South, his experiences in Denmark showed him the value of foreign ideas and practices. Frustrated by what was available to him in the United States, Horton looked elsewhere, realizing certain universal principles involving the disadvantaged transcended borders. Ultimately, this contributed to an international awareness that would characterize both Horton personally and the school he intended to establish. Although Horton understood the historical contingency that enabled the development of the nineteenth-century folk high schools, his experiences convinced him that, particularly in the arena of labor issues, the spirit of the older Danish tradition could be recaptured and used to establish similar institutions in other

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<sup>18</sup> Glen, *Highlander*, 16.

<sup>19</sup> Glen, *Highlander*, 18.

<sup>20</sup> Horton, Kohl, and Kohl, *The Long Haul*, 52.

countries.<sup>21</sup> The connection with this Danish model resulted in a relationship between the activities of the Highlander Folk School and similar adult education movements in Europe. However, most significantly, these international roots revealed a recognition of the common struggle of the oppressed, regardless of border or region, and illustrated the value of international collaboration and exchange of ideas.

Employing many of the practices from Denmark and Horton's personal knowledge of the plights of workers in the South, Horton and fellow activist Jim Dombrowski founded the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee in 1932.<sup>22</sup> Initially focusing on Grundy County, the site of Highlander, Horton taught classes on geography and economics, which aimed to increase both the citizens' sense of identity and demonstrate the power of economic collaboration, primarily through unionizing. Although Highlander focused its efforts from 1933 to 1935 on aiding timber and coal mining workers in Grundy County, its successful work in that area earned Highlander a positive reputation in the labor community, pushing the school into the larger arena of Southern labor organizations throughout the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>23</sup>

The looming civil rights struggle led Highlander staff and supporters to reevaluate the focus of the institution in the early 1950s. Since its founding, Highlander had been integrated, as Horton hoped that through "their experiential learning through living, working, and studying together [students] could come to an understanding of how to take their place intelligently in the changing world."<sup>24</sup> While it accepted students of all races, racial equality had remained a secondary goal to the labor issues during Highlander's first twenty years.

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<sup>21</sup> Horton, Kohl, and Kohl, *The Long Haul*, 53.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 58.

<sup>23</sup> Hobbs "Politics of Repression," 13.

<sup>24</sup> Horton, Kohl, and Kohl, *The Long Haul*, 54.

However, in 1953, Highlander's Executive Council met to discuss the school's future work, including a fundamental change in the direction of the institution. "We are at our best at Highlander when we are pioneering," Horton stated. "When our ideas and procedures become fairly well accepted, it is time for us to plow new ground."<sup>25</sup> After deciding that the South had "come within sight of material well-being" through the labor movement of the 1930s and 1940s, the committee concluded that Highlander needed to shift its focus to racial prejudice and segregation, especially in light of the approaching *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision.<sup>26</sup> In accordance with this new focus, Highlander hosted its first workshop on integration in 1953, aiming to show both the participants and those outside of the school that blacks and whites could live and work together amicably.

This transition from the labor movement to the Civil Rights Movement reflected the portability of Highlander's ideology and its international roots. While instituted as a center for the advancement of workers, Highlander remained, at its core, a center dedicated to fighting against inhumanity and injustice. Just as this underlying ideology had facilitated the international connections between the Danish folk high school tradition and Horton's ideal Southern institution, it also allowed Highlander's focus to change according to the perceived needs of the region at the time. This created an adaptable institution that could respond to the evolving American South during the twentieth century.

### **The Citizenship Schools**

While Highlander has received little attention in the historiography of the Civil Rights Movement, scholars such as C. Alvin Hughes have stressed the importance of the institution in

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<sup>25</sup> "Report of Special Executive Council Meeting, 1953." From Proquest History Vault, *Papers of the NAACP, Part 03: The Campaign for Educational Equality, Series C: Legal Department and Central Office Records, 1951-1955.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

shaping the character of the movement, asserting that Highlander trained and influenced many of its leaders.<sup>27</sup> Following the *Brown v. Board* decision, Highlander hosted several workshops in Monteagle focusing on school desegregation. Although Rosa Parks often receives the most attention as an alumna of these early workshops, Esau Jenkins's and Septima Clark's attendance at a 1954 workshop sparked a program that would propel Highlander into the Civil Rights Movement. Entitled "World Problems, the United Nations, and You," this workshop reflected Highlander's international awareness. Participants were asked to relate their situation in the South to similar issues throughout the world, namely discrimination, and with the United Nations' efforts to promote understanding and equality.<sup>28</sup> While Jenkins understood the importance of this work, he stressed the first to address and focus on some fundamental problems plaguing black communities, particularly illiteracy. Only after eradicating illiteracy, thereby gaining the vote, could blacks hope to make the changes they desired.

Although the Fifteenth Amendment guaranteed African Americans the right to vote, Southern states circumvented the full application of this directive through Jim Crow legislation. Despite the efforts to increase voter participation in the 1950s, a 1960 study of voting laws reported that twenty states maintained literacy requirements and six had poll taxes.<sup>29</sup> The failure of reforms largely reflected the efforts of white moderates, so often viewed as amicable to integration, to maintain the racial status quo. While these men and women superficially complied with the Supreme Court decisions, particularly *Brown*, they effectively avoided integration through legal mechanisms and stalled the sweeping changes required by the Supreme Court's decision.<sup>30</sup> Jenkins realized that as long as these individuals maintained power African

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<sup>27</sup> Hughes, "A New Agenda for the South," 242-243.

<sup>28</sup> Glen, *Highlander*, 158-159.

<sup>29</sup> See Smith, Constance E. *Voting and Election Laws: Laws for Voters*. New York: Oceana Publications 1960.

<sup>30</sup> Walker, *The Ghost of Jim Crow*, 40.

Americans would remain second-class citizens. He argued that change required the enfranchisement of blacks.

Overcoming the state literacy tests, however, proved a daunting task. Structural barriers, including inferior education in segregated schools and lack of adequate adult education, perpetuated the status quo. The socioeconomic and political realities of Jenkins's home, Johns Island, illustrated the magnitude of these disparities. Johns Island was one of several islands with a predominantly African American population located off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. While blacks comprised over ninety percent of the islands' populations, few of them registered to vote. For example, in St. Helena, ninety-one percent of the population was black, yet only thirty-one percent registered, meaning the white minority controlled nearly three fourths of the vote.<sup>31</sup> With this political power, the white population effectively denied African Americans much needed public education, health, and transportation services.

As a bus driver, transporting individuals from the Sea Islands to Charleston, Jenkins decided to challenge the status quo by encouraging his riders to vote and preparing them to pass the literacy tests. Per the South Carolina constitution, voters had to "read and write any section of [the] state constitution submitted by the registration officer."<sup>32</sup> Therefore, during their bus rides, Jenkins helped his riders memorize the state constitution. However, he acknowledged the limitations of his instruction. Many African Americans in his community accepted their second-class citizenship, for "white supremacy had instilled in many of his neighbors...fear and fatalism."<sup>33</sup> To show the black community the importance of their vote and the possibility of

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<sup>31</sup> Horton, Myles. "Report of Myles to the Sea Islands—January, 1958." In CEP Records.

<sup>32</sup> Smith, *Voting and Election Laws*, 67.

<sup>33</sup> Ling, "Local Leadership in the Early Civil Rights Movement," 408.

political change, Jenkins announced at the 1954 Highlander workshop his intention to run for trustee on the local board of education.<sup>34</sup>

Understanding that he could not succeed alone, Jenkins sought the support of Highlander at the United Nations workshop. As Bernice Robinson later described it, “he took over the workshop at that point and all of a sudden there were all those people out there who can’t read and write.”<sup>35</sup> Highlander, committed to refocusing and repurposing its portable ideology, agreed to aid Jenkins in establishing adult education classes on Johns Island. Horton realized that to be successful these night classes would have to respond directly to the needs of the people. Therefore, he spent six months visiting the Sea Islands and interviewing inhabitants of the island about their past educational experiences, particularly why the literacy programs sponsored by the state failed to meet their needs. While some complained about the physical discomfort and embarrassment of sitting in child-sized desks, others discussed more fundamental problems, namely that, rather than being taught as adults, the state literacy program utilized a curriculum designed for children. Resenting the patronizing environment of the classroom and the material so distant from their adult lives and goals, many quickly quit the program.<sup>36</sup> These observations in the Sea Islands would influence what would become the Citizenship Schools.

While Horton pledged to support Jenkins in 1954, difficulties in organizing community leaders on Johns Island postponed the program until January 1957.<sup>37</sup> During this delay, Horton hired Septima Clark and Bernice Robinson to manage the program. Although Robinson initially refused, believing herself unqualified to teach adults, she served as the first instructor of the Citizenship Schools. Horton asserted that her inexperience made her the best candidate for the

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<sup>34</sup> Ling, "Local Leadership in the Early Civil Rights Movement," 408.

<sup>35</sup> Robinson, Bernice. 1979. Speech transcribed by June Rostan. Harry Lasker Library, New Market, Tennessee, 2.

<sup>36</sup> Adams, "Highlander Folk School," 512.

<sup>37</sup> Ling, "Local Leadership in the Early Civil Rights Movement," 414.

position, for his time in the Sea Islands convinced him that the traditional student-teacher relationship degraded students. As Robinson later recalled, she informed her first students that they “were here to learn together,” for “they were going to teach me as much as I was going to teach them.”<sup>38</sup> By minimizing the hierarchal environment of the traditional classroom, Robinson gained the trust and attention of her students.

Furthermore, she focused on their interests in learning. For her first class, she brought only the South Carolina voter registration application, the Declaration of Human Rights, and two children’s school books. Quickly abandoning the elementary texts, Robinson asked her students what they wished to learn. Several explained that their illiteracy enabled others to abuse them. For example, men working on the wharf in Charleston wanted education in arithmetic, so that they could track their work and ensure that their employers paid them fairly.<sup>39</sup> Later Citizenship School workbooks revealed how student responses and interests largely shaped the curriculum of the classes. The South Carolina booklet contained information on election laws, the political parties of the state, paying taxes, applying for Social Security, obtaining health services, and completing money orders.<sup>40</sup> However, while South Carolina’s workbook focused more on civics, a later Tennessee workbook concentrated on grammar and arithmetic.<sup>41</sup> The diversity of content reflected Highlander’s commitment to contouring its program to the needs and wants of the individual communities.

Despite the diversity, the overall goals of the program remained consistent. Highlander used the Citizenship Schools to provide disadvantaged and disenfranchised African Americans with the tools to claim their rights and privileges as citizens, giving them the political clout to

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<sup>38</sup> Robinson, Bernice. 1979. Speech transcribed by June Rostan. Harry Lasker Library, New Market, Tennessee, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Glen, *Highlander*, 194.

<sup>40</sup> “My Reading Booklet Workbook, 1959.” In CEP Records.

<sup>41</sup> “My Citizenship Book Workbook, 1961-1962.” From Harry Lasker Library, *Citizenship School Workbooks*.

effect change. Although the vote was the most apparent of these, they also included access to other citizen benefits like Social Security. In Johns Island, this empowerment proved successful. Of Robinson's first students in 1957, all thirty-seven of voting age passed the voter's registration test in 1958. By 1960, John Island's African American voter pool rose from 208 in 1956 to 700.<sup>42</sup> Not only did the number of eligible voters swell, but voter participation dramatically increased. Of the 208 blacks registered to vote in 1956, only thirty actually participated in elections.<sup>43</sup> This largely reflected the fatalism noted by Jenkins. However, both his actions in running for trustee of the school board and Highlander's Citizenship Schools dramatically changed the political environment of Johns Island, as voter participation by blacks approached almost one hundred percent by 1960.<sup>44</sup> After gaining this political clout, African Americans on Johns Island possessed the power to effect the changes they had waited decades to see. Writing in 1960, Horton listed the major improvements on the island, stating that "roads have been built on the Island, public schools have improved, home life is better, public health facilities are available and used."<sup>45</sup> These successes inspired other islands in the Sea Islands to establish Citizenship Schools.

Expansion required the development of more leaders. Robinson's success in the first classes related to her ability to connect to her students and dismantle the traditional hierarchy of the classroom. Even she admitted later that many of the words and phrases of the Constitution remained unintelligible to her. However, as noted, Robinson's techniques proved successful in registering voters and providing them with the tools to function as full-fledged citizens in their

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<sup>42</sup> Horton, Myles. "Memorandum on the Citizenship School Training Program, December 1960." From Harry Lasker Library, *1960's Citizenship School Training Program, 1960-1961*.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*



communities.<sup>46</sup> To replicate this experience, several volunteers from the Citizenship Schools attended workshops at Highlander to become instructors. Soon, organizations outside of the islands also began sending volunteers to Highlander. Like Robinson, most of these individuals had little formal education.

However, these workshops transformed these ordinary citizens into community leaders through their training as teachers for the Citizenship Schools and met the rising demand for classes.<sup>47</sup> Horton praised this program, stating that as “students of one area become teachers in another” they not only aid others but “gain an ever deeper understanding of the principles involved...when they move out to teach others.”<sup>48</sup> Highlander’s program, therefore, helped people to help themselves by educating leaders to organize communities and respond effectively to their particular needs. Overall, this program reflected Highlander’s underlying philosophy, “the idea that the oppressed people know the answers to their own problems and, [according to Horton], the ‘teacher’s job is to get them talking about those problems, to raise and sharpen questions, and to trust people to come up with the answers.’”<sup>49</sup> Therefore, Highlander strove to provide the tools through literacy education for political change.

Turmoil in Tennessee ultimately led to Highlander’s withdrawal from the program. Throughout the late 1950s, Highlander faced allegations of operating as a communist training school. Litigation and the temporary closure of the school in 1960 led Horton and Clark, then Director of Education at Highlander, to search for organizations to assume the responsibility of the Citizenship Schools.<sup>50</sup> As noted, some organizations had sent members to train as teachers for schools in their communities, leading the program to spread from South Carolina to

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<sup>46</sup> Robinson, Bernice. 1979. Speech transcribed by June Rostan. Harry Lasker Library, New Market, Tennessee, 3.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

<sup>48</sup> Horton, Myles. “Report of Myles to the Sea Islands—January, 1958.” In CEP Records.

<sup>49</sup> Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 142.

<sup>50</sup> Clark, “Letter from Septima P. Clark to Lucile Synwolt, October 13, 1961.” In CEP Records.

Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia. Therefore, Highlander staff hoped for a large organization to maintain the spirit and momentum of the Citizenship Schools. While he initially refused, Martin Luther King, Jr. agreed in 1961 to adopt the program, placing it under the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the direction of both Clark and Dorothy Cotton.<sup>51</sup> Although Highlander no longer administered the program, it continued to serve as a training center along with the SCLC's site in Dorchester, Georgia.

While the program remained dedicated to voter registration, the SCLC recognized the significant potential of a network of grassroots leaders created through what it termed the Citizenship Education Program (CEP).<sup>52</sup> As Director of the CEP Andrew Young argued in his program proposal, the development of community leaders would be invaluable. Although he acknowledged the importance of literacy training, he recognized the overall poor education in black communities, even among the literate. Developing leaders, therefore, proved the most significant goal, as the "social, cultural, and civic development of the area will continue to be a problem even after voters are registered."<sup>53</sup> Therefore, the creation of leaders to address these manifold issues proved necessary to the maintenance of the Civil Rights Movement. It would also provide the SCLC with "a trained local leadership...to coordinate a wide variety of SCLC programs in the future."<sup>54</sup>

To accommodate this wider mission, the new program placed greater emphasis on the concept of first-class citizenship, which included "'the right to vote for the candidate of his choice and the responsibility of exercising that right in each and every election,' using voting

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<sup>51</sup> Glen, *Highlander*, 203.

<sup>52</sup> Lazar, "Septima Clark Organizing for Positive Freedom," 244-245.

<sup>53</sup> Young, Andrew. "Memorandum on a Proposed Strategy for the Citizenship School Program." From ProQuest History Vault, *Records of the Southern Leadership Conference, 1954-1970, Part 4: Records of the Program Department, Series I, Records of Andrew Young, Program Director, 1961-1964.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

power effectively to realize citizenship's opportunities, and working together with others to improve one's community."<sup>55</sup> In her recruitment letters, Cotton emphasized the focus on creating active citizens. Alongside literacy, Cotton asserted that African Americans needed to understand their government and the "the use of mass direct action, picketing, and the boycott in order to break down the barriers of segregation and destroy the institutions of prejudice."<sup>56</sup> The new workbook designed for the program reflected the more overtly political nature of the CEP, as the scope of the program shifted from small communities to the South and from local politics to national elections. Although many similarities existed between Highlander's and the SCLC's programs, as Clark largely developed both handbooks, the SCLC's edition included information on nonviolence and reading comprehension using historical events. For example, one exercise related the injustice of taxing the American colonists to the contemporary restrictions on voting for African Americans.<sup>57</sup>

The more overt political nature reflected the expansion in the scope of the program. The Citizenship Schools under Highlander, which operated in small communities on islands, more easily adhered to the concepts of experiential learning, including responding to the direct needs of the participants and spending more time to develop rather than instill political values and opinions. The CEP, however, embraced the SCLC's hierarchal role as an organization, aspiring to change not only local but regional and national politics as a representative of the black community. While not reaching the same hierarchal level as the Sandinistas in Nicaragua who also deviated from the similar pedagogy of Horton's Latin American counterpart, Paulo Freire, the SCLC achieved greater and more visible results on a much wider scope by deviating from the original Citizenship School model.

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<sup>55</sup> Lazar, "Septima Clark Organizing for Positive Freedom," 245.

<sup>56</sup> Cotton, Dorothy. "Letter from Dorothy Cotton to SCLC Contact Network." In CEP Records.

<sup>57</sup> "SCLC Workbook." From Harry Lasker Library, *Citizenship School Workbooks*.

By the 1964 presidential election, King hoped to double the number of black voters. His two year campaign relied heavily on the Citizenship Schools and the leaders trained through the program.<sup>58</sup> Ultimately, these efforts proved successful, for in the two years the SCLC operated the program after the transition from Highlander, fifty thousand African American voters registered, ten thousand of whom participated in the Citizenship Education Program or were directly influenced by those individuals.<sup>59</sup> Ultimately, while the SCLC modified Highlander's original program to include education on nonviolence and civil disobedience, the overall objective remained the same. Both organizations understood that voting represented a fundamental right in a democracy and recognized that, as long as African Americans lacked the ability to vote, they would face discrimination and inequality. However, education, particularly literacy education, precipitated its own change aside from voting, as seen in the Citizenship Schools. Learning to read and write allowed students to master a variety of empowering skills—to fill out money orders, apply for Social Security benefits, write letters, and do basic arithmetic to ensure that their employers paid them properly. Literacy provided them with the tools to challenge many of the discriminatory practices utilized by their white counterparts to ensure their submissiveness.

The Citizenship Schools allowed Highlander to engage in the growing international dialogue about literacy education. World War II and the subsequent Cold War precipitated severe social tension in many countries throughout the world which led disadvantaged and disenfranchised peoples to question their lower status, often through revolution. The oppressed frequently complained about their illiteracy, as they realized that their inability to read and write

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<sup>58</sup> *Atlanta Daily World*. "Voting Drive Launched for Southern Areas." April 6, 1962. .

<sup>59</sup> Clark, "Success of SCLC Citizenship School Seen in 50,000 New Registered Voters." *SCLC Newsletter* 1, no. 12. September 1963. From Harry Lasker Library, *Myles Horton Papers, 1896-1986, Citizenship Schools—Highlander Folk School*.

maintained their subjugated status. The Citizenship Schools enabled Highlander and the South more generally to participate in this wider world movement. While historians have traditionally studied the Civil Rights Movement as an American phenomenon, the work of Horton in making international connections with other regions performing similar literacy work reveals that Highlander's work was one branch of a wider international movement aiming to empower the oppressed through literacy education. Like his fellow activists in the Civil Rights Movement, Horton understood the connectedness of the phenomenon in the American South and the liberation movements in other regions, particularly those in Africa. Horton, therefore, was not alone in recognizing the link between the American South and areas of the Third World and the importance of an exchange of ideas between regions.<sup>60</sup>

As early as the 1960s, Highlander reached out to both Latin America and Canada to discuss the work and progress of each region in adult education. When Highlander hosted a preliminary conference in 1961, participants proposed an Inter-American Adult Education conference focusing on literacy education and community development.<sup>61</sup> This seminar, held in December 1962, encouraged the exchange of ideas between regions and revealed the need to dismantle state boundaries to understand the similar challenges faced by oppressed citizens in every region of the Western Hemisphere.<sup>62</sup> One participant described the event as "a means of bridging the astonishing gap between adult educators in North and Latin America at a time when the interchange of experience is an urgent priority in forging adult education into a functional

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<sup>60</sup> For a recent discussion of the connection between the American Civil Rights Movement and other world liberation movements, see Boxer, Andrew. "Civil Rights--the International Dimension." *History Review*, no. 70 (2011): 21-26, and Johnson, Matthew D. "From Peace to the Panthers: PRC Engagement with African-American Transnational Networks, 1949-1979." *Past and Present* 8 (2013): 233-57.

<sup>61</sup> "Memo on proposed Mexican Inter-American Adult Education Seminar, August 1962." From Wisconsin Historical Society, *Myles Horton Papers, Box 8, Folder 2-3*.

<sup>62</sup> "Preliminary Announcement Inter-American Adult Education Seminar. November 5, 1962." From Wisconsin Historical Society, *Myles Horton Papers, Box 8, Folder 2-3*.

element in the process of economic, political and social development.”<sup>63</sup> Horton also appreciated the connectedness of this effort, arguing that “there is a kinship between some of the programs...in the Southern part of the United States and in Mexico.”<sup>64</sup>

As in the American South, Mexico’s large illiterate population largely resulted from its colonial past. Despite early efforts to address the issue throughout the early twentieth century, Mexico did not dramatically reduce illiteracy until 1944 with the establishment of the *Dirreccion General de Alfabetization y Education Extraescolar*. Under this agency, the Ministry of Education installed centers throughout the country to collaborate with other national agencies and create educational materials and techniques. By 1962, this effort had reduced the illiteracy rate from 50% to 37%.<sup>65</sup> Similar to the Citizenship Schools, Mexico incorporated living and community skills into their literacy programs, teaching not only reading and writing but also knowledge needed to participate as an active citizen. These centers of adult education faced similar challenges as the Citizenship Schools, as both had to combat the entrenched fatalism that plagued their communities.<sup>66</sup>

Despite their similarities, ideological differences existed between Mexico’s and Highlander’s approaches. One of the most significant was the administration of these programs, as the Mexican government managed their efforts, while Highlander operated expressly outside of state institutions. Like other Latin American countries, Mexico was affected by the Cuban Revolution of 1959. While Mexico avoided a violent revolution, both left and right forces battled over control of the government and social policies throughout the 1960s. To quell this dissent, the conservative government focused on state nationalism, which included promoting

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<sup>63</sup> “Report on the First Inter-American Adult Education Seminar, December 1962.” From Harry Lasker Library, *Community Education, Latin America*.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

modernization through increased social services. In addition to the literacy programs, the Mexican government also attempted to gain control of labor unrest by providing special benefits to “officially recognized unions...in exchange for their docility.”<sup>67</sup> Although this required some liberal reforms, “Mexico [in the context of the Cold War] became the ‘preferred revolution’ for the US, a formerly radical society that had moved from ‘revolution to evolution’, one whose ‘achievement of social progress while maintaining freedom... [offered] a meaningful alternative to revolution Communist style’.”<sup>68</sup> The literacy programs, however, likely reflected a drive to maintain complacency and the status quo, which would limit the program’s ability to awaken and empower those it allegedly served.

Other differences also appeared through these conversations. Highlander and the Citizenship Schools largely focused on adults; Mexico’s programs, in contrast, also served illiterate children since poor education and resources left millions of youth without the ability to read and write. Furthermore, Mexico often utilized many secondary school students as teachers unlike Highlander, which required adults as part of their focus on fostering equality between teacher and student.<sup>69</sup> Locating and retaining these instructors proved a difficult and expensive task for the state, limiting the ability of the program to meet the need in over six hundred communities.

Ultimately, although this first meeting did not appear to create a lasting relationship or longstanding impact, it represented one of Highlander’s first attempts to provide outreach into Latin America and revealed some of the different characteristics of literacy education in the United States and Latin America. Many of these same divergences reappeared later in

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<sup>67</sup> Schmidt, “The Political and Economic Reverberations of the Cuban Revolution in Mexico,” 1145.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 1444.

<sup>69</sup> “Report on the First Inter-American Adult Education Seminar, December 1962.” From Harry Lasker Library, *Community Education, Latin America*.

Highlander's relationship and communication with Nicaragua in the 1980s and helped explain the different outcomes experienced by the Citizenship Schools and the Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade.

### **Paulo Freire and Brazil**

Over the past several decades, historians have noted the similarities between former colonial territories. This has contributed to the rise of the concept of the Global South, which largely focuses on transcending national borders by connecting regions with similar histories and characteristics.<sup>70</sup> While often considered dissimilar, the American South and Brazil shared several common features, reflecting their colonial pasts. Scholars, such as Marshall Eakin, noted these similarities, asserting that “after dominating or driving back the relatively sparse Indian peoples of eastern North America, the southern British colonies looked very similar to the core regions of Latin America—plantation agriculture, a large unfree labor force, and an elite white minority.”<sup>71</sup> Ultimately, these characteristics, endemic to plantation economies, precipitated economic, political, and social inequalities that would plague these regions into the twentieth century.

Additionally, the longstanding practice of slavery fostered a “democratic inexperience,”<sup>72</sup> from “which arose a series of obstacles and simultaneously, the impossibility of forming a

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<sup>70</sup> For more examples of the growing body of literature on the Global South see Zimmerman, Andrew. *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010; Ring, Natalie J. "Mapping Regional and Imperial Geographies: Tropical Disease in the US South." In *Colonial Crucible: Empire in the Making of the Modern American State*, edited by Alfred W. McCoy and Francisco A. Scarano. 297-308. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009; and Clune, Erin Elizabeth. "From Light Copper to the Blackest and Lowest Type: Daniel Tompkins and the Racial Order of the Global New South." *Journal of Southern History* 76, no. 2 (2010): 275-93.

<sup>71</sup> Eakin, *Brazil*, 26.

<sup>72</sup> Gadotti and Torres, "Paulo Freire," 1257.



democratic mentality.”<sup>73</sup> This inexperience widened the gap between the empowered and the oppressed and instilled an oftentimes debilitating fatalism in the latter. While the subjugation of certain populations had racial components, by the twentieth century, economic disparities largely separated the majority of the population from the dominant minority who subjugated them.

As in the United States, illiteracy largely reinforced this gap and permitted the denial of political power and rights. According to some estimates, Brazil contained approximately twenty million illiterates of voting age in 1963.<sup>74</sup> Brazilian law denied illiterates the right to vote. However, in contrast to the American South, the government instituted low standards for what constituted literacy, requiring only that the individual possess the ability to write his own name. Elites often utilized this to their advantage, teaching their peasant workers to copy their names on voters’ applications and telling them for whom to vote.<sup>75</sup> Similar to the disenfranchisement of African Americans in the United States, this practice maintained the status quo, ensuring that the power structure that subjugated these individuals remained firmly intact. However, just as Horton and others organized to oppose the injustice of their society, groups in Brazil fought for the oppressed members of their country. Paulo Freire represented one of the most significant of Latin America’s reformers, as he designed a literacy program for the peasants of the Brazilian Northeast, one of the country’s poorest regions.

A professor at the University of Recife, Freire had maintained an interest in adult education for the majority of his life. Residing in the poor Northeast, he had witnessed the effects of the political, social, and economic inequalities that characterized the region. Like Horton, Freire had studied various pedagogies and searched for a solution to one of the area’s most significant problems—illiteracy. He too remained dissatisfied with the results. As with the state-

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<sup>73</sup> Freire, *Education, the Practice of Freedom*, 67.

<sup>74</sup> Kirkendall, "Entering History," 179.

<sup>75</sup> Brown, "Literacy in 30 Hours: Paulo Freire's Process," 256.

run literacy programs in South Carolina, most programs Freire found utilized the same material for both children and adults.<sup>76</sup> The failure to account for this distinction created programs inappropriate for adult learners. Freire, however, noted another failure of these traditional pedagogies, namely that they were created for a specific socioeconomic group, the middle-class. To the peasants, the situations and vocabulary employed in these programs were foreign.<sup>77</sup> These age and economic incompatibilities rendered, in Freire's mind, these systems of little use to the poor, as their inappropriateness often belittled those whom it attempted to help. Like Horton, however, Freire feared another form of paternalism, that endemic of a traditional classroom. He argued that, as culture and literacy were inextricably linked, a teacher in the hierarchal setting "bestowed culture on the ignorant pupil, intensifying the sense of subordination and worthlessness that he as a member of the lower class already suffered."<sup>78</sup> Education, therefore, became "only one more manifestation of the normal class relations of Latin America" instead of a source of empowerment for the peasants.<sup>79</sup>

Dissatisfied with these approaches, Freire developed what he termed the "pedagogy of the oppressed." Freire, like Horton, realized the importance of solutions rising from the people themselves, stating that this pedagogy "must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed."<sup>80</sup> However, involving the people proved problematic, for years of subjugation had fostered an acceptance of their downgraded condition or at least instilled in them a fear to rise against their oppressors. Similar to the fatalism Esau Jenkins asserted plagued African American communities, Freire often encountered individuals who believed that their subjugation was merely the natural order

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<sup>76</sup> Sanders, Thomas G. "Letter from Thomas Sanders to Richard Nolte." From Harry Lasker Library, *Freire and Critics*.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 48.

of the world, attributing their situation to divine judgment or fate.<sup>81</sup> As Freire noted, even those who possessed the will to risk themselves in an upheaval remained resigned to their position, realizing those around them lacked this same will.<sup>82</sup> Since conformity appeared more comfortable, the possibility of change waned, especially as a recognition of one's status, either as the oppressed or the oppressor, meant little unless followed by action.<sup>83</sup> However, in accepting the status quo, both the oppressed and the oppressors lost their humanity.<sup>84</sup> "Liberation is thus a childbirth," Freire asserted, "and a painful one," for it allowed people to transcend the traditional oppressed-oppressor relationship and reclaim their humanity.<sup>85</sup> While this would seem beneficial for all, Freire recognized that it was in the oppressor's interest "for the people to continue in a state of submersion, impotent in the face of oppressive reality."<sup>86</sup> For Freire, illiteracy served as one of the oppressors' most useful tools to maintain their dominance.

Literacy education, therefore, operated as a vehicle to develop what Freire considered a "critical consciousness."<sup>87</sup> This occurred through a process Freire termed *conscientização* or conscientization, which included evaluating one's reality, realizing the constraints of this existence, and taking action to change the situation.<sup>88</sup> Viewing literacy as a political act, it provided a mechanism, if done correctly, for individuals to comprehend their situation and transform it, utilizing the power they gained through their acquired ability to read and write. As Freire noted, the oppressors strove to stop this, recognizing that "being able to read [in a literate society] is a necessary step towards making decisions and sharing power...[It] is a step toward

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<sup>81</sup> Brown, "Literacy in 30 Hours," 246.

<sup>82</sup> Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 47.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 48.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 52.

<sup>87</sup> Sanders, Thomas G. "Letter from Thomas Sanders to Richard Nolte." From Harry Lasker Library, *Freire and Critics*.

<sup>88</sup> Brown, "Literacy in 30 Hours," 252.

political participation.”<sup>89</sup> Therefore, to maintain their position, elites manipulated education, transmitting only the knowledge that secured their position. Freire’s literacy program directly challenged the model utilized by those in authority, focusing on the perceptions and ideas of those he aimed to empower. As one commentator described it:

If non-readers learn to read by writing and reading their own words and opinions, then they learn that their perceptions of reality are valid to others and can influence even those in authority. If on the other hand, their teachers require them to learn the words and ideas in a primer, donated by those in power, then the learners must accept that experience as more valid than their own. They must accept the social and economic structure transmitted by the teacher—or decide not to learn to read.<sup>90</sup>

As noted, however, many of the oppressed embraced the teachings of the elite and believed that their subjugation merely served as the natural order of the world. Therefore, Freire’s first mission in conscientization was to help the oppressed distinguish between nature and culture. While oppressors often utilized the latter to make their dominance appear natural, Freire argued that the oppressed could also shape their culture.

To frame their own culture, however, the oppressed needed to understand their reality. In his literacy program, Freire focused on developing this comprehension through visuals, commissioning artist Francisco Brennand for drawings depicting situations familiar to Brazilian peasants. Using these images, instructors of the literacy courses helped their students develop a concept of culture, not by providing them with answers but merely by asking questions that stimulated conversation.<sup>91</sup> Through this process, the students analyzed their own situations. One student concluded from this exercise that “the democratization of culture has to do with what we are and with what we make as people. Not with what they think and want for us.”<sup>92</sup> Because Freire believed that this conscientization provided the motivation for learning to read and write,

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<sup>89</sup> Brown, "Literacy in 30 Hours," 245.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, 245.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 246.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, 251.

all students in his program underwent at least three sessions of these exercises before beginning literacy lessons.<sup>93</sup>

When they began their courses, students utilized short vocabulary lists consisting of approximately sixteen to seventeen words, containing every sound in the Portuguese language. Since Portuguese was a phonetic language, students, regardless of the initial size of their vocabulary, could sound out words they did not understand and record those that they knew but formerly could not read or write. To be successful, Freire argued, these first words needed to be familiar to the students. Therefore, the vocabulary lists were contoured to each region. Prior to holding class, instructors would visit a community to learn about its culture, ensuring the words remained relevant for those they taught. This specificity reflected Freire's disdain for primers, believing that, even when targeted toward the worldview of the people, they served as "an instrument of propaganda...tell[ing] them what they should believe."<sup>94</sup>

While the Citizenship Schools utilized workbooks, Freire likely would not have condemned these primers, for they, like his vocabulary lists, catered to specific states and contained information primarily about available civil services. However, those utilized by the SCLC might have triggered his censure. While their discussions relating iconic historical events to the African American reality could have been seen as a way to develop political consciousness, those advocating nonviolent protest could be construed as instilling values and prompting action that came not from the people but from organizations wanting to advance their own agendas. The distinction between developing values with and from the people rather than instilling principles in them presented one of the fundamental features of the pedagogies of Freire and Horton. However, although the early Citizenship Schools and the Brazilian classes

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<sup>93</sup> Sanders, Thomas G. "Letter from Thomas Sanders to Richard Nolte." From Harry Lasker Library, *Freire and Critics*.

<sup>94</sup> Brown, "Literacy in 30 Hours," 255.

closely adhered to their underlying principles, they remained small in scale. When put into practice for sweeping change, they deviated from the original pedagogy, as evidenced by the change in the SCLC's Citizenship Education Program and the later Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade. In these latter experiences, alleged representatives of the people, whether a regional organization or a one-party government, decided what values and knowledge the people should possess, creating significant achievements on paper but potentially little lasting empowerment of the people as envisioned by both Freire and Horton. However, the lack of direct criticism by either of these educators about these later programs suggests that they supported them and their results, recognizing that direct adherence to their pedagogies was not possible, at least in a period when powerful governments, notably the United States, attempted to undermine social change.

For the brief period it lasted (1958-1964), Freire's program proved successful. Beginning in Freire's home state of Pernambuco, the program quickly spread to other regions of Brazil.<sup>95</sup> Governor Aluizio Alves of Rio Grande do Norte appreciated the inexpensive and unconventional methods employed by Freire. The program in the town of Angicos became the model for literacy education in Brazil, boasting of its ability to teach, using the Freire method, illiterates to read in only forty hours.<sup>96</sup> Of those who completed the literacy course, approximately three-quarters of them could read and write simple texts.<sup>97</sup>

While the program focused on literacy education, those who administered it noted the underlying goal to create active citizens, similar to Horton's and the SCLC's focus on first-class citizenship. Students participating in the program were expected "to demand their rights and make sure that laws on the books were borne out in practice."<sup>98</sup> As the director of the Angicos

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<sup>95</sup> Kirkendall, "Entering History," 170-171.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, 176.

<sup>97</sup> Brown, "Literacy in 30 Hours," 256.

<sup>98</sup> Kirkendall, "Entering History," 176.

program stated, “We don’t consider it enough to teach people to read and write alone...without making it possible for him to become a conscious and true participant in Brazilian democracy.”<sup>99</sup> This language mirrored the mission of the SCLC and Martin Luther King, Jr., for both groups believed that literacy, while crucial, served as only one component of the plight of the oppressed. Alves recognized the revolutionary aspect of this education, calling it a “Revolution through Education” leading to “the integration of a greater number of adults into the rights and conquests of social and economic development of their communities.”<sup>100</sup>

Others soon also realized the revolutionary nature of this movement. The upper and middle classes feared the potential shift of power, as nearly half the population, through literacy, could gain the right to vote.<sup>101</sup> Claiming that Freire’s education was subversive, the military leaders in the coup of 1964 quickly crushed the National Literacy Program launched months prior and jailed many of its leaders, including Freire.<sup>102</sup> While literacy education continued in Brazil, it lacked the conscientization component that characterized Freire’s program, allowing elites to control the curricula and limit the empowering aspect of literacy education.<sup>103</sup>

Ultimately, Freire’s experiences and programs propelled him to the forefront of literacy education, becoming “the foremost literacy expert and radical educator in the world.”<sup>104</sup> Governments throughout the globe requested his services, particularly in developing states in Africa and Latin America.<sup>105</sup> Like Horton, Freire acknowledged the applicability of his pedagogy

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<sup>99</sup> Kirkendall, "Entering History," 176.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> Sanders, Thomas G. “Letter from Thomas Sanders to Richard Nolte.” From Harry Lasker Library, *Freire and Critics*.

<sup>102</sup> Kirkendall, "Entering History," 179-181.

<sup>103</sup> Sanders, Thomas G. “Letter from Thomas Sanders to Richard Nolte.” From Harry Lasker Library, *Freire and Critics*.

<sup>104</sup> Rohter, Larry. “Radical Theorist Takes His Message to the World: Radical Theorist Spreads Message.” *New York Times*. Aug. 19, 1986.

<sup>105</sup> See Gadotti, Moacir, and Carlos Alberto Torres. "Paulo Freire: Education for Development." *Development and Change* 40, no. 6 (2009): 1255-67.

and approaches to all regions, regardless of their First or Third World status. While Horton and Freire would not meet until years later, they were both aware of one another's work.<sup>106</sup> Freire alleged that he had consistently been told that his ideas only applied to the Third World. To contradict these assertions, he referenced Highlander, stating that "the story of Myles Horton and of [the] Highlander Center show that the ideas apply to the First World too."<sup>107</sup> This mutual recognition revealed the importance of a colonial past in creating enduring social structures that plagued countries centuries after their independence. Because both Horton and Freire resided in the poorest regions of their respective countries, they shared experiences despite their membership in either the First World or the Third World. Therefore, each educator independently developed a model in which the underlying "idea [is] that knowledge grows from and is a reflection of social experience," creating pedagogies applicable to the education of the oppressed regardless of region or country.<sup>108</sup>

Nevertheless, while Horton and Freire's educational methods shared several similarities, a few fundamental differences separated them. These differences largely reflected the contexts of their movements, for while they employed similar structures to achieve the broad goals of empowering the oppressed through literacy education, the political and social environments of their respective regions shaped their programs. Horton's and Freire's contrasting views on the involvement of the state illustrated this divergence. While Horton remained adamant that adult education needed to remain outside formal institutions, the Brazilian Ministry of Education sponsored Freire's program.<sup>109</sup> This reflected the contrasting political environment in which these movements took place. Radical social change, at least temporarily, received support from

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<sup>106</sup> Horton and Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking*, vii.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> Sanders, Thomas G. "Letter from Thomas Sanders to Richard Nolte." From Harry Lasker Library, *Freire and Critics*.



the state, with Pernambuco Governor Miguel Arraes even referring to it as a “Brazilian Revolution.”<sup>110</sup> This contrasted with the hostile environment Horton had perpetually faced in advocating for the rights of workers and African Americans in the South. The majority of the states utilizing Freire’s approach to education were revolutionary states, often featuring a one-party government which favored the advancement of the poor. However, as one historian asserted, these states often deviated from Freire’s model, commandeering these programs to create what they deemed ‘good’ citizens.<sup>111</sup> Working outside of the government, Horton and Highlander were not forced to bend to state control, despite persecution, but could pursue radical education that often contradicted the status quo.

The revolutionary nature of the later Latin American education movements might have impeded rather than aided their cause. As one reporter described it, “liberation is seldom authentic, because often the once-oppressed merely end up in the puppet mimicry of the oppressor...Lenin replaces the czar, Castro outs Batista, but what is really the difference?”<sup>112</sup> As Freire asserted, liberation was not achieved “by changing roles” but by the oppressed and the oppressors rising together to reclaim their humanity.<sup>113</sup> Both Horton and Freire were aware of the coercive elements that education and literacy could assume if performed top-down and not arising from the people.

The Latin American liberation movements of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, therefore, served as a testing ground for many of these ideas. Through these revolutions, the people ideally would overthrow their government to establish a system reflecting their own values. Literacy programs, therefore, would be administered by the state. While this deviated from Horton’s

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<sup>110</sup> Kirkendall, “Entering History,” 183.

<sup>111</sup> Kirkendall, *Paulo Freire and the Cold War Politics of Literacy*, 90-91.

<sup>112</sup> McCarthy, Colman. “Paulo Freire and Educating the Oppressed.” *The Washington Post, Times Herald*. July 31, 1972.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

model, he likely would have understood this as a unique opportunity for radical adult education. Although he normally advocated for education outside of the established system, Horton likely would have recognized that the Sandinista revolution essentially a clean slate to see if experiential education could be applied by a state allegedly controlled by the people. Likewise, Freire's experiences in Africa proved that he understood that liberation was a slow process. Ultimately, Nicaragua represented a unique opportunity to test the techniques of literacy education developed throughout the twentieth century. As a state-supported and nation-wide effort, Nicaragua's program tested whether literacy could be used to effectively rehabilitate a country and alleviate the severe socioeconomic disparities that maintained dramatic societal stratifications.

### **Nicaragua and the Literacy Crusade of 1980**

Increasing social, economic, and political disparities throughout the twentieth century precipitated unrest in Nicaragua. While the focus on economic development following World War II placed pressure on many Third World nations, the seeds of Nicaragua's tensions had been planted decades before when Augusto Cèsar Sandino led a peasant army against the United States Marines occupying Nicaragua.<sup>114</sup> For his efforts both to expel the American forces and to advocate for the interests of the peasants, particularly in education, Sandino became regarded by many Nicaraguans as a young David battling Goliath. Although he eventually signed a peace treaty with Nicaragua's US backed government, the country's dictator, Anastasio Somoza García, ordered Sandino assassinated.<sup>115</sup> Sandino's struggle and sacrifice would become a

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<sup>114</sup> Miller, *Between Struggle and Hope*, 16.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*, 18.

symbol of the anti-Somoza movement,<sup>116</sup> especially for the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN), which developed in response to the Cuban Revolution in 1961.<sup>117</sup> Sandino's movement also established a precedent for the mobilization of the peasantry, which proved vital for the Sandinista revolution in 1979.<sup>118</sup>

Under Somoza rule, the disparities between the wealthy and poor significantly increased, as “the Somoza dynasty ran Nicaragua as a family plantation.”<sup>119</sup> Half of the population survived on \$200 to \$300 per year, and large segments of those in the countryside lived on less than one \$120 per year.<sup>120</sup> To ensure that its population remained docile and poor, the Somoza dynasty maintained a corrupt education system, in which illiteracy was high. During this period, adult illiteracy exceeded 50%, the third highest rate in the Western Hemisphere;<sup>121</sup> however, this figure increased dramatically in the rural areas where the estimated illiteracy rate reached 90%.<sup>122</sup>

The maintenance of an illiterate and poor population served Somoza's goals, for “the development model of export agriculture depended upon a large pool of unskilled workers.” As a literacy activist who participated in the Crusade later declared, “it was clearly unwise for Somoza to undertake any type of genuine nationwide literacy program.”<sup>123</sup> Prior to 1979, the elites, including the agrarian capitalist class and large landowners, dominated the peasantry of the countryside. This fostered a deep resentment in the peasants, who demanded better education

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<sup>116</sup> Miller, *Between Struggle and Hope*, 21.

<sup>117</sup> Kirkendall, *Paulo Freire and the Cold War Politics of Literacy*, 121.

<sup>118</sup> Ortega, "The State, the Peasantry and the Sandinista Revolution," 122.

<sup>119</sup> Miller, *Between Struggle and Hope*, 19.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> Millett, Richard. “Nicaragua: It Has Been Neither the Best, Nor the Worst of Times.” *Los Angeles Times*. July 13, 1980.

<sup>122</sup> Ortega, "The State, the Peasantry and the Sandinista Revolution." 123.

<sup>123</sup> Miller, *Between Struggle and Hope*, 21.

and healthcare services.<sup>124</sup> The Sandinistas harnessed this resentment, “offer[ing] the peasantry the weapons and the anti-imperialist and anti-authoritarian ideological message necessary for confronting the Somoza regime and developing a national project.”<sup>125</sup> Because education was a significant grievance of the peasants, the revolutionaries recruited supporters and soldiers by promising them significant educational reforms. Needing to maintain this support to ensure the success of the revolution, the Sandinistas announced their intention to launch a national literacy campaign within days after the overthrow of the Somoza dynasty.<sup>126</sup>

In addition to garnering support, the emphasis on education provided continuity between Sandino and the Sandinistas as well as reflected their adoption of communist ideology. Many of the newly formed socialist states, including the Soviet Union and Cuba, launched literacy campaigns shortly after their formation, their leaders believing that uneducated and illiterate people could not be politically active citizens.<sup>127</sup> These other states, particularly Cuba as the first Latin American state to declare a war on illiteracy, influenced Nicaragua’s decision to quickly initiate a literacy campaign. Like Nicaragua, Cuba formerly had a tyrannous regime under Batista, who like his Somoza counterpart, undermined education to reinforce the status quo.<sup>128</sup> By 1953, the lack of education produced an illiteracy rate of 23.6%;<sup>129</sup> however, many more were “functional illiterates,” able to read and write without truly understanding words or their meaning.<sup>130</sup> Furthermore, Cuba also witnessed a significant disparity between the cities and the countryside, as the illiteracy rate in the urban areas remained about 13%, while, in the

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<sup>124</sup> Ortega, "The State, the Peasantry and the Sandinista Revolution," 122-123.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid*, 127.

<sup>126</sup> Arnove, *Education and Revolution in Nicaragua*, 17.

<sup>127</sup> Baracco, "The Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade Revisited," 341.

<sup>128</sup> Quesada, "Cuba: Education and Revolution," 137.

<sup>129</sup> Morales, "Literacy Campaign in Cuba," 31.

<sup>130</sup> Quesada, "Cuba: Education and Revolution," 137.

countryside, illiteracy rates hovered around 40%. Any literacy campaign, therefore, would require the mobilization of those in the cities.

Forming the National Literacy Commission in 1959, merely months after the revolution, the Cuban government recruited former revolutionary organizations to assist in the creation of a national literacy crusade.<sup>131</sup> Like similar revolutionary governments, the Commission embraced Freire's method of instruction. Postponing the campaign until late 1960 provided the organizers with the opportunity to contour their program for different communities in a possible attempt to remain faithful to the fundamental philosophy of Freire. Its supporters suggested that "since the work was never approached with a fixed organizational pattern," by the Commission in creating a primer, "the characteristics of the region and the creativity of the masses shaped new forms of activity."<sup>132</sup> These primers, while possibly diverse, used revolutionary concepts to teach literacy. While this could have proven valuable to the many youth and other literacy instructors employed by the government to teach the peasants, its detractors alleged that the Cuban Literacy Campaign largely failed to adhere to Freire's pedagogies and focused on inculcating revolutionary principles in the teachers who then indoctrinated the peasants.<sup>133</sup> As one scholar asserted:

If we analyze the Literacy Campaign on the grounds set forth by Freire, its failures become clear. By representing peasants as passive objects in need of instruction, by including revolutionary propaganda through their primers, by employing a unidirectional method of teaching—the literacy workers appearing as the only agents of the campaign—instead of the creation of a *dialogue* with the oppressed, the Literacy Campaign emphasized the objective of spreading literacy in a wide sense, instead of its stated aim of emancipation of the peasants.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Morales, "Literacy Campaign in Cuba," 33.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>133</sup> See Serra, Ana. *The "New Man" in Cuba: Culture and Identity in the Revolution* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-40.

Nicaragua would also face similar accusations for its Literacy Crusade, as even Horton admitted in his biography that he believed that the instructors of these campaigns benefitted more than those that they were tasked to teach.<sup>135</sup>

The Cuban government, however, embraced the radical nature of this education, viewing their literacy campaign as an extension of their revolution. During the campaign, Cuba faced hostility and even invasion with the Bay of Pigs in 1961 by the United States. Fidel Castro capitalized on this negative relationship, for it provided Cuba with an adversary to fuel its revolution and justify militaristic literacy campaigns, which aimed to quickly instill revolutionary values and garner support for a government combatting outside enemies.<sup>136</sup> This could explain the campaign's coercive nature, as the Cuban government threatened to deny jobs to anyone illiterate after December 1961.<sup>137</sup> Much of this need to quickly create a literate population stemmed from Cuba's conflict with the United States. The success of the program, would, therefore, represent "defiance...especially [against] the United States, a perennial enemy of the Revolution."<sup>138</sup> Viewing Cuba's and Nicaragua's literacy campaigns in the context of the Cold War provides a way to understand the pressure these revolutionary governments were under to succeed as well as their need to create new citizens, through literacy education, supportive of the regime.

In addition to serving as a model, Cuba also provided direct support for the Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade, sending approximately two thousand volunteers to serve as teachers in the campaign and instructing Nicaraguan officials about its 1961 educational approaches and

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<sup>135</sup> Horton, Kohl, and Kohl, *The Long Haul*, 202.

<sup>136</sup> Serra, *The "New Man" in Cuba*, 35.

<sup>137</sup> Eder, Richard. "Cuba is Pressing Literacy Drive." *New York Times*. August 18, 1961. .

<sup>138</sup> Serra, *The "New Man" in Cuba*, 28

techniques.<sup>139</sup> Because Cuba had already, at least superficially, attempted to contour their program to various rural communities and apply Freire's methods, the Nicaraguans could have seen Cuba's primers as acceptable examples of Freire's pedagogy. This example of revolutionary solidarity encouraged the Sandinista government in its efforts to reinvent a society composed of new, politically conscious citizens. However, it also could have increased criticism by the United States of Nicaragua's literacy program, as they adopted the model of one of the US's greatest enemies.

Another factor also fed conservative fear in the US yet encouraged radical adult educators like Freire and Horton. Despite some of their mistakes in consolidating and rearranging the government after the revolution, the Sandinistas at least claimed that they supported a pluralistic government and aimed to increase the social welfare of their people through healthcare and literacy programs. Therefore, as one reporter stated:

The real fear of the Reagan administration is not that the Sandinistas will identify with the Soviet Union and Cuba; its real fear is that the Sandinistas will *not* identify with the Soviet Union and Cuba. If, out the revolution, the Nicaraguan people can forge a democratic, nonaligned state, then what pretext will the United States have to prop up a brutal and corrupt military status quo in Central America instead of accommodating US policy to the indigenous forces for political, economic, and social change?<sup>140</sup>

For educators like Horton, Nicaragua represented the opportunity for radical education to fundamentally transform a country by awakening the citizens and allowing them to create a democratic society in ways that did not occur in Cuba. However, the uncertainty surrounding Nicaragua and its mission left Congress baffled, as the dialogues over foreign aid illustrated. While Congress did not wish to support a communist regime, the Sandinistas had not by 1980 committed to the Soviets or Cuba. Congressional members also could not ignore the significant

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<sup>139</sup> Kirkendall, *Paulo Freire and the Cold War Politics of Literacy*, 136.

<sup>140</sup> White, Robert E. "Aiding 'Contras' Harms Democracy." *The Christian Science Monitor*. April 23, 1985.

measures the Sandinistas were taking to promote the social welfare of their people through education.<sup>141</sup>

The Sandinista government, desiring to maintain the revolutionary fervor of 1979, framed the literacy campaign as an extension of the revolution, portraying it as a “cultural insurrection” following the political rebellion.<sup>142</sup> However, the connection between these two events was more than symbolism. The government organized what they termed the People’s Literacy Army,<sup>143</sup> mobilizing between 80,000<sup>144</sup> and 110,000 literate individuals (*brigadistas*) in six armies for the Literacy Crusade.<sup>145</sup> Because of the massive scale of this operation, which aimed to reduce the illiteracy rate to approximately fifteen percent within nine months, the new government expected all those who were literate to participate in the program. To prepare these individuals, the government began training students and teachers to become instructors of the literacy schools in December 1979, ultimately preparing approximately 200,000 individuals through weeklong courses.<sup>146</sup> The majority of the literate individuals came from the cities, necessitating the creation of brigades to go into the countryside. Those assigned to the countryside joined the People’s Literacy Army, largely composed of high school students, while the People’s Literacy Teachers provided instruction in the cities.<sup>147</sup> Because of the strenuous demands of the countryside, the Sandinistas primarily utilized the youth for the People’s Literacy Army. Those assigned to the countryside received physical training, going on mandated marches.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> See discussion about foreign aid to Nicaragua in US Congress. *Congressional Record*. 96th Cong., 2nd sess., 1980. Vol 126, pt. 11.

<sup>142</sup> Arnove, *Education and Revolution in Nicaragua*, 17.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

<sup>144</sup> Craven, "The State of Cultural Democracy in Cuba and Nicaragua During the 1980s," 105.

<sup>145</sup> Riding, Alan. "Nicaragua Drafts the Young for a War on Illiteracy." *New York Times*. June 4, 1980.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>147</sup> Arnove, *Education and Revolution in Nicaragua*, 19-20.

<sup>148</sup> Riding, Alan. "Nicaragua Drafts the Young for a War on Illiteracy." *New York Times*. June 4, 1980.



For some, the military nature of the Sandinistas represented their greatest flaw. As one American reporter stated, “the problem with the Sandinistas, however, is not so much that they are Marxist as that they are soldiers. They tend to think of the Nicaraguan people as an army which must have disciplined land direction if they are successfully to defend their revolution against its enemies.”<sup>149</sup> Here, the democratic idealism of the Sandinistas to liberate the people clashed with the authoritarian structure the government deemed necessary to achieve its goals. International pressure, particularly from the United States with its support of the Contras, the anti-Sandinista forces, was partially responsible. Cast as a communist regime from the outset and actively resisted by the United States, as even the Carter administration had spent \$1 million support opposition groups, the Sandinistas had to protect their fragile regime and its goals, creating at least the perceived need to maintain military attitudes and extend their revolution to literacy education.<sup>150</sup>

Because many of the administrators of the new Sandinista government knew little about education, they enlisted the aid of Freire, inviting him to design the new literacy program.<sup>151</sup> Though he agreed to help them, Freire only spent nine days in the country.<sup>152</sup> While they adopted many of his pedagogical theories, particularly the emphasis on conscientization and culture, the Literacy Crusade differed in several fundamental ways from the literacy programs advocated by Freire, leading to accusations of indoctrination.<sup>153</sup> As one American reporter stated, “the parallel goal of the campaign is political and social indoctrination, mingling history of the revolution with maxims and slogans designed to shape what is commonly called the new Nicaragua.”<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> White, Robert E. “Aiding ‘Contras’ Harms Democracy.” *The Christian Science Monitor*. April 23, 1985.

<sup>150</sup> Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 21.

<sup>151</sup> Rohter, Larry. “Radical Theorist Takes His Message to the World: Radical Theorist Spreads Message.” *New York Times*. Aug. 19, 1986.

<sup>152</sup> Kirkendall, *Paulo Freire and the Cold War Politics of Literacy*, 125.

<sup>153</sup> Arnove, *Education and Revolution in Nicaragua*, 23.

<sup>154</sup> Dickey, Christopher. “Managua Literacy Drive: Too Political?” *Washington Post*, May 24, 1980.

The Literacy Crusade's use of a primer—*Sunrise of the People*—represented one of the most significant deviations from Freire, who had long insisted that teachers should not use prepared texts.<sup>155</sup> Unlike the primers utilized in Highlander's Citizenship Schools, which were created to serve the specific needs of individual communities, all *brigadistas* employed the same text, regardless of region. Perhaps more importantly, these texts, utilizing images for discussion as in Freire's original model, focused on revolutionary themes. For instance, the initial images portrayed Sandino and other heroes of the revolution.<sup>156</sup>

While utilizing Freire's techniques about consciousness-raising, the actual execution of their program reinforced the social hierarchy, as the state, not the people, directed the curriculum, utilizing political figures to create citizens for the new revolutionary society. The Sandinistas would likely have challenged accusations that they deviated from the original mission of their revolution by instilling revolutionary values in their people. Perceiving themselves as representatives of the people, they possessed the authority as liberators of the Nicaragua to awaken their citizens. Only through this awakening would they be prepared to assume control of a pluralistic government. The Sandinistas decision to postpone elections reflected this view. As one reporter stated "one Sandinist argument is that elections cannot be held fairly while half the country of about 2.2 million can neither read nor write."<sup>157</sup> They, therefore, maintained tight control of the government as legitimate representatives until they believed that the people were adequately prepared. Although their instruction, which aimed to shape the people's political views in favor of the Sandinistas, could be criticized, the Sandinistas actions did not dramatically differ from the SCLC's Citizenship Education Program. Like the

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<sup>155</sup> Arnove, *Education and Revolution in Nicaragua*, 22.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> Downer, Stephen. "Doubts Grow in Nicaragua About Where Sandinist Revolution is Leading." *The Times*. August 2, 1980.

Sandinistas, the SCLC created a program, as representatives of the African American population, to foster a type of citizenship, advocating a political ideology deemed subversive by many in the South. While the differences between the two programs and the surrounding circumstances should be noted, recognizing the similarities between these two programs aids in overcoming the often automatic and negative connotations associated with communism and the Sandinista revolution.

Additionally, the vocabulary lists employed by the literacy workers primarily contained ideologically charged words, emphasizing the revolution. For example, to teach the fundamental sounds of the Spanish language, literacy instructors utilized words like *la revolucìon*, *la liberaciòn*, and *el genocidio*. These words differed from those utilized in Freire's Brazilian program, which focused on common words of specific communities that would have meaning to those individuals.<sup>158</sup> In Brazil, instructors created the vocabulary lists only after studying the culture of the specific region. Therefore, words, such as brick, vote, crab, straw, and class, appeared much more frequently than revolution or liberation in Brazilian literacy classes.<sup>159</sup>

Opponents of the Sandinista Revolution capitalized on the political nature of the primers, allowing them to criticize the literacy campaigns by alleging that they served as forms of indoctrination. For example, in deciding whether or not to provide aid to Nicaragua, members of the US Congress debated the issue of indoctrination. Those in favor of aid suggested that the positive work of the Sandinistas to improve the lives of their people, including significant improvements in healthcare and education, warranted aid.<sup>160</sup> Those who believed that the Sandinistas attempted to indoctrinate their people exhibited different reactions. Some argued that support was necessary to prevent "Nicaragua... [from turning] from a dictatorship of the right to

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<sup>158</sup> Arnove, *Education and Revolution in Nicaragua*, 22.

<sup>159</sup> Brown, "Literacy in 30 Hours: Paulo Freire's Process," 253.

<sup>160</sup> Rep. Buchanan speaking on HR 13493, 96th Congress, 2nd sess., *Congressional Record* 126, pt. 11: 13491.

a dictatorship of the left.”<sup>161</sup> Opponents of aid, however, stated that indoctrination prevented the United States from providing aid, for any financial support would serve as subsidization of a communist regime. Their evidence of indoctrination in the records directly referenced the revolutionary vocabulary of the primers.<sup>162</sup> The United States, however, was not the only critic of the alleged indoctrination. One London reporter alleged that the “textbooks that are used read like a political primer,” portraying Sandino as a “father of the country.”<sup>163</sup> Ultimately, the Nicaraguan campaign’s “manuals focused on revolutionary slogans” instead of popular language, leading to allegations of political indoctrination by opponents of the Crusade.<sup>164</sup>

While the new Nicaraguan government denied these accusations, they acknowledged the political nature of their literacy campaign. They and later supporters argued, however, that no education was neutral, “not in Nicaragua, not in the United States, not anywhere. Every social project carries with it an ideology—in order to maintain a system, to reproduce a system, or to sustain a process of profound change.”<sup>165</sup> Furthermore, Ernesto Vallecillo Gutierrez, the Vice Minister of Adult Education in 1985, defended the political character of their program, as it prepared Nicaraguan citizens for the new world after the revolution. Therefore, the primer’s political content did not represent indoctrination, he explained, but rather the language that conscious citizens in a revolutionary society would come to utilize on a daily basis.<sup>166</sup> For many Nicaraguan leaders, however, including Fernando Cardenal, the primary architect of the Crusade, the learning of the country’s history and the unification of the previously divided regions of Nicaragua, particularly the cities and the countryside, represented the most significant and lasting

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<sup>161</sup> Rep Fascell speaking on HR 13493, 96th Congress, 2nd sess., *Congressional Record* 126, pt. 11: 13492.

<sup>162</sup> Rep. Ashbrook speaking on HR 13493, 96th Congress, 2nd sess., *Congressional Record* 126, pt. 11: 13493.

<sup>163</sup> Strafford, Peter. “Fears of ‘Second Cuba’ Aroused by Trend to Left in Nicaragua.” *The Times*. June 12, 1980.

<sup>164</sup> Kirkendall, *Paulo Freire and the Cold War Politics of Literacy*, 125.

<sup>165</sup> Kleinbach, “Nicaraguan Literacy Campaign,” 76.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid*, 77.

accomplishments of the campaign.<sup>167</sup> Therefore, the Literacy Crusade, despite its educational character, operated foremost as a nation-building project.<sup>168</sup> Literacy, particularly through the conscientization program developed by Freire, provided a mechanism for this endeavor.

However, Nicaragua's reliance on youth may have hindered both the success of the literacy program and conscientization. Sheryl Hirshon, a North American educator, participated in the Literacy Crusade and detailed her experiences and those of the *brigadistas* in her memoir, *And Also Teach Them to Read*. While she maintained her enthusiasm for the program, she noted that the first month of the campaign revealed many fundamental flaws that had not been anticipated, one of which was the "immaturity of the brigadistas."<sup>169</sup> Because of the massive scale of this undertaking and the large illiterate population of adults, youths became the primary literacy teachers for the Crusade, as Nicaragua closed all the schools during the five month campaign.<sup>170</sup> According to the *brigadista* manual, the Sandinistas tasked these youths with the following objectives:

- a. Eradicate once and for all the social phenomenon of illiteracy in Nicaragua
- b. Promote a process of awareness...so that our formerly marginated [sic] masses can integrate freely and effectively...and take an active part in national development and reconstruction
- c. Contribute to national unity
- d. Continue...with the education of adults
- e. Facilitate the development of the New Nicaraguan Society, eliminating the evils that derive from illiteracy
- f. Contribute the awakening of the newly literate through their closer contact with national events
- g. Carry out complementary investigations<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Baracco, "The Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade Revisited," 341-342.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid*, 339-340.

<sup>169</sup> Hirshon and Butler, *And Also Teach Them to Read*, 39.

<sup>170</sup> Koepfel, Barbara. "Nicaragua Sending All Its Citizens to School: Literacy Campaign." *Christian Science Monitor*. Jan. 17, 1980.

<sup>171</sup> Hirshon and Butler, *And Also Teach Them to Read*, 39.

These objectives proved difficult for the youth, who, as young as twelve, left their homes and families and ventured into the countryside to awaken in adults revolutionary concepts and understandings that these youths likely did not fully comprehend themselves.

Unlike the college students who participated in Highlander's Citizenship Schools, the Nicaraguan youth did not share the plights of those they instructed. Rather, they largely came from the cities and enjoyed benefits and opportunities long denied their students, intensifying frictions between the *brigadistas* and their students. Although Hirshon insisted that the Nicaraguan youth were far more prepared for this task than their US counterparts, she acknowledged the challenges.<sup>172</sup> Some did not embrace the idea of a classroom of equals, frightening those they attempted to teach. Others simply ignored the struggling students, focusing solely on the advanced. Furthermore, while "childhood without responsibilities is a luxury afforded few youth in third world countries," many *brigadistas* resisted their obligations as teachers.<sup>173</sup> Unfortunately, the distance between the *brigadistas*, their squadron leaders, and their supervisors allowed discipline problems to thrive.

The age and the limited training of the *brigadistas* pushed the Literacy Crusade to deviate from the Freire method. Freire's ideal program required highly trained literacy instructors, who could identify words based on the culture of a region to utilize in the vocabulary lists.<sup>174</sup> The *brigadistas*, however, relied heavily on the primers, finding the discussion, the true conscious raising element, to be "a frustrating and confusing assignment."<sup>175</sup> Because these youth had never been taught with these methods in the cities, they did not comprehend the necessity of this component to the objectives of the Literacy Crusade, often poorly moderating the discussions or

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<sup>172</sup> Hirshon and Butler, *And Also Teach Them to Read*, 68.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid*, 69.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid*, 104.

omitting them all together.<sup>176</sup> Some *brigadistas* claimed that their students desired to skip these lessons and focus on reading and writing. However, as Hirshon stated, “if we just come and teach reading, we aren’t doing anything. This crusade was planned so that the workers and peasants could really understand the national reality.”<sup>177</sup> This sentiment reflected the aforementioned emphasis on nation building as opposed to literacy education. However, the *brigadistas* appeared more prepared to deliver the latter rather than the former.

Despite the hurdles, the Literacy Crusade lowered the illiteracy rate from 53% to 12% in only five months, teaching nearly 700,000 illiterate adults to read and write.<sup>178</sup> For this impressive effort, Nicaragua won the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) Peace Prize in 1980.<sup>179</sup> To continue this success, the *brigadistas* established the People’s Education Collectives (CEPs) in the countryside. The CEPs, led by the high achieving students of the Literacy Crusade, served as the basic structure for continuing adult education. These groups most resembled the Citizenship Schools of the American South. Popular teachers, the former students of the Crusade, both taught other community members who had not participated in the initial campaign and engaged with other literates in a two year education program.<sup>180</sup> These new instructors, ranging in age from eight to seventy, strove to replicate the Literacy Crusade for their adult students, as the CEPs reached the remote areas of the countryside.<sup>181</sup> The Sandinista government relied on the network of CEPs to continue the adult education services they initially promised. However, the same endemic weaknesses of the Literacy Crusade appeared in the CEPs, as teachers as young as eight years old attempted not

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<sup>176</sup> Hirshon and Butler, *And Also Teach Them to Read*, 104.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>178</sup> Millett, Richard. “Nicaragua: It Has Been Neither the Best, Nor the Worst of Times.” *Los Angeles Times*. July 13, 1980.

<sup>179</sup> Barndt, Deborah. “The Poor Man’s Formula: The People Teach Each Other.” 1981. From Harry Lasker Library, *Community Education: Nicaragua—Barndt*.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

only to teach adults how to read and write but also how to understand themselves in a new revolutionary society, solving collective problems for themselves. The arguably impossible goal to eradicate illiteracy within a year necessitated the mobilization of those who likely lacked the capacity to instill revolutionary values, limiting the effectiveness of the program. However, heightening criticism about the communist leanings of the new Nicaraguan government in the midst of the Cold War forced the FSLN to demonstrate their legitimacy as effective rulers capable of answering the demands of their people for increased welfare in an effort to limit internal dissent.

### **International Solidarity**

The literacy education programs of Highlander, Freire, and Nicaragua did not occur in a vacuum, as evident by the clear connection between Freire and the Nicaraguan campaign. Rather, each of these movements belonged to a wider network of literacy and adult education that spanned continents. As noted, Horton realized the value of international exchange prior to the founding of Highlander, traveling to Denmark to study the folk high school tradition. Horton later claimed that his experiences there resulted in over half a century of exchange between Highlander and educators in Europe, establishing what he termed a “long-standing transatlantic dialogue,” maintained largely through the International Council on Adult Education (ICAE).<sup>182</sup> As its Secretary-General Budd L. Hall stated, many of the problems facing the world, including illiteracy, were international issues. However, “to resolve these problems we must ‘think globally but act locally.’”<sup>183</sup> Alongside this American-European relationship, Horton also

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<sup>182</sup> “Letter to Adela Betancourt from Myles Horton” From Wisconsin Historical Society, *Myles Horton Papers, 1851-1990, Box 12, Folder 19.*

<sup>183</sup> “Speeches—Opening Session ICAE, 1982.” From Wisconsin Historical Society, *Myles Horton Papers Box 12, Folder 19.*



developed connections with the Latin American and Canadian educators throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, applying for a grant to meet these individuals at the ICAE conference in 1982.<sup>184</sup> At this conference, participants discussed world illiteracy, agreeing that “literacy and education are a fundamental human right, a right on which many others are contingent.”<sup>185</sup> This reflected the recognition that illiteracy represented more than merely a nation’s or region’s challenge but a worldwide obstacle to full citizenship, requiring collective international attention.

Multiple organizations in the United States and in Canada in addition to the ICAE had offered support to Latin American adult education programs. For example, Freire’s initial program in Rio Grande do Norte received support from Alliance for Progress, a US program sponsored by President John F. Kennedy, which, among other objectives, aimed to eradicate adult illiteracy by 1970.<sup>186</sup> Fidel Castro, also offered these funds to further Cuba’s Literacy Campaign, criticized this program. “Imperialism makes educational plans, hypothetical plans and promises, to be fulfilled, they say, in ten years—but of course they will not be fulfilled because only a revolution is capable of mobilizing resources and the necessary interest for a campaign of this type.”<sup>187</sup> Therefore, Castro asserted that he would show the supremacy of his communist state by eradicating in one year what the United States claimed would require ten. This insult could have poisoned the opinions of the US administrators of Alliance for Progress about leftist literacy campaigns, and contributed to the conflict in Congress over whether to provide aid to

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<sup>184</sup> “Letter to Adela Betancourt from Myles Horton.” From Wisconsin Historical Society, *Myles Horton Papers, Box 12, Folder 19*.

<sup>185</sup> “International Council for Adult Education Council, Paris Conference, 1982.” From Wisconsin Historical Society, *Myles Horton Papers, Box 12, Folder 19*.

<sup>186</sup> De Onis, Juan. “Brazil Conducts A Literacy Drive.” *New York Times*. June 2, 1963.

<sup>187</sup> Eder, Richard. “Cuba is Pressing Literacy Drive.” *New York Times*. August 18, 1961.

Nicaragua in the 1980s, especially as the Literacy Crusade largely imitated the Cuban example and employed Cuban leaders and teachers.<sup>188</sup>

The Nicaraguan Revolution also became a focus of solidarity movements in several countries throughout the world, finding support from organizations in the US, Canada, and many western European countries.<sup>189</sup> While the governments of these states might not have supported the Sandinista Revolution, progressive organizations in these regions, viewing Nicaragua as a testing ground of the work they had spent decades developing on smaller scales in their own countries, banded together to help this experiment succeed. The 1983 conference in Nicaragua grew out of these solidarity movements, particularly as representatives from Highlander, including Horton, and Canadian Action for Nicaragua (CAN) visited the country in 1980 for the return of the *brigadistas* from the countryside.<sup>190</sup> While Horton had already been planning this conference for several months, the connections with these other members of the ICAE and the Participatory Research Group, another international organization supporting similar movements as Highlander, furthered the plans for this Inter-American conference three years later.<sup>191</sup>

Although Horton organized an Inter-American conference in Mexico in 1962, Highlander's most significant Latin American connections did not develop until the 1970s. In 1977, Horton, desiring to establish further connections with Latin America, sent a letter to a complete stranger, reading:

Since 1932, when Highlander was started in the southern mountains, I have worked with adults struggling against poverty and repression and would like to get in touch with

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<sup>188</sup> See discussion about foreign aid to Nicaragua in US Congress. *Congressional Record*. 96th Cong., 2nd sess., 1980. Vol 126, pt. 11.

<sup>189</sup> Peace, *A Call to Conscience*, 171.

<sup>190</sup> Barndt, Deborah. "Report on Nicaraguan Trip, 1980." From Harry Lasker Library, *Community Education: Nicaragua—Barndt*.

<sup>191</sup> "Letter to Geraldine O'Leary from Myles Horton, December 14, 1979." From Wisconsin Historical Society, *Myles Horton Papers, Box 8, Folders 5-7*.

people in South and Central America carrying on similar activities. Elizabeth Chase gave me your name. I would greatly appreciate hearing from you.<sup>192</sup>

This simple letter to Geraldine O’Leary, an American expatriate in Nicaragua, resulted in a relationship that would give Horton and Highlander a foothold in Nicaragua. Both Geraldine O’Leary and her husband Edgard de Macias, a native Nicaraguan, were active in adult education, de Macias serving as the Director of Programs at the Institute for Human Development (INPRHU) and Geraldine working with the Protestant Church and the Peace Corps, focusing on education for women and children.<sup>193</sup> Because of their work, they faced persecution under Somoza rule, being viewed as agitators.

From their initial letters, Horton and O’Leary showed interest in each other’s work. Despite the passage of almost twenty years, Horton still considered the Citizenship Schools one of Highlander’s greatest achievements, briefly discussing the project in the earliest letters to O’Leary. While the Sandinista revolution had not yet come to completion, Horton likely knew about the significance of education to the Sandinistas, especially as he had met with world educators earlier that year, including Freire. This revealed his recognition that the literacy work of the Civil Rights Movement related in structure and largely in purpose to these other Latin American campaigns.<sup>194</sup> After the Literacy Crusade began in March 1980, Horton directly drew the parallels between these regions and their literacy work, stating:

I have been extremely interested in the reports I have read on the literacy crusade. You may recall from reading about Highlander that prior to the Civil Rights Movement, we developed a literacy program with Southern Blacks...It was similar in many respects to

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<sup>192</sup> “Letter to Geraldine O’Leary from Myles Horton, August 15, 1977.” From Wisconsin Historical Society, *Myles Horton Papers, Box 8, Folders 5-7*.

<sup>193</sup> “Letter to Myles Horton from Geraldine O’Leary, October 5, 1977.” From Wisconsin Historical Society, *Myles Horton Papers, Box 8, Folders 5-7*.

<sup>194</sup> “Letter to Geraldine O’Leary from Myles Horton, December 14, 1977.” From Wisconsin Historical Society, *Myles Horton Paper, Box 8, Folders 5-7*.

the work done by Paulo Freire in Brazil and I would imagine to the program he is helping to develop in Nicaragua.<sup>195</sup>

Horton's recognition largely inspired the decision to make Nicaragua the location for the 1983 conference, as it represented the culmination of a tradition of literacy education in the Western Hemisphere.

Throughout 1978, Horton and O'Leary continued to share letters, describing their respective work and the conditions in Nicaragua leading up to the revolution. After the FSLN victory in 1979, de Macias, long persecuted for his supposedly dangerous educational beliefs, became the Vice Minister of Social Welfare in the emerging Nicaraguan bureaucracy<sup>196</sup> before becoming the Vice Minister of Labor.<sup>197</sup> Horton recognized the potential opportunities of de Macias's new position, asking about his duties and role and inviting him to visit Highlander.<sup>198</sup> Horton's connection with O'Leary and de Macias helped him obtain a tour of the country in time for the return of the *brigadistas*. Writing to Georgia McFadden, who held tours of Nicaragua, he explained that O'Leary and her husband had invited him to the country.<sup>199</sup> Horton ultimately gained access to a previously closed tour,<sup>200</sup> which fortunately placed him in Nicaragua at the same time as the delegation from CAN, a meeting which led to the 1983 conference.<sup>201</sup>

Horton's relationship with de Macias also proved of further benefit to the conference, as de Macias pledged, in his official visit to Highlander in 1980, to support a meeting of popular

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<sup>195</sup> "Letter to Geraldine O'Leary from Myles Horton, April 15, 1980." From Wisconsin Historical Society, *Myles Horton Papers, Box 8, Folders 5-7*.

<sup>196</sup> "Letter to Myles Horton from Geraldine O'Leary, October 23, 1979." From Wisconsin Historical Society, *Myles Horton Papers, Box 8, Folders 5-7*.

<sup>197</sup> "Letter from Geraldine O'Leary to Myles Horton, January 14, 1980." From Wisconsin Historical Society, *Myles Horton Papers, Box 8, Folders 5-7*.

<sup>198</sup> "Letter to Geraldine O'Leary from Myles Horton, December, 14, 1979." From Wisconsin Historical Society, *Myles Horton Papers, Box 8, Folders 5-7*.

<sup>199</sup> "Letter to Georgia McFadden from Myles Horton, May, 24, 1980." From Wisconsin Historical Society, *Myles Horton Papers, Box 8, Folders 5-7*.

<sup>200</sup> "Letter to Myles Horton from John McFadden, August, 18, 1980." From Wisconsin Historical Society, *Myles Horton Paper, Box 8, Folders 5-7*.

<sup>201</sup> Barndt, Deborah. "Report on Nicaraguan Trip, 1980." From Harry Lasker Library, *Community Education: Nicaragua—Barndt*.

educators and suggested sending Nicaraguans to Highlander, a visit that occurred in March 1983.<sup>202</sup> In addition to de Macias's support, Horton met and gained the backing of Chico Lacayo, the Vice Minister of Education in charge of adult education, through his Canadian connections at a Participatory Research Group meeting in 1981.<sup>203</sup> Like de Macias, Lacayo suggested sending Nicaraguans to Highlander to judge the benefits of an exchange of ideas.<sup>204</sup>

These letters, however, more than merely described the development of the important relationships which led to the 1983 conference. O'Leary's later letters expressed fear about the welfare of the program, as it was threatened by the growing political instability. In March 1981, O'Leary noted that the literacy campaigns on the East Coast, a region that maintained language and cultural differences, faced challenges. Unlike the Nicaraguans on the Pacific side, peasants on the East Coast were not exploited by large landowners. Most, if they desired, could obtain a plot of land.<sup>205</sup> Furthermore, they maintained religions and practices foreign to those on the Pacific side, who often considered those on the East Coast primitive. Because of these differences, they lacked the same revolutionary fervor and allegiance to the government as their western counterparts.

The Sandinistas, to promote unity in Nicaragua, desired to assimilate the East Coast. Balking at this, those on the East Coast began advocating for their independence and autonomy.<sup>206</sup> As O'Leary wrote, "the past few weeks have been terribly discouraging and both Edgard and I wonder just where it is all leading to with the Frente [FSLN] trying to keep all the

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<sup>202</sup> "Letter to Georgia McFadden from Myles Horton, December 11, 1980." From Wisconsin Historical Society, *Myles Horton Papers, Box 8, Folders 5-7*.

<sup>203</sup> "Letter to Myles Horton from Deborah Barndt, January 20, 1981." From Wisconsin Historical Society, *Myles Horton Papers, Box 8, Folders 5-7*.

<sup>204</sup> "Letter to Geraldine O'Leary from Myles Horton, May 12, 1981." From Wisconsin Historical Society, *Myles Horton Papers, Box 8, Folders 5-7*.

<sup>205</sup> Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 84.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid*, 85-86.

power within their grasp.”<sup>207</sup> The Sandinistas responded with violence to dissent on the East Coast, burning homes, destroying cars, and beating resistors. O’Leary saw this as a break with the popular nature of the revolution, as one group, the Frente, strove to dominate government and quash any dissent.<sup>208</sup> US critics capitalized on the Sandinistas’ failure to peaceably integrate the East Coast. Members of Reagan’s administration alleged that the Sandinistas had committed grave human rights abuses in their attempt to eradicate Nicaragua’s coastal, indigenous population.<sup>209</sup> They hoped these allegations would lessen international support for the Sandinistas.

While the US government’s claims were likely exaggerated to fulfill their political aims, even supporters of the Sandinistas must have worried about the rise of a one-party and coercive state. However, they likely felt that they could not truly express their fears because of the fragility of the revolution. Nevertheless, some commentary, though often indirect, surfaced. Freire acknowledged the rarity of true liberation, as he believed that “the moment the new regime hardens into a dominating bureaucracy, the humanist dimension is lost and it is no longer possible to speak of liberation.”<sup>210</sup> The Sandinista’s attempts to consolidate their government and administer grand social programs, like national literacy campaign, therefore, could have undermined their ability to serve those they claimed to represent. The question then became, could Freire’s ideals work on a large scale? President Nyerere of Tanzania who had attempted to implement Freire’s pedagogy in the 1970s allegedly told Freire that applying his program proved

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<sup>207</sup> “Letter to Myles Horton from Geraldine O’Leary, March 17, 1981.” From Wisconsin Historical Society, *Myles Horton Papers, Box 8, Folders 5-7*.

<sup>208</sup> “Letter to Myles Horton from Geraldine O’Leary, March 17, 1981.” From Wisconsin Historical Society, *Myles Horton Papers, Box 8, Folders 5-7*.

<sup>209</sup> Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 86.

<sup>210</sup> McCarthy, Colman. “Paulo Freire and Educating the Oppressed.” *The Washington Post, Times Herald*. July 31, 1972.

more difficult than expected. As Freire told Nyerere, the success of a revolution rested on its ability to overcome these challenges. “Yes, it is not easy, but it’s not impossible.”<sup>211</sup>

Horton, however, remained more skeptical. He asserted that, while the revolution had effected many changes, the schools in Nicaragua remained largely unchanged.<sup>212</sup> These institutions represented vestiges of the old system and reinforced the status quo. Horton’s criticism likely reflected his belief that education had to occur outside of the established system, for “reform within the system reinforced the system, or was co-opted by the system. Reformers didn’t change this system, they made it more palatable and justified it.”<sup>213</sup> Horton, therefore, advocated more radical change in popular education, for attempts to work within the system, especially as the Sandinistas forged a strong bureaucracy, failed to effect the social change that the Nicaraguan peasants needed. Unfortunately, agitation to create change, especially if it perceivably threatened the regime, was dangerous. De Macias provided a perfect example, as his political maneuvering with various groups made him fall into disfavor with the Frente, leading to his dismissal in March 1982.<sup>214</sup>

Only months later, an article in *Soberania*, an anti-imperialist magazine, alleged that both O’Leary and de Macias accepted covert funds from the CIA. Searched for by the Security Police, de Macias found asylum in Costa Rica. While the experiences of de Macias and O’Leary were not universal, they represented the trials of several reformers denounced in *Soberania* and served as evidence of the growing instability of Nicaragua in the early 1980s. O’Leary’s letters revealed her deep sadness at this event. The excitement of her early letters to Horton, in which she maintained such hope for the future of her adopted country in the wake of popular

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<sup>211</sup> Horton and Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking*, 219.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid*, 221.

<sup>213</sup> Horton and Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking*, 200.

<sup>214</sup> “Letter to Myles Horton from Geraldine O’Leary, March 15, 1982.” From Wisconsin Historical Society, *Myles Horton Papers, Box 8, Folders 5-7*.

revolution, disappeared. Her belief that education could bring together a nation no longer appeared in her letters. Rather, the Nicaraguan project seemed almost like a failed dream, as the FSLN consolidated power, “isolated itself from the people,” and utilized Somoza tactics of suppression, resulting “once again [in the] Nicaraguan youth...rising and dying because they protest dictatorship.”<sup>215</sup> According to one eye-witness, many of the youth involved in the Contra movement against the Sandinistas lacked sophisticated justifications for their participation. Some argued that the economic policies of the Sandinistas harmed their families. Others alleged that they experienced no significant improvement in living conditions since the overthrow of the regime.<sup>216</sup> Regardless of their reasons, by 1985, the Contras had killed “130 teachers, 40 doctors and nurses, 152 technicians, and 41 other professionals” as well as destroyed 85 health facilities with the support and guidance of the United States.<sup>217</sup>

For Horton and others, these failures only illustrated the need for more international solidarity. While regional, these issues represented universal problems that the United States, Canada, and Latin America faced or had faced. Although Horton’s plans for an international conference were delayed, the International Popular Education Conference for Peace (*Encuentro Internacional de Educacion Popular por la Paz*) came to fruition in August and September 1983. To prepare for this meeting, a group of American, Canadian, and Latin American educators met at Highlander, in its new location in New Market, Tennessee, in March 1983. Just as Highlander had served as a center for adult education from the 1930s to the 1960s, the institution now operated as a center of international solidarity, bringing together educators from throughout the Western Hemisphere to rural Tennessee.

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<sup>215</sup> “Letter to Friends from Geraldine O’Leary, July 14, 1982.” From Wisconsin Historical Society, *Myles Horton Papers, Box 8, Folders 5-7*.

<sup>216</sup> Schodolski, Vincent J. “Contras Are Young, Restless, and Angry.” *Chicago Tribune*. April 16, 1985.

<sup>217</sup> Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 48-49.



Horton and other Highlander staff recognized the importance of these connections and believed that the school's long history of aiding the oppressed through workshops and literacy education developed an expertise in adult education that would be useful to others. "We believe that increasingly the problems faced by communities in Appalachia and the South are inter-related with those of developing countries."<sup>218</sup> The objectives established at the March conference largely reflected Highlander's longstanding recognition of the importance of international connections and exchange. Participants agreed:

- 1) To exchange experiences in popular education and to systematize our understanding of methodologies of popular education;
- 2) To strengthen international solidarity with Latin America in general and with Central America in particular;
- 3) To create links between popular education in order to establish long-term relationships (according to sectors, regions, or interests in common)
- 4) To strengthen the collaboration between popular educators and organizations of popular education in Latin America and North America, developing a plan of action for the next two years.<sup>219</sup>

This conference ultimately served as the culmination of Highlander's efforts since the 1960s to establish connections with Latin America.

Although the conference in August focused largely on Nicaragua and the conflicts in that country, participants did have the opportunity to share their experiences about the work in their regions. At the close of the conference, participants signed the Managua Declaration, pledging, among other things, to support Nicaragua's revolution and education programs, as it "orients and illuminates educational activities in all countries."<sup>220</sup> For these adult educators, Nicaragua served as a testing ground of the theories that each region had spent decades developing. While the United States, Canada, and the western European countries had hosted literacy movements,

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<sup>218</sup> "Grant Proposal for Delegation to World Assembly of Adult Education, 1985." From Harry Lasker Library, *Latin America*.

<sup>219</sup> "Sample Letter to Participants of 1983 Conference." From Wisconsin Historical Society, *Myles Horton Papers, Box 8, Folder 8*.

<sup>220</sup> "Managua Declaration, 1983." From Wisconsin Historical Society, *Myles Horton Papers, Box 8, Folder 8*.

Nicaragua provided a radical opportunity. As a country with one of the worst literacy rates in the Western Hemisphere, heavily stratified both economically between classes, and divided socially between the cities and the countryside, Nicaragua had many debilitating problems, yet its government declared that it would solve many of them through a massive, nation-wide literacy campaign mobilizing the entire country. This required great sacrifice from the whole population. Horton admired what he believed to be the willingness of the Nicaraguans to pursue what they deemed right despite the potential consequences and hardships, especially as the US increased pressure on the Sandinistas. “That’s a dimension that I don’t think we’ve gotten into here in Appalachia or at Highlander,” he stated, “but one we must get into if we’re going to move toward any kind of transformation of society.”<sup>221</sup> The success of the Nicaraguans despite adversity would, therefore, benefit education movements throughout the world by demonstrating the effectiveness of these radical campaigns. Furthermore, the Managua Declaration “reiterate[d] commitment to peace and to the self-determination of all people.”<sup>222</sup> In Horton’s view, the struggles of Nicaragua and the inability of the country to continue to develop into a progressive, modern state rested on the US’s interference in Nicaragua’s domestic affairs through the support of the Contras not the country’s mission.<sup>223</sup>

The meeting also created new and strengthened old relationships. The Latin American Council for Adult Education (CEAAL), headed by Paulo Freire, signed an agreement with Highlander to continue the exchange begun at the Popular Education for Peace Conference and to hold joint workshops and projects together in the future.<sup>224</sup> Furthermore, the meeting brought Nicaraguan educators and Highlander closer. In a 1988 letter, John Gaventa, the successor of

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<sup>221</sup> Horton and Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking*, 225.

<sup>222</sup> “Managua Declaration, 1983.” From Wisconsin Historical Society, *Myles Horton Papers, Box 8, Folder 8*.

<sup>223</sup> Horton, Kohl, and Kohl, *The Long Haul*, 206.

<sup>224</sup> “Agreement Between CEAAL and the Highlander, 1983” From Harry Lasker Library, *Community Education, Organizations, Sources, and Newsletters, CEAAL Folder*.

Horton as director of Highlander, wrote to the popular education leader in Nicaragua, Adolfo Lopez Campos, describing the solidarity that developed between the two regions over the past decade. These included the 1983 conference, the arrangement of members from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to visit Nicaragua, a speaking tour by Eduardo Baez, and workshops at Highlander for international educators in both 1987 and 1988.<sup>225</sup> In addition, Horton continued visiting Nicaragua throughout the remainder of the 1980s, even participating in its 1985 election as an official witness.<sup>226</sup> Despite the many struggles of the country, Horton never lost hope that Nicaragua would one day achieve its goals, for he had seen through his own battles in the United States that radical change could occur. “I don’t have any fear that it won’t take place. I’ve seen it in the civil rights movement.”<sup>227</sup>

## Conclusion

These interactions ultimately contributed to the current understanding of the concept of the Global South. Highlander’s past experiences with the Citizenship Schools allowed the South to participate in these dialogues. While the American South and Latin America developed differently, these regions retained certain vestiges of the colonial plantation system under which they were founded. Therefore, the South retained characteristics that its northern counterpart did not possess, creating what one observer termed “a Third World within your First World.”<sup>228</sup> Because of this likeness, the South underwent similar processes and maintained similar structures as its southern neighbors. The American South, Brazil, and Nicaragua all possessed

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<sup>225</sup> Gaventa, John. “Letter from John Gaventa to Adolfo Lopez Campos, January 26, 1988.” From Harry Lasker Library, *1988 Trips to Latin America, Visits from Nicaraguans, Ideas on Latin American Institute, Reports and Funding Requests for Travel to Nicaragua, January 1988*.

<sup>226</sup> Horton, Kohl, and Kohl, *The Long Haul*, 205.

<sup>227</sup> Horton and Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking*, 225.

<sup>228</sup> *Highlander Reports*. “Highlander Reports, Fall 1985.” From Harry Lasker Library, *Highlander Reports, 1968 Spring through 2008 Fall, Box 2, Folder 23*.

severe social, economic, and political disparities that largely resulted from a wealthy minority wielding power over a large, undereducated, and disenfranchised majority. These elites utilized the illiteracy of the majority to control and subjugate those they deemed inferior.

Similar situations resulted in similar responses, as Horton and Freire developed comparable pedagogies about adult education and literacy. Both focused on the equal environment of the classroom, realizing that traditional education often reproduced the status quo since teachers merely instilled their own values in their students. Therefore, change required that the answers to problems come from the people and their experiences. Only then could it truly provide them with liberation. To achieve this, teachers and students needed to be social equals. Therefore, Horton required that all instructors of the Citizenship Schools be African American adults. Likewise, unlike other Latin American literacy programs, Freire required that his instructors be highly trained to ensure that they would adequately create vocabulary lists and facilitate discussion that reflected the culture and values of those whom they taught.

Furthermore, because these communities and cultures varied across regions, any educational program needed to respond to the needs of a particular area. While Freire opposed the notion of any primer, only developing his vocabulary lists after initial discussions with community members, Horton's Citizenship Schools developed workbooks for specific areas of the South. Although they contained many similarities, the differences in content reflected what the people in that region wanted to learn. Despite the use of workbooks, Highlander's program remained similar to Freire's, as the instructors of the Citizenship Schools only trained at Highlander before being sent back to work with their own communities. Their programs, therefore, remained relatively flexible, as the workbooks primarily contained exercises in writing and arithmetic, leaving discussions largely at the discretion of the instructor.

While Horton and Freire shared many similarities, one fundamental difference existed between their pedagogies. Horton strongly believed that radical education could not take place within the established system. When instituting Highlander, he ensured it would lie outside of traditional education, free to develop its own programs and challenge the status quo. Freire's program, however, directly worked with the Brazilian government until the military coup in 1964. This reflected the revolutionary society in which Freire developed his program. The failure of his literacy campaign and Freire's expulsion may illuminate a reason why Highlander's program, in contrast to many of the Latin American campaigns, enjoyed greater and lasting success. By existing on the outside, Highlander did not have to worry about government overthrow or corruption halting its program. In its own way, the Citizenship Schools aimed to create this overthrow and end existing corruption through the power of voting. Its removal from the system ensured that Highlander could change existing institutions without becoming a part of them or indirectly supporting them. While criticized and deemed subversive, Horton could effect the change he desired without facing exile like his counterpart. However, on the outside, Highlander faced greater accusations for propaganda and indoctrination, as they were perpetually seen as antagonistic to the system, which limited the receptiveness of the government to their demands.<sup>229</sup> Therefore, both Freire and Horton were limited by their political environment. Nicaragua, on the other hand, as a yet unformed and new entity after the overthrow of Somoza offered the opportunity to build a society founded on these principles of radical social change. However, even in this new society, the question of working inside or outside of the established system plagued Nicaragua.

More revolutionary than Brazil, Nicaragua served as a significant example of a Latin American literacy movement. The campaign's sponsorship by the government imbued the

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<sup>229</sup> Horton and Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking*, 200-201.

Literacy Crusade with an overtly political element that violated many of the precepts established by Freire. Not only did the Sandinistas create a primer, they filled it with revolutionary material, including photos of Sandino and ideologically charged words. For this primer, the Literacy Crusade received criticism for political indoctrination by its opponents. While that term and its negative connotations might be inappropriate, as all governments, including the United States, engage in forms of political socialization, the leaders of the Literacy Crusade recognized that the creation and development of citizens fit for the new revolutionary society served as the primary goal of the campaign. Literacy merely acted as a mechanism to achieve this end. However, the use of children as instructors largely hindered the ability of the Nicaraguan project to adequately perform conscientization. These youth largely lacked the ability awaken in peasants of the countryside revolutionary ideals, especially as the peasants often cared more about literacy lessons than the discussions. Therefore, it could be argued that the discussions served to instill the revolutionary values more in the youth than in the peasants. The pressures of the Cold War, nevertheless, necessitated the rapid creation of citizens supportive of the regime and the fragile revolution. Unfortunately, these massive social programs also required the formation of a large, administrative bureaucracy, arguably insulating the government from the people and sparking dissent among certain groups who believed the government they served failed to measure up to its own promises.

Ultimately, these variances resulted in different levels of success for the literacy experiments. Perhaps, Highlander proved most successful in its mission because of its limited program, working outside the government and focusing primarily on providing its students with tools for political change rather than a pre-determined ideology. In contrast, the Sandinistas focused on creating new citizens for Nicaragua, instilling in them the values that they believed

revolutionary citizens should possess. The differences in these programs largely reflected the political environments and the scale of their programs. Highlander's Citizenship Schools, operating outside of the state and focusing on small, isolated communities, could design programs to fit the specific needs of communities and avoid accusations of indoctrination. However, Nicaragua's government, despite its official adoption of Freire's method, could not maintain the same adherence to the underlying pedagogies of Freire due to the scale of the program, which served as an attempt to reinvent a society and its citizens in the face of political pressures on the Sandinista government to quickly produce results.

Because of the fundamental flaws in the campaign, illiteracy increased shortly after the Crusade, raising questions about the success of the program even if it temporarily produced dramatic improvements. To this day, Nicaragua continues to have one of the highest rates of illiteracy in the Western Hemisphere, as approximately 23% of the population lacks the ability to read and write.<sup>230</sup> This rate is triple or quadruple the rates most of the Latin American countries that engaged in a similar literacy campaigns in the twentieth century.<sup>231</sup> Despite this increase in illiteracy, attention to the plights of peasants in Nicaragua significantly decreased after the end of the Cold War, illustrating the impact of the global political environment on what might otherwise have been lauded and supported as a noble achievement. The Cold War politics, however, actively thwarted the Nicaraguan Literacy Crusade. Funneling increasingly greater amounts of funds on defense against the US-backed Contras, the Sandinistas had to shift moneys away from their social programs,<sup>232</sup> legitimizing Horton's claim that the 1979 movement would have been successful had it not been for the United States efforts to undermine Nicaragua.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> "Indicators on Illiteracy." edited by Scientific United Nations Educational, and Cultural Organization, 2006.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>232</sup> Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 40.

<sup>233</sup> Horton, Kohl, and Kohl, *The Long Haul*, 206.

However, these challenges illustrated the importance of the international solidarity of the 1980s. Despite the politically compromising position some of these organizations placed themselves in by supporting Nicaragua, they remained invested, seeing the revolution and its literacy campaign as a testing ground for the adult education many of these institutions had spent decades developing. As a blank slate, Nicaragua represented the opportunity to start anew and build a revolutionary society founded on progressive, social change without the hindrances of an established system. While different organizations involved in Nicaragua in the 1980s approached the problem of illiteracy in different ways, they all promoted political change and acted as representatives of the people in creating these programs.

Highlander, Freire, and Nicaragua shared an underlying mission to empower the oppressed in their country. Although the problems of the American South and those of Latin America may have outwardly seemed distinct, Highlander showed the commonalities between these regions. As Horton argued, “Highlander is a Third World idea. It has worked in Appalachia and the South because they have a lot in common with Third World countries or Third World segments within other countries.”<sup>234</sup> By overcoming borders through the exchange of ideas, the obstacles faced by a specific region could be addressed or at least alleviated. The 1983 conference in Nicaragua served as an example of the importance of this solidarity, as adult educators from across the world met to discuss and find solutions for Nicaragua and their people. Ultimately, as those involved frequently acknowledged, they, despite their different approaches and political environments, battled against the universal plights of the oppressed and participated in one of the most significant waves of social change in the twentieth century.

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<sup>234</sup> Horton, Kohl, and Kohl, *The Long Haul*, 213.



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