

Editors' Introduction

*Myles Horton
and Paulo Freire:
Background
on the Men,
their Movements,
and the Meetings*

In December 1987, Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, two pioneers of education for social change, came together to “talk a book” about their experiences and ideas. Though they came from different environments—one from the rural mountains of Appalachia, the other from São Paulo, the largest industrial city in Brazil—Myles and Paulo shared a vision and a history of using participatory education as a crucible for empowerment of the poor and powerless. Their remarkably common experiences represent more than one hundred years of educational praxis.

In many ways, Myles and Paulo seem an unlikely match. They began their work at different times. Horton started the Highlander Folk School on the Cumberland Plateau in Tennessee in 1932. Paulo began his literacy programs in Recife in northeastern Brazil some

twenty-five years later. Paulo has always been more theoretical in his writing and discourse. Myles conversed more simply, often through anecdotes and storytelling drawn from his years of struggle. Paulo's work, at least initially, came from a position within a university. He continued it as a government official responsible for literacy programs throughout Brazil. Myles always worked outside university and government institutions, using as his base the Highlander Folk School (later the Highlander Research and Education Center), an independent center conducting adult education programs at the grass roots. Partly as a result of political circumstance—he was forced to flee from Brazil in 1964—Paulo has worked in many countries and is a more global figure. Myles too has faced political repercussions—especially the attacks, beatings, and investigations during the McCarthy era and civil rights movement—but chose (and was able) to stay rooted in one region of the southern United States for more than five decades.

One of the reasons that Paulo Freire wanted to “talk a book” with Myles, he often said, was that he was tired of North American audiences telling him that his ideas were only applicable to Third World conditions. “No,” he said, “the story of Myles and of Highlander Center show that the ideas apply to the First World, too.”

How could two men, working in such different social spaces and times, arrive at similar ideas and methods? Underlying the philosophy of both is the idea that knowledge grows from and is a reflection of social experience. It is important, therefore, that these conver-

sations and the ideas of these two men also be linked to the social context from which they grew. Perhaps more important than their First World or Third World roots is the fact that both Myles and Paulo came from the poorest regions *within* their own countries, regions that shared many characteristics in their relationships to the larger political economy. Within that context, they also shared similarities of life history and of involvement in social movements that helped to shape their vision and their practice.

The Men

Myles Horton was born in 1905 in the western Tennessee Delta, an area whose history is based upon plantation agriculture, a slave-based economy, absentee ownership, and severe rural poverty. He founded the Highlander Folk School in Grundy County, Tennessee, one of the poorest Appalachian counties and an area dominated by powerful coal interests. During the 1930s, at the time of Highlander's founding, the region was being swept by industrialization. Myles and Highlander started their programs with rural workers, who were being displaced from the land and driven into the textile mills, mines, and factories as part of the "development" of the rural South.

Paulo Freire was born in 1921 in Recife, in northeast Brazil, one of Brazil's poorest regions. As Appalachia and the rural South have been in the United States, the region has been plagued with "poverty, hunger and illiteracy for many years. . . . The northeast has Brazil's

highest birthrate, shortest life expectancy rates, severest malnutrition, lowest literacy rates, and highest levels of unemployment and underemployment.”¹ There are other common characteristics between the two regions. The rural areas of northeast Brazil were dominated by sugar estates and slave and peasant labor, not dissimilar to the cotton plantation economy of the South. Industrialization and “development” schemes transformed the rural-based economy, leading peasants to migrate from the countryside to the towns and cities such as Recife. Both regions were dependent upon powerful economic interests, initially the plantation owners and later the multinationals, and were characterized by sharp dichotomies between rich and poor, powerful and powerless.

Myles and Paulo also experienced rather similar family backgrounds. Both were born of parents who were slightly more educated and well-to-do than many of the poor around them. But in both families, the broader economic changes were to lead to personal adversity.

Myles’s father and mother, who had been through grammar school, were schoolteachers. They later lost their jobs when teachers were required to have certification. Myles’s father survived as he could, spending time as a day laborer, a clerk, and then a sharecropper. Myles recalls: “I can remember very well that I never felt sorry for myself. I just accepted the fact that those were the conditions, and that I was a victim of those conditions, but I never had a feeling of inferiority to

people. I think that I got that from my parents too, because even though they were struggling and poor, they never accepted the fact that they were inferior to anybody or that anybody was inferior to them.”

Paulo’s father was a low-level officer in the military where “pay was low, but the prestige was high.” During the Depression, his father lost that job, as Myles’s father had lost his, and the family left Recife for the nearby town of Jaboatão. There, Paulo says, “I had the possibility to experience hunger. And I say I had the *possibility* because I think that experience was very useful to me.”

Though Myles’s and Paulo’s parents were constantly on the edge of poverty, struggling to make ends meet, they were strongly supportive of schooling for their children. Paulo recalls his father teaching him to read “under a mango tree,” while Myles describes loving books and reading anything that he could borrow from neighbors, friends, and relatives in the nearest little town, named, coincidentally, Brazil! Through family friends or other contacts, both sets of parents were able to send their sons to nearby towns for high school when they were 15 or 16 years old. Conforming to the schooling system was not easy for either boy, even at a young age. As a child, Paulo was thought to have learning problems, leading his teachers to label him as having a “mild mental retardation.” Myles describes how he hated to do the rote work that was required and instead would sneakily read other books, leading him to “get in trouble for reading in school.”

Unlike many of their friends from similar circumstances, both Myles and Paulo attended college, Myles in a small Tennessee school called Cumberland Presbyterian, Paulo in the University of Recife, where he was trained as a lawyer, a profession he quickly gave up. Both were drawn to the social aspects of Christianity, among other early intellectual influences. Myles went on from college to Union Seminary in the late 1920s, where he was influenced by Reinhold Niebuhr, the Christian socialist and social critic. He also went on to study sociology briefly at the University of Chicago, where he worked with Jane Addams in the Settlement House movement.

Freire, too, was highly influenced by a growing Catholic Action movement, which was to lay the ground for what would later become known as the liberation theology movement. As a student, he joined a Catholic Action group at the university, which, unlike most of the church, was “more preoccupied with the concept of society and social change, and acutely aware of the conditions of poverty and hunger in the Northeast.” While Myles moved away from his theological roots, Freire continued to be active in and deeply influenced by the radical Catholic movement.’

Myles and Paulo were shaped as well by their own families and personal relationships, especially their wives. In 1935 Myles married Zilphia Mae Johnson, a talented musician and singer, who contributed to Highlander and Myles an understanding of the role that music and culture could play in nurturing social

change.” In 1943, Paulo married Elza Maria Costa de Oliveira, whom he credits for constantly helping him develop his educational ideas and method. Myles suffered personal tragedy when Zilphia died in 1956. Elza died in 1987, before Paulo visited Highlander to hold these conversations. Both Myles and Paulo remarried: Myles to Aimee Isgrig, who worked on the staff with Myles and wrote a dissertation on Highlander; Paulo to Anna Maria Araujo, one of his students who wrote her dissertation with him on the history of illiteracy in Brazil.⁸

While Myles and Paulo shared these commonalities in family background, they chose very different paths to begin their educational work.

After leaving graduate school in sociology at the University of Chicago, Myles went to Denmark to study the Danish Folk High School movement, hoping to gain insights for his own fledgling idea of a community school in the United States. There he learned more about the ideas of Bishop Grundtvig, founder of the movement—ideas such as the importance of peer learning in nonformal settings free from government regulation. In Copenhagen on Christmas night 1931, he wrote of his dream of beginning a school in the mountains of Tennessee:

I can't sleep, but there are dreams. What you must do is go back, get a simple place. move in and you are there. The situation is there. You start with this and you let it grow. You know your goal. It will build its own structure and take its own **form**.

You can go to school all your life, you'll never figure it out because you are trying to get an answer that can only come from the people in the life situation.⁹

With this vision in mind, he returned to Tennessee in 1932, and along with Don West started the Highlander Folk School. Though he took short stints away from Highlander to develop educational programs for unions, Myles was to serve as director of Highlander the next forty years, until he retired in 1972.

After abandoning law, Paulo Freire began work in 1946 at a social service agency for the state of Pernambuco. He was responsible for programs of education for the rural poor and industrial workers in the area that included Recife. Here he first became interested in the problems of adult literacy and popular education, and he began to read and develop his ideas. In 1954 he resigned this post and began teaching history and philosophy of education at the University of Recife. In 1959, with the election of a new, progressive mayor in Recife, Freire was placed in charge of the Movimento de Cultura Popular (MCP), an active adult-education program. (At the same time, he obtained his doctorate from the University of Recife, where in his thesis he outlined his emerging adult-education ideas.) In 1962, he was named head of a new cultural extension service established for popular education in the region. And following a change in national government and a victory by João Goulart, Freire, whose methods were by now becoming well-known, was asked in 1963 to head the National Literacy Program of the Brazilian Minis-

try of Education and Culture — the post that was to lead to his exile in **1964**.

The Movements

Thus, Myles's and Paulo's ideas were to develop through two very different forms of praxis—Myles's from a small, independent residential education center situated outside the formal schooling system or the state, Paulo from within university and state-sponsored programs. Their ideas were to converge not through a series of theoretical deductions but through their interaction with the social context and their involvement with broader popular struggles for participation and freedom. Though both are often credited for what they contributed to these movements, perhaps more significant is the way in which their careers were in fact shaped by social movements themselves.

When Myles and others founded Highlander on the Cumberland Plateau in 1932, they had a vision of change but no clear idea of the movement that was to bring it about. Their intent was simply “to provide an educational center in the South for the training of rural and industrial leaders, and for the conservation and enrichment of the indigenous cultural values of the mountains.”¹⁰ The school's first fund-raising letter, sent by Reinhold Niebuhr, stated that the school proposed “to use education as one of the instruments for bringing about a new social order.”” The seeds of the idea settled on the fertile soil of industrialization that was

sweeping the rural South, bringing with it the demands for economic justice for southern workers. Highlander staff members quickly provided assistance to workers and used these experiences to shape their educational ideas. During one strike, following meetings with coal miners in Wilder, Tennessee, Myles was arrested by the National Guard and charged with “coming here, getting information, going back and teaching it.”¹² By the 1940s Highlander had become a residential education center for the Congress for Industrial Organizations (CIO), providing schools for union leaders from around the South.

In the early 1950s, feeling that racial justice must accompany economic justice, Highlander shifted its attention to the problem of desegregation in the South. For the next decade it was a meeting and educational ground for the emerging civil rights movement. Dozens of meetings and workshops at Highlander were followed by civil rights activities that were to make major changes in race relations in the United States. Rosa Parks, who had been to Highlander only a few months before, sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott when she refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white man. The boycott in turn gave rise to the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr., also a visitor to Highlander and a colleague of Horton's.

In the early days of the civil rights movement, one of Highlander's most influential programs was the development of Citizenship Schools. Begun in Johns Island, South Carolina, in response to a request from Esau Jenkins, a black community leader, the Citizenship Schools

taught blacks how to read and write in order to gain the vote and political power. In so doing, they also developed principles of literacy education that used popular black leaders as teachers and taught reading based on the students' needs and desires to gain freedom. In the 1960s, leadership of the highly successful program was passed to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). By 1970 SCLC estimated that approximately one hundred thousand blacks had learned to read and write through the Citizenship Schools.¹³

In his book, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, Aldon Morris traces this link between the Citizenship Schools and the mobilization of the civil rights movement. He argues that "the citizenship schools were probably the most profound contribution of all those made to the emerging civil rights movement" by "movement halfway houses" such as Highlander.¹⁴ (The Citizenship Schools are discussed extensively by Horton and Freire in Chapter 2 of this book.)

Freire's ideas found a similar base in the movements for democratic education in northeast Brazil. During the growth of these movements in the late 1950s, the traditional social structure was changing, the dependence on the sugar plantation economy was declining, and industrialization was occurring at a rapid rate. With the emergence of a populist reformist government of Pernambuco, the Northeast of Brazil became a laboratory for the emergence of new demands for participation by the people in their own development. Two movements in particular formed the setting for the literacy and popular education program of which Freire

was a part. One was the growth of rural trade unions or peasant associations known as Peasant Leagues. By **1960** an estimated eighty thousand workers belonged to these leagues in the Northeast. Among their demands, in addition to the right to organize cooperatives for a program of land reform, was the right for illiterates to vote, a right that was denied to the peasants at the time. The second movement grew from Catholic activists and included the Basic Education Movement, or **MEB** (*Movimento Educação de Base*), and radical Catholic groups such as Popular Action and Catholic University Youth (to which Freire had belonged).

In 1959 Miguel Arraes, a nationalist and radical democrat, was elected mayor of Recife. Hoping to bring about fundamental changes in the constitution, he knew that he would have to bring education to the rural poor, who represented a majority of the population but could not vote because they were largely illiterate. He formed the Recife Popular Culture Movement, or **MCP** (*Movimento Cultural Popular*), which would carry out a program of grassroots education, adult literacy, and development of critical consciousness of the masses. Doing so would help to mobilize the peasants to exercise their political power, and Freire was asked to head this program. Here he developed culture centers and culture circles that were at the heart of the literacy education process. Recife and the surrounding area thus became the microcosm for the development of Freire's ideas, ideas that were deeply related to the popular demands and political movements of the time.

The period was one of great awakening and change

throughout the country. "Different forces were in motion and the process was an irreversible one. It was the breaking of an old society and the emergence of a more democratic, pluralistic social order."¹⁵ With the election of a new populist national government in 1960, a variety of popular education and culture programs were initiated. Freire was appointed head of the new National Literacy Program. Under the National Literacy Plan of 1964, his methods were to be extended to reach 5 million illiterate people throughout the country. The MEB, the Catholic Church's own national adult education organization, also adopted Freire's methods.

The plans were not fully realized. In 1964 a military coup overthrew the Goulart government. The National Literacy Campaign was halted. The government enacted new laws, "which deprived one hundred influential members of the previous government their rights for a decade."¹⁶ Among them was Paulo Freire, who was forced to flee the country along with hundreds of other activists and leaders in the government.

For both Freire and Horton, the linking of literacy and enfranchisement posed a major threat to long-entrenched power structures, a threat that led to repercussions. As Freire has pointed out:

It was so extraordinary, that it couldn't be allowed to continue. In a state like Pernambuco, which at the time had about 800 thousand voters, it would be possible in one year to have up to 1 million and 300 thousand new voters. . . . Well, that had too great a repercussion on the prevalent power structure. It was too risky a game for the dominant class.¹⁷

In Brazil, the Rio de Janeiro newspaper *El Globo* accused Freire of “spreading foreign ideas throughout the country.”¹⁸ Freire was arrested, jailed for seventy-five days and interrogated for eighty-three hours. The military government declared him an “international subversive, a traitor to Christ and to the people of Brazil besides being an absolute ignoramus and illiterate.”¹⁹

Similarly, as Highlander emerged as a key force in the empowerment of blacks in the South, it came under attack. The southern white power structure attempted to use the virulent anticommunist rhetoric of the McCarthy period to discredit Horton and the school. In 1954, Horton was investigated by Senator James Eastland, a wealthy Mississippi planter and white supremacist, for his alleged communist connections. In another celebrated incident, Georgia’s segregationist governor, Marvin Griffin, dispatched infiltrators to the celebration of Highlander’s twenty-fifth anniversary in 1957, where Martin Luther King, Jr., was the keynote speaker. Pictures were taken of King, Horton, and others, turned into billboards, and plastered around the South with the label, “King at a Communist Training School.” In 1959 the Highlander Folk School was raided by the State of Tennessee and its property and assets seized? Arguing that you could padlock the school but not the idea, Horton renamed it the Highlander Research and Education Center and moved it to Knoxville—and later to New Market, where it is today.

Despite the adversity, both men displayed the optimism that underlies much of their educational beliefs. The attacks, while imposing great personal costs, be-

came learning grounds for further activities. After a brief stint in Bolivia (until another coup), Freire went on to Chile, where he assisted in developing educational programs on behalf of agrarian reform. From there he went to Harvard, where he wrote and lectured. His ideas began to receive much more international attention, especially following the publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in English in 1975.²¹ In 1970, he joined the World Council of Churches in Geneva. He continued to travel, assist in the development of programs, and write until he was able to return to Brazil in 1980.

As the North American civil rights movement began to grow in the mid-1960s, the Citizenship Schools became incorporated under the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Myles tried to continue developing educational programs in other parts of Appalachia and the South. Later, passing on leadership of the Highlander Research and Education Center to younger associates, he focused on traveling, speaking, and conducting workshops in the United States and abroad. Today, the center continues its work throughout Appalachia and the South. While issues have changed—today they include environmental abuse, poverty and economic justice, youth empowerment, leadership development—the philosophy of education for empowerment remains.

The Meetings

Given their backgrounds, it was perhaps inevitable that Horton and Freire would meet. When they did come

together in Myles's home at Highlander, it was an important time for both. Earlier in the year Paulo's wife, Elza, had died, and Paulo was still in a state of sorrow and depression. Myles had recovered from an operation for colon cancer in the summer, and though he was doing well, he was clearly concerned about how to share his ideas while he was able.

In this **book**, the two men link their own lives, their ideas on radical education, and their experiences in a fresh way. After reading the edited manuscript, Paulo would say that of all the themes that he and Myles discussed, two underlying ideas are the most important. First is the fundamental belief in the importance of the freedom of people everywhere, the struggle for which is widely seen as the 1990s open—in Brazil, in Eastern Europe, in the Soviet Union, in southern Africa. Second is the radical democratic belief in the capacity and right of all people to achieve that freedom through self-emancipation.

Both men believe, then, real liberation is achieved through popular participation. Participation in turn is realized through an educational practice that itself is both liberatory and participatory, that simultaneously creates a new society and involves the people themselves in the creation of their own knowledge.

Most important for Myles and Paulo, these ideas are not abstractions, but grow from their struggles to link theory and practice in their own lives. In turn, their discussions illuminate questions faced by educators and activists around the world who are concerned

with linking participatory education to liberation and social change. What is the role of the teacher? The organizer? The educator? How is education linked to mobilization and culture to create a new society? Can society be transformed by education, or must education itself first be transformed? Is there space for liberatory education within the state-sponsored educational system, as Paulo tried to show, or must change come from somewhere outside, such as Myles's Highlander?

In dealing with these themes, the conversations give us, as Henry Giroux has said of Freire, both a "language of critique" of existing power relations and a "language of possibility" for creating a new society through a new educational and social practice.²²

The process of "talking a book" became for the two men intensely personal. They not only deepened their critique of knowledge and power but also developed and renewed their own strength. Over the course of their conversations, they shared a respect and personal affection for one another in a way that gave each a new sense of possibility and hope.

Paulo credits his reflections with Myles as helping to bring him out of his despair over Elza's death. In his meeting with Myles in December 1987, he saw in Myles a man sixteen years his senior—then 82 years old—still full of energy and vision. He says, "At Highlander I began to read and to write again." He also was drawn back into the struggles for popular participation in Brazil. When a popular socialist candidate was elected mayor of São Paulo in 1988, Paulo became Sec-

retary for Education and took up the new challenge of transforming a traditional educational system in Latin America's largest and most industrialized city.

In the winter of 1989, in the first popular elections in twenty-nine years, Paulo supported Luis Inacio Lula da Silva, known as Lula, a trade unionist for the Workers Party (PT), who came very close to winning the national elections. Had he done so, it would have been a new historical moment in Brazilian politics, and Paulo Freire would again have been named Minister of Education for the whole country, the post he held when he was exiled in 1964. "Tell Myles that I may not be able to see him in January," Freire told us as we tried to arrange the final meeting. "Tell him that I may be in power."

"That," Horton allowed, "would be a reasonable excuse."

Lula came very close to winning the election, but not close enough. In early January 1990, following Lula's defeat, Paulo and Anita, his second wife, came to Highlander for a final review of the manuscript and, it would turn out, a final meeting with Myles. In the fall of 1989, Myles had undergone surgery for a tumor in the brain, two years after his initial bout with colon cancer. As his mental and physical strength slipped away, he focused on rereading the edited transcript and on the possibility of another meeting with Freire for final changes. By this second meeting, another tumor had formed in Myles's brain, and he worried about being alert enough to discuss the manuscript with Paulo. He rallied for the meeting. The two men were able to have several brief conversations, to concur that the manuscript was

almost ready, and to express their pleasure with it. As they talked and ate together in Myles's home, the atmosphere was one of intense emotion. Looking out over the mountains and at the birds at the feeder, Paulo would comment: "It is sad, but dying is a necessary part of living. It is wonderful that Myles may die here. Dying here is dying in the midst of life."

Three days after his last visit with Paulo and Anita, Myles Horton slipped into a coma. He died a week later. He was 84 years old. "It is incredible," said Paulo, "that at the moment that Myles dies, I assume the responsibility of leading the public system of education in São Paulo. . . . It was an honor for me to participate with him. He's an incredible man. The history of this man, his individual presence in the world, is something which *justifies* the world." Were he able, Myles, we are sure, would say the same of Paulo.

NOTES

- 1 Carroll L. Wessinger, *Parallel Characteristics: Northeast Brazil/Appalachia* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Church of America, n.d.), 6.
- 2 Jorge Jeria, "Vagabond of the Obvious: A Bibliography of Paulo Freire," *Vitae Scholasticae: The Bulletin of Educational Biography* 5, nos. 1-2 (1986): 4.
- 3 Jeria, "Vagabond," g, quoting "Background on Paulo Freire," *Convergence* 6, no. 1 (1973): 46.
- 4 Jeria, "Vagabond," 13.
- 5 Emanuel de Kadt, *Catholic Radicals in Brazil* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 102-5.