

*Cultural Action
for Freedom*

2000 EDITION

PAULO FREIRE

with an introduction by

Marta Soler-Gallart and Bárbara M. Brizuela



HARVARD EDUCATIONAL REVIEW

MONOGRAPH SERIES NO. 1, REVISED EDITION

Cultural Action for Freedom: Editors' Introduction

In this volume, we have chosen to highlight the importance of education to human rights by reprinting two articles written by Paulo Freire (1921–1997) in 1970 for the *Harvard Educational Review*: “The Adult Literacy Process as Cultural Action for Freedom” and “Cultural Action and Conscientization.” These articles contain many of Freire’s original ideas on human rights and education — issues that are central to his work. Freire was a pioneer in promoting the universal right to education and literacy as part of a commitment to people’s struggle against oppression. As Jerome Bruner recognized after Freire’s death in May 1997, Freire left as a legacy his commitment to basic human rights: “He was a brave man as well as a far-sighted one. He made us aware of our mindless cruelties, and now the challenge to all of us is to do something about those cruelties” (e-mail communication to CREA Research Center, University of Barcelona, May 1997).

Throughout Freire’s life, he provided examples of his belief in education as a basic human right. How he acted on this belief is evident in his writings (Freire, 1993, 1994, 1997); in his literacy campaigns in Brazil and Chile; in his involvement in education projects (as director of the Department of Education and Culture in Pernambuco, Brazil; as a consultant for UNESCO; as head of the Department of Education of the United Council of Churches; and as Secretary of Education for the City of São Paulo, Brazil); and in adult education programs he supported during the 1970s in the newly formed African countries of Angola and Guinea-Bissau.

In the early 1960s, Freire started working to promote popular and cultural education by introducing the defense of literacy

and education as universal rights. He claimed that the right to education implies cultural communication — not cultural transmission from educators to “un-educated” people, or transmission from “developed” to “underdeveloped” countries.¹ Almost thirty years after these articles were published, Freire’s ideas are still very much alive.

In these articles, which were published in the same year as his best-known book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire speaks about the importance of *denunciation* and *annunciation*: both are part of a utopian pedagogy in which denouncing dehumanizing structures and practices must be linked to announcing ways to transform them. He states, for example, that the only road to the humanization of both the oppressed and oppressors is through the transformation of the structures that dehumanize them. This requires their commitment to understanding the denounced reality and to a theory of action that supports the announced transformation. The men and women Freire describes are creative subjects who are able to change and transform their world, thus humanizing it and freeing themselves.

Freire’s views are intimately related to human rights: “Learning to read and write ought to be an opportunity for men [and women]² to know what *speaking the word* really means: a human act implying reflection and action. As such it is a primordial human right and not the privilege of a few. . . . The literacy process must relate *speaking the word* to *transforming reality*, and to man’s [and woman’s] role in this transformation” (see pp. 20–21). Further, the conclusion of “Cultural Action and Conscientization” may very well be read as a call to struggle for basic human rights for all people: “If we have faith in men [and women], we cannot be con-

tent with saying that they are human persons while doing nothing concrete so that they may exist as such” (see p. 65).

Paulo Freire wrote these articles in a particular historical moment. His words speak to us from the historical and personal context of a man imprisoned in and exiled from his home country, Brazil, for his political ideas, as a result of the coup d’état that overthrew President João Goulart’s government in 1964. Freire’s exile took him to Chile from 1964 to 1969, where he developed many of the ideas that would result in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970), as well as in the articles reprinted in this issue. In both Brazil and Chile, Freire was intent on addressing the oppression and illiteracy (a form of oppression, in Freire’s mind) suffered by the adults with whom he worked. The articles reflect his concerns at the time: with the agrarian reform movement in Latin America, and with the numerous coups d’état and subsequent military dictatorships (such as those in Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, Peru, and later in Chile) that affected the daily lives and human rights of men and women throughout Latin America. Freire writes to us not only *about* the human right to education for which we must all struggle, but also *from* the humanizing perspective of a person who both suffered and witnessed violations of human rights.

Freire contributed to the fight against a behaviorist trend in education by bringing a consideration of human beings’ consciousness into educational concerns. In these two articles, he speaks of how the process of conscientization brings a “critical dimension” to men’s and women’s consciousness. Freire argues that “this ‘critical’ dimension of consciousness accounts for the goals men [and women] assign to their transforming acts upon the world” (see p. 42), which links to the idea of praxis that he introduced in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970).³ The idea of conscientization, however, evolved throughout Freire’s *oeuvre*. In later writings, he stressed that dialogue must be an integral part of the conscientization process, thus insisting on the importance of dialogue between teachers and students who need to

¹In the reprinted articles, Freire refers to poor countries as “Third World countries,” and describes the situation of dependence and silence imposed upon them. “Third World” was the term used in the 1970s. These countries have also been called “underdeveloped” or “developing,” which in any case reveals the notion of inferiority or “otherness” promoted by Western means of categorization.

²In the reprinted articles, Freire uses “man” and “men” as a generalization for human beings, reflecting the common practice of the time. In our introduction, we have chosen to insert “[and women]” when quoting him because it clarifies his meaning in today’s context. In the reprinted articles, however, we have kept the original form used by Freire.

³Praxis is the relation between theory and practice, between critical thinking about the world and the consequent actions in it.

be critical thinkers. From the mid-1970s, Freire insisted on the dialogical nature of this process, which he referred to as *conscientização*.⁴

Probably his most important contribution to the field of education is the way Freire defended a dialogical universalization of human rights. In the 1960s and 1970s, he promoted a universal right to literacy. He criticized the humanitarian and paternalistic nature of traditional literacy campaigns and promoted an approach that perceives all individuals as full human beings. He believed in adult literacy as a way for men and women to transform the world through their access to the word and therefore to a voice. He also called for dialogue as a way to universalize the right to literacy and end the "culture of silence." Freire denounced a Western understanding of human rights and favored their dialogical universalization. He also elaborated on the idea of the necessity of a universal ethic for all educators. Giving himself as an example, he stated, "I cannot remain neutral. . . . I must intervene in teaching peasants that their hunger is socially constructed, and work with them to help identify those responsible for this social construction, which is, in my view, a crime against humanity" (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p. 391). Freire (1998) believed that the universal ethic of educators is to educate, to have political clarity regarding their stance, and to engage dialogically with their students.

Today we must remind ourselves of the need to universalize human rights through inclusive dialogue. Freire's thirty-year-old texts continue to speak to us today. We invite our readers, then, to revisit with us "The Adult Literacy Process as Cultural Action for Freedom" and "Cultural Action and Conscientization," and to reflect on the challenges of educating with honesty and in solidarity. We encourage all educators to continue their efforts to open dialogues about equality, respect, fairness, and freedom in our schools and educational institutions. These dialogues, begun with tolerance and inclusive of diverse people, celebrate the universality of being equally human and inherently free.

MARTA SOLER-GALLART
BÁRBARA M. BRIZUELA

References

- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (rev. ed.). New York: Continuum.
 Freire, P. (1994). *Pedagogy of hope*. New York: Continuum.
 Freire, P. (1997). *Pedagogy of the heart*. New York: Continuum.
 Freire, P. (1998). *Teachers as cultural workers: Letters to those who dare to teach*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
 Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the world and the word*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
 Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1995). A dialogue: Culture, language, and race. *Harvard Educational Review*, 65, 377-402.

⁴ *Conscientização* is included in the revised edition of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and other writings by Freire (1987, 1995, 1997, 1998).