

EDUCATION

ALPHABET

**READING THE WORD
AND THE WORLD**

**Paulo Freire &
Donald Macedo**

INTRODUCTION BY
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FOREWORD BY
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being and Freire the revolutionary. The outcome is one that not only provides us with a broader understanding of the meaning of literacy and education as a form of cultural politics, but also demonstrates the importance of having a voice that speaks with dignity, embodies the language of critique, and engages a discourse of hope and possibility.

Rather than provide an overview in didactic fashion of the basic assumptions that inform this book, I intend to approach it in a manner consistent with its own critical and transformative spirit of viewing literacy as an effort to read the text and the world dialectically. In doing so, I want to situate Freire and Macedo's text in a theoretical framework that allows us to further understand the dialectical meaning/connection that this book has to the lived reality of teaching and pedagogy. The text in this case is represented by the critical pedagogical principles that structure the essential meaning of this book; the context is the wider world of schooling and education, including the public schools as well as those public spheres where other forms of learning and struggle exist. In what follows, I want to analyze the importance of extending literacy as both a historical and social construct for engaging the discourse of domination and for defining critical pedagogy as a form of cultural politics. I shall then suggest some of the implications Freire and Macedo's view of emancipatory literacy have for developing a radical pedagogy of voice and experience.

CRITICAL LITERACY AS A PRECONDITION FOR SELF AND SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT

In the broadest political sense, literacy is best understood as a myriad of discursive forms and cultural competencies that construct and make available the various relations and experiences that exist between learners and the world. In a more specific sense, critical literacy is both a narrative for agency as well as a referent for critique. As a narrative for agency, literacy becomes synonymous with an attempt to rescue history, experience, and vision from conventional discourse and dominant social relations. It means developing the theoretical and practical conditions through which human beings can locate themselves in

*a narrative for AGENCY
+ referent for CRITIQUE*

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The Importance of the Act of Reading¹

In attempting to write about the importance of reading, I must say something about my preparation for being here today, something about the process of writing this book, which involved a critical understanding of the act of reading. Reading does not consist merely of decoding the written word or language; rather, it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world. Language and reality are dynamically interconnected. The understanding attained by critical-reading of a text implies perceiving the relationship between text and context.

As I began writing about the importance of the act of reading, I felt myself drawn enthusiastically to rereading essential moments in my own practice of reading, the memory of which I retained from the most remote experiences of childhood, from adolescence, from young manhood, when a critical understanding of the act of reading took shape in me. In writing this book, I put objective distance between myself and the different moments at which the act of reading occurred in my experience: first, reading the world, the tiny world in which I moved; afterward, reading the word, not always the word-world in the course of my schooling.

TEXT + CONTEXT

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Recapturing distant childhood as far back as I can trust my memory, trying to understand my act of *reading* the particular world in which I moved, was absolutely significant for me. Surrendering myself to this effort, I re-created and relived in the text I was writing the experiences I lived at a time when I did not yet read words.

I see myself then in the average house in Recife, Brazil, where I was born, encircled by trees. Some of the trees were like persons to me, such was the intimacy between us. In their shadow I played, and in those branches low enough for me to reach I experienced the small risks that prepared me for greater risks and adventures. The old house — its bedrooms, hall, attic, terrace (the setting for my mother's ferns), backyard — all this was my first world. In this world I crawled, gurgled, first stood up, took my first steps, said my first words. Truly, that special world presented itself to me as the arena of my perceptual activity and therefore as the world of my first reading. The *texts*, the *words*, the *letters* of that context were incarnated in a series of things, objects, and signs. In perceiving these I experienced myself, and the more I experienced myself, the more my perceptual capacity increased. I learned to understand things, objects, and signs through using them in relationship to my older brothers and sisters and my parents.

The *texts*, *words*, *letters* of that context were incarnated in the song of the birds — tanager, flycatcher, thrush — in the dance of the boughs blown by the strong winds announcing storms, in the thunder and lightning; in the rainwaters playing with geography, creating lakes, islands, rivers, streams. The *texts*, *words*, *letters* of that context were incarnated as well in the whistle of the wind, the clouds in the sky, the sky's color, its movement in the color of foliage, the shape of leaves, the fragrance of flowers (roses, jasmine); in tree trunks; in fruit rinds (the varying color tones of the same fruit at different times — the green of a mango when the fruit is first forming, the green of a mango fully formed, the greenish-yellow of the same mango ripening, the black spots of an overripe mango — the relationship among these colors, the developing fruit, its resistance to our manipulation, and its taste). It was possibly at this time, by

doing it myself and seeing others do it, that I learned the meaning of the verb to *squash*.

Animals were equally part of that context — the same way the family cats rubbed themselves against our legs, their mewling of entreaty or anger; the ill humor of Joli, my father's old black dog, when one of the cats came too near where he was eating what was his. In such instances, Joli's mood was completely different from when he rather playfully chased, caught, and killed one of the many opossums responsible for the disappearance of my grandmother's fat chickens.

Part of the context of my immediate world was also the language universe of my elders, expressing their beliefs, tastes, fears, and values which linked my world to a wider one whose existence I could not even suspect.

In the effort to recapture distant childhood, to understand my act of reading the particular world in which I moved, I re-created, relived the experiences I lived at a time when I did not yet read words. And something emerged that seems relevant to the general context of these reflections: my fear of ghosts. During my childhood, the presence of ghosts was a constant topic of grown-up conversation. Ghosts needed darkness or semidarkness in order to appear in their various forms — wailing the pain of their guilt; laughing in mockery; asking for prayers; indicating where their cask was hidden. Probably I was seven years old, the streets of the neighborhood where I was born were illuminated by gaslight. At nightfall, the elegant lamps gave themselves to the magic wand of the lamplighters. From the door of my house I used to watch the thin figure of my street's lamplighter as he went from lamp to lamp in a rhythmic gait, the lighting taper over his shoulder. It was a fragile light, more fragile even than the light we had inside the house; the shadows overwhelmed the light more than the light dispelled the shadows.

There was no better environment for ghostly pranks than this. I remember the nights in which, enveloped by my own fears, I waited for time to pass, for the night to end, for dawn's demilight to arrive, bringing with it the song of the morning birds. In morning's light my night fears sharpened my percep-

tion of numerous noises, which were lost in the brightness and bustle of daytime but mysteriously underscored in the night's deep silence. As I became familiar with my world, however, as I perceived and understood it better by reading it, my terrors diminished.

It is important to add that reading my world, always basic to me, did not make me grow up prematurely, a rationalist in boy's clothing. Exercising my boy's curiosity did not distort it, nor did understanding my world cause me to scorn the enchanting mystery of that world. In this I was aided rather than discouraged by my parents.

My parents introduced me to reading the word at a certain moment in this rich experience of understanding my immediate world. Deciphering the word flowed naturally from reading my particular world; it was not something superimposed on it. I learned to read and write on the ground of the backyard of my house, in the shade of the mango trees, with words from my world rather than from the wider world of my parents. The earth was my blackboard, the sticks my chalk.

When I arrived at Eunice Vascanello's private school, I was already literate. Here I would like to pay heartfelt tribute to Eunice, whose recent passing profoundly grieved me. Eunice continued and deepened my parents' work. With her, reading the word, the phrase, and the sentence never entailed a break with reading the world. With her, reading the word meant reading the word-world.

Not long ago, with deep emotion, I visited the home where I was born. I stepped on the same ground on which I first stood up, on which I first walked, began to talk, and learned to read. It was that same world that first presented itself to my understanding through my reading it. There I saw again some of the trees of my childhood. I recognized them without difficulty. I almost embraced their thick trunks — young trunks in my childhood. Then, what I like to call a gentle or well-behaved nostalgia, emanating from the earth, the trees, the house, carefully enveloped me. I left the house content, feeling the joy of someone who has encountered loved ones.

Continuing the effort of rereading fundamental moments of my childhood experience, of adolescence and young manhood

— moments in which a critical understanding of the importance of the act of reading took shape in practice — I would like to go back to a time when I was a secondary school student. There I gained experience in the critical interpretation of texts. I read in class with the Portuguese teacher's help, which I remember to this day. Those moments did not consist of mere exercises, aimed at our simply becoming aware of the existence of the page in front of us, to be scanned, mechanically and monotonously spelled out, instead of truly read. Those moments were not reading lessons in the traditional sense, but rather moments in which texts, including that of the young teacher Jose Pessoa, were offered to us in our restless searching.

Sometime afterward, as a Portuguese teacher in my twenties, I experienced intensely the importance of the act of reading and writing — basically inseparable — with first-year high school students. I never reduced syntactical rules to diagrams for students to swallow, even rules governing prepositions after specific verbs, agreement of gender and number, contractions. On the contrary, all this was proposed to the students' curiosity in a dynamic and living way, as objects to be discovered within the body of texts, whether the students' own or those of established writers, and not as something stagnant whose outline I described. The students did not have to memorize the description mechanically, but rather learn its underlying significance. Only by learning the significance could they know how to memorize it, to fix it. Mechanically memorizing the description of an object does not constitute knowing the object. That's why reading a text as pure description of an object (like a syntactical rule), and undertaken to memorize the description, is neither real reading nor does it result in knowledge of the object to which the text refers.

I believe much of teachers' insistence that students read innumerable books in one semester derives from a misunderstanding. We sometimes have about reading. In my wanderings throughout the world there were not a few times when young students spoke to me about their struggles with extensive bibliographies, more to be devoured than truly read or studied, "reading lessons" in the old-fashioned sense, submitted to the students in the name of scientific training, and of which they

had to give an account by means of reading summaries. In some bibliographies I even read references to specific pages in this or that chapter from such and such a book, which had to be read: "pages 15-37."

Insistence on a quantity of reading without internalization of texts proposed for understanding rather than mechanical memorization reveals a magical view of the written word, a view that must be superseded. From another angle, the same view is found in the writer who identifies the potential quality of his work, or lack of it, with the quantity of pages he has written. Yet one of the most important documents we have — Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach" — is only two and a half pages long.

To avoid misinterpretation of what I'm saying, it is important to stress that my criticism of the magical view of the word does not mean that I take an irresponsible position on the obligation we all have — teachers and students — to read the classic literature in a given field seriously in order to make the texts our own and to create the intellectual discipline without which our practice as teachers and students is not viable.

But to return to that very rich moment of my experience as a Portuguese teacher: I remember vividly the times I spent analyzing the work of Gilberto Freyre, Lins do Rego, Graciliano Ramos, Jorge Amado. I used to bring the texts from home to read with students, pointing out syntactical aspects strictly linked to the good taste of their language. To that analysis I added commentaries on the essential differences between the Portuguese of Portugal and the Portuguese of Brazil.

I always saw teaching adults to read and write as a political act, an act of knowledge, and therefore a creative act. I would find it impossible to be engaged in a work of mechanically memorizing vowel sounds, as in the exercise "ba-be-bi-bo-bu, la-le-li-lo-lu." Nor could I reduce learning to read and write merely to learning words, syllables, or letters, a process of teaching in which the teacher fills the supposedly empty heads of learners with his or her words. On the contrary, the student is the subject of the process of learning to read and write as an act of knowing and of creating. The fact that he or she needs the teacher's help, as in any pedagogical situation, does not mean that the teacher's

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help nullifies the student's creativity and responsibility for constructing his or her own written language and for reading this language.

When, for instance, a teacher and a learner pick up an object in their hands, as I do now, they both feel the object, perceive the felt object, and are capable of expressing verbally what the felt and perceived object is. Like me, the illiterate person can feel the pen, perceive the pen, and say *pen*. I can, however, not only feel the pen, perceive the pen, and say *pen*, but also write *pen* and, consequently, read *pen*. Learning to read and write means creating and assembling a written expression for what can be said orally. The teacher cannot put it together for the student; that is the student's creative task.

I need go no further into what I've developed at different times in the complex process of teaching adults to read and write. I would like to return, however, to one point referred to elsewhere in this book because of its significance for the critical understanding of the act of reading and writing, and consequently for the project I am dedicated to — teaching adults to read and write.

Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world. As I suggested earlier, this movement from the word to the world is always present; even the spoken word flows from our reading of the world. In a way, however, we can go further and say that reading the word is not preceded merely by reading the world, but by a certain form of writing it or rewriting it, that is, of transforming it by means of conscious, practical work. For me, this dynamic movement is central to the literacy process.

For this reason I have always insisted that words used in organizing a literacy program come from what I call the "word universe" of people who are learning, expressing their actual language, their anxieties, fears, demands, and dreams. Words should be laden with the meaning of the people's existential experience, and not of the teacher's experience. Surveying the word universe thus gives us the people's words, pregnant with the world, words from the people's reading of the world. We then give the words back to the people inserted in what I call

"codifications," pictures representing real situations. The word *brick*, for example, might be inserted in a pictorial representation of a group of bricklayers constructing a house.

Before giving a written form to the popular word, however, we customarily challenge the learners with a group of codified situations, so they will apprehend the word rather than mechanically memorize it. Decodifying or reading the situations pictured leads them to a critical perception of the meaning of culture by leading them to understand how human practice or work transforms the world. Basically, the pictures of concrete situations enable the people to reflect on their former interpretation of the world before going on to read the word. This more critical reading of the prior, less critical reading of the world enables them to understand their indigence differently from the fatalistic way they sometimes view injustice.

In this way, a critical reading of reality, whether it takes place in the literacy process or not, and associated above all with the clearly political practices of mobilization and organization, constitutes an instrument of what Antonio Gramsci calls "counterhegemony."

To sum up, reading always involves critical perception, interpretation, and *rewriting* of what is read.

re writing

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Adult Literacy and Popular Libraries

To speak of adult literacy and popular libraries is to speak of the problems of reading and writing: not reading and writing words in and of themselves, as if the reading and writing of words did not imply another reading, anterior to and simultaneous with the first, the reading itself. The critical comprehension of literacy, which involves the equally critical comprehension of reading, demands the critical comprehension of reading, demands the critical comprehension of the library. However, upon speaking of a critical vision, authenticated in a practice of the same critical form of literacy, I not only recognize but also emphasize the existence of a contrary practice, an understanding that, in an essay published a long time ago, I called naive.¹

It would be tiresome to insist on points referred to on other occasions when I discussed the problems of literacy. Nevertheless, at the risk of repeating myself, I will try to clarify or reclarify what I call the critical practice and understanding of literacy, as opposed to the naive and so-called "astute" practice and un-

¹This chapter is adapted from a talk presented at the Eleventh Brazilian Congress of Library Economy and Documentation, held in João Pessoa in January 1982. It was translated by Dale A. Koike.

posite of authoritarianism. After all, authoritarianism does not contain the polar opposite of spontaneity. For example, I am not going to be authoritarian so as not to be a *laissez-faire* educator. So as not to be an authoritarian, I am not going to be a *laissez-faire* educator.

Once more we fall into the theoretical framework of a pedagogical radicality as proposed by Giroux. We see that the correct way to assume the direction of education is to avoid reducing learners to a minority led by educators. On the contrary, the direction of education lies in the presentation of this problem to learners, a problem that is political, epistemological, and pedagogical. The problem of the directiveness and nature of education once more focuses on the issue of subjectivity, the role of education in the reconstruction of the world.

What are the roles of the educator and the learner? It cannot be merely that the learner follows the educator blindly. The role of an educator who is pedagogically and critically radical is to avoid being indifferent, a characteristic of *laissez-faire* educators. The radical has to be an active presence in educational practice. But the educator should never allow his or her active and curious presence to transform learners' presences into shadows of the educator's presence. Neither can the educator be the shadow of learners. The educator has to stimulate learners to live a critically conscious presence in the pedagogical and historical process.

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Literacy and Critical Pedagogy

In the previous chapters we developed a view of literacy as a form of cultural politics. In our analysis, literacy becomes a meaningful construct to the degree that it is viewed as a set of practices that functions to either empower or disempower people. In the larger sense, literacy is analyzed according to whether it serves to reproduce existing social formations or serves as a set of cultural practices that promotes democratic and emancipatory change. We have not only provided a reconstructed theory of literacy, but also concrete, historical analyses of campaigns for literacy in countries such as Cape Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Guinea-Bissau. In addition, we argued that the native languages of these countries must be used in literacy programs if literacy is to be an important part of an emancipatory pedagogy. In the cases we analyzed in detail, the use of Portuguese rather than the native African languages or Creole has led to the reproduction of a neocolonialist, elitist mentality. In this chapter, we will examine in more detail literacy programs in the light of theories of cultural production and reproduction. We will also argue more strongly for the use of the native language as a prerequisite to the development of any literacy campaign that purports to serve as the means to a critical appropriation of one's own culture and history.

Within the last decade, the issue of literacy has taken on a new importance among educators. Unfortunately, the debate that has emerged tends to recycle old assumptions and values regarding the meaning and usefulness of literacy. The notion that literacy is a matter of learning the standard language still informs the vast majority of literacy programs and manifests its logic in the renewed emphasis on technical reading and writing skills.

We want to reiterate in this chapter that literacy cannot be viewed as simply the development of skills aimed at acquiring the dominant standard language. This view sustains a notion of ideology that systematically negates rather than makes meaningful the cultural experiences of the subordinate linguistic groups who are, by and large, the objects of its policies. For the notion of literacy to become meaningful it has to be situated within a theory of cultural production and viewed as an integral part of the way in which people produce, transform, and reproduce meaning. Literacy must be seen as a medium that constitutes and affirms the historical and existential moments of lived experience that produce a subordinate or a lived culture.

Hence, it is an eminently political phenomenon, and it must be analyzed within the context of a theory of power relations and an understanding of social and cultural reproduction and production. By "cultural reproduction" we refer to collective experiences that function in the interest of the dominant groups, rather than in the interest of the oppressed groups that are the object of its policies. We use "cultural production" to refer to specific groups of people producing, mediating, and confirming the mutual ideological elements that emerge from and reaffirm their daily lived experiences. In this case, such experiences are rooted in the interests of individual and collective self-determination.

This theoretical posture underlies our examination of how the public school systems in the ex-Portuguese colonies in Africa have developed educational policies aimed at stamping out the tremendously high illiteracy rate inherited from colonialist Portugal. These policies are designed to eradicate the colonial educational legacy, which had as its major tenet the total de-Africanization of these people. Education in these colonies was

discriminatory, mediocre, and based on verbalism. It could not contribute anything to national reconstruction because it was not constituted for this purpose. Schooling was antidemocratic in its methods, in its content, and in its objectives. Divorced from the reality of the country, it was, for this very reason, a school for a minority and thus against the majority.

Before the independence of these countries in 1975, schools functioned as political sites in which class, gender, and racial inequities were both produced and reproduced. In essence, the colonial educational structure served to inculcate the African* natives with myths and beliefs that denied and belittled their lived experiences, their history, their culture, and their language. The schools were seen as purifying fountains where Africans could be saved from their deep-rooted ignorance, their "savage" culture, and their bastardized language, which, according to some Portuguese scholars, was a corrupted form of Portuguese "without grammatical rules (they can't even be applied)."¹

This system could not help but reproduce in children and youth the profile that the colonial ideology itself had created for them, namely that of inferior beings, lacking in all ability.

On the one hand, schooling in these colonies served the purpose of deculturating the natives; on the other hand, it acculturated them into a predefined colonial model. Schools in this mold functioned "as part of an ideological state apparatus designed to secure the ideological and social reproduction of capital and its institutions, whose interests are rooted in the dynamics of capital accumulation and the reproduction of the labor force."²

This educated labor force in the ex-Portuguese colonies was composed mainly of low-level functionaries whose major tasks were the promotion and maintenance of the status quo. Their role took on a new and important dimension when they were used as intermediaries to further colonize Portuguese possessions in Africa. Thus, colonial schools were successful to the extent that they created a petit-bourgeois class of functionaries who had internalized the belief that they had become "white"

*By African we mean to refer to African natives belonging to African countries that were colonized by Portugal. For the sake of economy of terms, we have selected this term, but we want to point out that we are aware of the great linguistic and cultural diversity that exists in Africa.

or "black with white souls," and were therefore superior to African peasants, who still practiced what was viewed as barbaric culture.

This assimilation process penetrated the deepest level of consciousness, especially in the bourgeois class. For instance, with respect to becoming "white," we are reminded of an anecdote about a black Cape Verdian so preoccupied with his blackness that he paid a well-respected white Cape Verdian to issue him a decree proclaiming him white. The man jokingly wrote for him on a piece of paper "Dja'n branco dja," meaning "I have thereby been declared white."

After independence and in the reconstruction of a new society in these countries, schools have assumed as their major task the "decolonization of mentality," as it is termed by Aristides Pereira, and which Amílcar Cabral called the "re-Africanization of mentality." It is clear that both Pereira and Cabral were well aware of the need to create a school system in which a new mentality cleansed of all vestiges of colonialism would be formulated; a school system that would allow people to appropriate their history, their culture, and their language; a school system in which it was imperative to reformulate the programs of geography, history, and the Portuguese language, changing all the reading texts that were so heavily impregnated with colonialist ideology. It was an absolute priority that students should study their own geography and not that of Portugal, the inlets of the sea and not Rio Tejo. It was urgent that they study their history, the history of the resistance of their people to the invader and the struggle for their liberation, which gave them back the right to make their own history — not the history of the kings of Portugal and the intrigues of the court.

The proposal to incorporate a radical pedagogy in schools has met a lukewarm reception in these countries. We want to argue that the suspicion of many African educators is deeply rooted in the language issue (African versus Portuguese) and has led to the creation of a neocolonialist literacy campaign under the superficially radical slogan of eliminating illiteracy in the new republics. The difficulties of reappropriating African culture have been increased by the fact that the means for such struggle has been the language of the colonizer. As we will argue in this

chapter, the present literacy campaign in these nations concerns itself mainly with the creation of functional literates in the Portuguese language. No longer based on the cultural capital of subordinate Africans, the program has fallen prey to positivist and instrumental approaches to literacy concerned mainly with the mechanical acquisition of Portuguese language skills.³

Before our discussion of the politics of an emancipatory literacy program in Africa and elsewhere, we would like to discuss various approaches to literacy. First, we will briefly discuss those approaches derived from a positivist school and linked to the process of cultural reproduction. Then, we will analyze the role of language in the reproduction process. Finally, we will argue that the only literacy approach that would be consistent with the construction of a new anticolonial society is one rooted in the dynamics of cultural production and informed by a radical pedagogy. That is, the literacy program that is needed is one that will affirm and allow oppressed people to re-create their history, culture, and language; one that will, at the same time, help lead those assimilated individuals who perceive themselves to be captive to the colonial ideology to "commit class suicide."

APPROACHES TO LITERACY

Almost without exception, traditional approaches to literacy have been deeply ingrained in a positivist method of inquiry. In effect, this has resulted in an epistemological stance in which scientific rigor and methodological refinement are celebrated, while "theory and knowledge are subordinated to the imperatives of efficiency and technical mastery, and history is reduced to a minor footnote in the priorities of 'empirical' scientific inquiry."⁴ In general, this approach abstracts methodological issues from their ideological contexts and consequently ignores the interrelationship between the sociopolitical structures of a society and the act of reading. In part, the exclusion of social and political dimensions from the practice of reading gives rise to an ideology of cultural reproduction, one that views readers as "objects." It is as though their conscious bodies were simply empty, waiting to be filled by that word from the teacher. Although it is important to analyze how ideologies inform various

reading traditions, in this chapter we will limit our discussion to a brief analysis of the most important approaches to literacy, linking them to either cultural reproduction or cultural production.

The Academic Approach to Reading

The purpose assigned to reading in the academic tradition is twofold. First, the rationale for this approach "derives from classical definitions of the well-educated man — thoroughly grounded in the classics, articulate in spoken and written expression, actively engaged in intellectual pursuits."⁵ This approach to reading has primarily served the interests of the elite classes. In this case, reading is viewed as the acquisition of predefined forms of knowledge and is organized around the study of Latin and Greek and the mastery of the great classical works. Second, since it would be unrealistic to expect the vast majority of society to meet such high standards, reading was redefined as the acquisition of reading skills, decoding skills, vocabulary development, and so on. This second rationale served to legitimize a dual approach to reading: one level for the ruling class and another for the dispossessed majority. According to Giroux (*Theory and Resistance*): "This second notion is geared primarily to working class students whose cultural capital is considered less compatible, and thus inferior in terms of complexity and value, with the knowledge and values of the dominant class."

This twofold academic approach to reading is inherently alienating in nature. On the one hand, it ignores the life experience, the history, and the language practice of students. On the other, it overemphasizes the mastery and understanding of classical literature and the use of literary materials as "vehicles for exercises in comprehension (literal and interpretative), vocabulary development, and word identification skills."⁶ Thus, literacy in this sense is stripped of its sociopolitical dimensions; it functions, in fact, to reproduce dominant values and meanings. It does not contribute in any meaningful way to the appropriation of working-class history, culture, and language.

The Utilitarian Approach to Reading

The major goal of the utilitarian approach is to produce readers who meet the basic reading requirements of contemporary

school front

society. In spite of its progressive appeal, such an approach emphasizes the mechanical learning of reading skills while sacrificing the critical analysis of the social and political order that generates the need for reading in the first place. This position has led to the development of "functional literates," groomed primarily to meet the requirements of our ever more complex technological society. Such a view is not simply characteristic of the advanced industrialized countries of the West; even within the Third World, utilitarian literacy has been championed as a vehicle for economic betterment, access to jobs, and increase of the productivity level. As it is clearly stated by UNESCO, "Literacy programs should preferably be linked with economic priorities. [They] must impart not only reading and writing, but also professional and technical knowledge, thereby leading to a fuller participation of adults in economic life."⁷

This notion of literacy has been enthusiastically incorporated as a major goal by the back-to-basics proponents of reading. It has also contributed to the development of neatly packaged reading programs that are presented as the solution to difficulties students experience in reading job application forms, tax forms, advertisement literature, sales catalogs, labels, and the like. In general, the utilitarian approach views literacy as meeting the basic reading demand of an industrialized society. As Giroux points out:

Literacy within this perspective is geared to make adults more productive workers and citizens within a given society. In spite of its appeal to economic mobility, functional literacy reduces the concept of literacy and the pedagogy in which it is suited to the pragmatic requirements of capital; consequently, the notions of critical thinking, culture and power disappear under the imperatives of the labor process and the need for capital accumulation.⁸

Cognitive Development Approach to Reading

While the academic and utilitarian approaches to reading emphasize the mastery of reading skills and view the readers as "objects," the cognitive development model stresses the construction of meaning whereby readers engage in a dialectical interaction between themselves and the objective world. Although the acquisition of literacy skills is viewed as an important task in this approach, the salient feature is how people construct

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meaning through problem-solving processes. Comprehension of the text is relegated to a position of lesser importance in favor of the development of new cognitive structures that can enable students to move from simple to highly complex reading tasks. This reading process is highly influenced by the early work of John Dewey and has been shaped in terms of the development of Piagetian cognitive structures. Under the cognitive development model, reading is seen as an intellectual process, "through a series of fixed, value-free, and universal stages of development."⁹

The cognitive development model thus avoids criticism of the academic and utilitarian views of reading and fails to consider the content of what is read. Instead, it emphasizes a process that allows students to analyze and critique issues raised in the text with an increasing level of complexity. This approach, however, is rarely concerned with questions of cultural reproduction. Since students' cultural capital — i.e., their life experience, history, and language — is ignored, they are rarely able to engage in thorough critical reflection, regarding their own practical experience and the ends that motivate them in order, in the end, to organize the findings and thus replace mere opinion about facts with an increasingly rigorous understanding of their significance.

The Romantic Approach to Reading

Like the cognitive development model, the romantic approach is based on an interactionist approach with a major focus on the construction of meaning; however, the romantic approach views meaning as being generated by the reader and not occurring in the interaction between reader and author via text. The romantic mode greatly emphasizes the affective and sees reading as the fulfillment of self and a joyful experience. One writer praised "the intimate reliving of fresh views of personality and life implicit in the work (of literature); the pleasure and release of tensions that may flow from such an experience . . . the deepening and broadening of sensitivity to the sensuous quality and emotional impact of day-to-day living."¹⁰

In essence, the romantic approach to reading presents a counterpoint to the authoritarian modes of pedagogy which view

readers as "objects." However, this seemingly liberal approach to literacy fails to make problematic class conflict, gender, or racial inequalities. Furthermore, the romantic model completely ignores the cultural capital of subordinate groups and assumes that all people have the same access to reading, or that reading is part of the cultural capital of all people. This failure to address questions of cultural capital or various structural inequalities means that the romantic model tends to reproduce the cultural capital of the dominant class, to which reading is intimately tied. It is presumptuous and naive to expect a student from the working class, confronted and victimized by myriad disadvantages, to find joy and self-affirmation through reading alone. But more important is the failure of the romantic tradition to link reading to the asymmetrical relations of power within the dominant society, relations of power that not only define and legitimate certain approaches to reading but also disempower certain groups by excluding them from such a process.

We have argued thus far that all of these approaches to literacy have failed to provide a theoretical model for empowering historical agents with the logic of individual and collective self-determination. While these approaches may differ in their basic assumptions about literacy, they all share one common feature: they all ignore the role of language as a major force in the construction of human subjectivities. That is, they ignore the way language may either confirm or deny the life histories and experiences of the people who use it. This becomes clearer in our analysis of the role of language in the literacy programs.

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN LITERACY

In this section we will draw mostly from campaigns in ex-Portuguese African colonies that we directly or indirectly participated in and then followed through their development over the years. Even though we will frequently make reference to these literacy experiments, however, we believe that the issues we raise about the role of language in literacy can be generalized to any linguistic context where there exist asymmetrical power relations.

The literacy programs in ex-Portuguese African colonies have

been plagued by constant debate over whether the language of instruction should be the official Portuguese language or the native languages. Such debate, however, hides issues of a more serious nature that are rarely raised. This is in line with Gramsci's argument that: "Each time that in one way or another, the question of language comes to the fore, that signifies that a series of other problems is about to emerge, the formation and enlarging of the ruling class, the necessity to establish more 'intimate' and sure relations between the ruling groups and the national popular masses, that is, the reorganization of cultural hegemony."¹¹ Gramsci's argument illuminates the issue underlying the debates over language in literacy campaigns we have discussed in this book, debates in which there is still no agreement as to whether the native language is really suited to be a language of instruction. These educators repeatedly use the lack of orthographic uniformity for the African languages to justify their present policy of using Portuguese as the only medium of reading instruction. They raise the question of which dialect such an orthography should be based on. However, the most common argument is that the Portuguese language has international status and therefore guarantees upward mobility for the Portuguese-educated Africans.

The sad reality is that while education in Portuguese provides access to positions of political and economic power for the high echelon of African society, it screens out the majority of the masses, who fail to learn Portuguese well enough to acquire the necessary literacy level for social, economic, and political advancement. By offering a literacy program conducted in the language of the colonizers with the aim of reappropriating the African culture, these educators have, in fact, developed new manipulative strategies that support the maintenance of Portuguese cultural dominance. What is hidden in the language debate in these countries is possibly a resistance to re-Africanization, or perhaps a subtle refusal on the part of the assimilated Africans to "commit class suicide."

The pedagogical and political implications of these literacy programs are far-reaching and yet largely ignored. The reading programs often contradict a fundamental principle of reading, namely that students learn to read faster and with better com-

prehension when taught in their native tongue. The immediate recognition of familiar words and experiences enhances the development of a positive self-concept in children who are somewhat insecure about the status of their language and culture. For this reason, and to be consistent with the plan to construct a new society in these ex-colonies free from vestiges of colonialism, a literacy program should be based on the rationale that such a program must be rooted in the cultural capital of subordinate Africans and have as its point of departure the native language.

Educators must develop radical pedagogical structures that provide students with the opportunity to use their own reality as a basis of literacy. This includes, obviously, the language they bring to the classroom. To do otherwise is to deny students the rights that lie at the core of the notion of an emancipatory literacy. The failure to base a literacy program on the native language means that oppositional forces can neutralize the efforts of educators and political leaders to achieve decolonization of mind. Educators and political leaders must recognize that "language is inevitably one of the major preoccupations of a society which, liberating itself from colonialism and refusing to be drawn into neo-colonialism, searches for its own recreation. In the struggle to re-create a society, the reconquest by the people of their own world becomes a fundamental factor."¹² It is of tantamount importance that the incorporation of the students' language as the primary language of instruction in literacy be given top priority. It is through their own language that they will be able to reconstruct their history and their culture.

In this sense, the students' language is the only means by which they can develop their own voice, a prerequisite to the development of a positive sense of self-worth. As Giroux eloquently states, the students' voice "is the discursive means to make themselves 'heard' and to define themselves as active authors of their world."¹³ The authorship of one's own world, which would also imply one's own language, means what Mikhail Bakhtin defines as "retelling a story in one's own words."

Although the concept of voice is fundamental in the development of an emancipatory literacy, the goal should never be to restrict students to their own vernacular. This linguistic con-

striction inevitably leads to a linguistic ghetto. Educators must understand fully the broader meaning of student's "empowerment." That is, empowerment should never be limited to what Arnowitz describes as "the process of appreciating and loving oneself."¹⁴ In addition to this process, empowerment should also be a means that enables students "to interrogate and selectively appropriate those aspects of the dominant culture that will provide them with the basis for defining and transforming, rather than merely serving, the wider social order."¹⁵ This means that educators should understand the value of mastering the standard dominant language of the wider society. It is through the full appropriation of the dominant standard language that students find themselves linguistically empowered to engage in dialogue with the various sectors of the wider society. What we would like to reiterate is that educators should never allow the students' voice to be silenced by a distorted legitimization of the standard language. The students' voice should never be sacrificed, since it is the only means through which they make sense of their own experience in the world.

The debate over whether African languages are less suitable as languages of instruction, whether they are restricted or elaborated languages, points to the issue of whether Portuguese is in fact a superior language. In a more important sense, these linguistic categories rest on the technical question of whether African languages are valid and rule-governed systems. Despite synchronic and diachronic analysis of many of these languages, the fact still remains that they continue in a stigmatized and subordinate position. We want to argue that the students' languages have to be understood within the theoretical framework that generates them. Put another way, the ultimate meaning and value of these languages is not to be found by determining how systematic and rule governed they are. We know that already. Their real meaning has to be understood through the assumptions that govern them, and they have to be understood via the social, political, and ideological relations to which they point. Generally speaking, the issue of systematicity and validity often hides the true role of language in the maintenance of the value and interests of the dominant class. In other words, the issue of systematicity and validity becomes a mask that

obfuscates questions about social, political, and ideological order within which the subordinate languages exist.

If an emancipatory literacy program is to be developed in the African ex-colonies of Portugal and elsewhere, a program in which readers become "subjects" rather than "objects," educators must understand the productive quality of language. Donald puts it this way:

I take language to be *productive* rather than *reflective* of social reality. This means calling into question the assumption that we, as speaking subjects, simply use language to organize and express our ideas and experiences. On the contrary, language is one of the most important social practices through which we come to experience ourselves as subjects. My point here is that once we get beyond the idea of language as no more than a medium of communication, as a tool equally and neutrally available to all parties in cultural exchanges, then we can begin to examine language both as a practice of signification and also as a *site* for cultural struggle and as a *mechanism* which produces antagonistic relations between different social groups.¹⁶

It is to the antagonistic relationship between African and Portuguese speakers that we want to turn now. The potentially antagonistic nature of the African languages has never been fully explored. In order to more clearly discuss this issue of antagonism, we will use Donald's distinction between *oppressed* language and *repressed* language. Using Donald's categories, the "negative" way of posing the language question is to view it in terms of *oppression* — that is, seeing the students' language as "lacking" the dominant language's features, which usually serve as a point of reference for discussion and/or evaluation. By far the most common questions concerning the students' language are posed from the oppression perspective. The alternative view of the students' language is that it is repressed in the dominant standard language. In this view, the subordinate language, as a repressed language, could, if spoken, challenge the privileged linguistic dominance of the standard. Educators have failed to recognize the "positive" promise and antagonistic nature of the subordinate languages. It is precisely on these dimensions that educators must demystify the dominant standard and the old assumptions about its inherent superiority.

Educators must develop an emancipatory literacy program informed by a radical pedagogy so that the students' language will cease to provide its speakers the experience of subordination and, moreover, may be brandished as a weapon of resistance to the dominance of the standard language.

As we stated earlier, the linguistic issues raised in this chapter and throughout this book are not limited to developing countries of Africa and Latin America. The asymmetrical power relations in reference to language use are also predominant in highly industrialized societies. For instance, the U.S. English movement in the United States headed by the ex-California senator S.I. Hayakawa points to a xenophobic culture that blindly negates the pluralistic nature of U.S. society and falsifies the empirical evidence in support of bilingual education, as has been amply documented.¹⁷ These educators, including the present secretary of education, William J. Bennett, fail to understand that it is through multiple discourses that students generate meaning of their everyday social contexts. Without understanding the meaning of their immediate social reality, it is most difficult to comprehend their relations with the wider society.

By and large, U.S. English proponents base their criticism of bilingual education on quantitative evaluation results, which are "the product of a particular model of social structure that gear the theoretical concepts to the pragmatics of the society that devised the evaluation model to begin with."¹⁸ That is, if the results are presented as facts determined by a particular ideological framework, these facts cannot in themselves get us beyond that framework.¹⁹ We would warn educators that these evaluation models can provide answers that are correct and nevertheless without truth. A study that concludes that linguistic minority students in the United States perform way below other mainstream students in English is correct, but such an answer tells us very little about the material conditions with which these linguistic- and racial-minority students work in the struggle against racism, educational tracking, and the systematic negation of their histories.

Bennett's comment that only English "will ensure that local schools will succeed in teaching non-English-speaking students English so that they will [enjoy] access to the opportunities of

the American society" points to a pedagogy of exclusion that views the learning of English as education itself. At this point, we would like to raise two fundamental points questions: (1) If English is the most effective educational language, how can we explain that over 60 million Americans are illiterate or functionally illiterate?²⁰ (2) If education in English *only* can guarantee the linguistic minorities a better future as Bennett promises, why do the majority of black Americans, whose ancestors have been speaking English for over 200 years, find themselves still relegated to the ghettos?

We believe that the answer lies not in the technical questions of whether English is a more elaborate and viable language of instruction. This position would point to an assumption that English is in fact a superior language. We want to propose that the answer rests in a full understanding of the ideological elements that generate and sustain linguistic, racial, and sex discrimination.

Some of these ideological elements are succinctly discussed in Lukas's 1985 analysis of school desegregation in Boston public schools (*Common Ground*). For example, he cites a trip to Charlestown High School, where a group of black parents experienced first-hand the stark reality their children were destined to endure. Although the headmaster assured them that "violence, intimidation, or racial slurs would not be tolerated," they could not avoid the racial epithets on the walls: "Welcome Niggers," "Niggers-Suck," "White Power," "KKK," "Bus is for Zulu," and "Be illiterate; fight forced busing." As these parents were boarding the bus, "they were met with jeers and catcalls 'Go, home niggers. Keep going all the way to Africa!'" This racial intolerance led one parent to reflect, "My God, what kind of hell am I sending my children into? . . . What could her children learn at a school like that except to hate?"²¹ Even though forced integration of schools in Boston exacerbated the racial tensions in the Boston public schools, one should not overlook the deep-seated racism that permeates all levels of the school structure. According to Lukas:

Even after Elvira "Prixie" Paladino's election to Boston School Committee she was heard muttering about "jungle bunnies" and

"pickaninnes." And John "Bigga" Kerrigan, [also elected to the School Committee] prided himself on the unrestrained invective ("I may be a prick, but at least I'm a consistent prick"), particularly directed at blacks ("savages") and the liberal media ("mother-fucking maggots") and Len Tucker, a black correspondent for ABC News, whom Kerrigan described as "one generation away from swinging in the trees," a remark he illustrated by assuming his hands upwards, and scratching his armpits.²⁷

Against this landscape of violent racism perpetrated against racial minorities, and also against linguistic minorities, one can understand the reasons for the high dropout rate in the Boston public schools (approximately 50 percent). Perhaps racism and other ideological elements are part of a school reality which forces a high percentage of students to leave school, only later to be profiled by the very system as dropouts or "poor and unmotivated students."

EMANCIPATORY LITERACY

In maintaining a certain coherence with the revolutionary plan to reconstruct new and more democratic societies, educators and political leaders need to create a new school grounded in a new educational praxis, expressing different concepts of education consonant with the plan for the society as a whole. In order for this to happen, the first step is to identify the objectives of the inherited dominant education. Next, it is necessary to analyze how the methods used by the dominant schools function, legitimize the dominant values and meanings, and at the same time negate the history, culture, and language practices of the majority of subordinate students. The new school, so it is argued, must also be informed by a radical pedagogy, which would make concrete such values as solidarity, social responsibility, creativity, discipline in the service of the common good, vigilance, and critical spirit. An important feature of a new educational plan is the development of literacy programs rooted in an emancipatory ideology, where readers become "subjects" rather than mere "objects." The new literacy program needs to move away from traditional approaches, which emphasize the acquisition of mechanical skills while divorcing reading from its ideological and historical contexts. In attempting to meet this

goal, it purposely must reject the conservative principles embedded in the approaches to literacy we have discussed earlier. Unfortunately, many new literacy programs sometimes unknowingly reproduce one common feature of those approaches by ignoring the important relationship between language and the cultural capital of the people at whom the literacy program was aimed. The result is the development of a literacy campaign whose basic assumptions are at odds with the revolutionary spirit that launched it.

The new literacy programs must be largely based on the notion of emancipatory literacy, in which literacy is viewed "as one of the major vehicles by which oppressed people are able to participate in the sociohistorical transformation of their society."²⁸ In this view, literacy programs should be tied not only to mechanical learning of reading skills but, additionally, to a critical understanding of the overall goals for national reconstruction. Thus, the reader's development of a critical comprehension of the text, and the sociohistorical context to which it refers, becomes an important factor in our notion of literacy. The act of learning to read and write, in this instance, is a creative act that involves a critical comprehension of reality. The knowledge of earlier knowledge, gained by the learners as a result of analyzing praxis in its social context, opens to them the possibility of a new knowledge. The new knowledge reveals the reason for being that is behind the facts, thus demythologizing the false interpretations of these same facts. Thus, there is no longer any separation between thought-language and objective reality. The reading of a text now demands a reading within the social context to which it refers.

Literacy, in this sense, is grounded in a critical reflection on the cultural capital of the oppressed. It becomes a vehicle by which the oppressed are equipped with the necessary tools to reappropriate their history, culture, and language practices. If is, thus, a way to enable the oppressed to reclaim "those historical and existential experiences that are devalued in everyday life by the dominant culture in order to be both validated and critically understood."²⁴ The theories underlying emancipatory literacy have been, in principle, wholeheartedly embraced by many educators in many

People
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parts of the world, particularly in Latin America and the ex-Portuguese colonies in Africa. However, we must argue that, in practice, the assimilated middle class, especially teachers trained by the colonial schools, has not been fully able to play a radical pedagogical role. These educators sometimes fail to analyze and understand the ways in which the ruling class uses the dominant language to maintain class division, thereby keeping subordinate people in their proper place. For example, we are reminded of a friend in Cape Verde who, having intellectually embraced the revolutionary cause, is unable to perceive himself as still being emotionally "captive" to the colonial ideology. But when we asked him which language he most often uses in the office, he quickly answered, "Portuguese, of course. It is the only way to keep my subordinates in their place. If I speak Cape Verdian, they don't respect me."

This view of language in Cape Verde is illustrative of the extent to which Cape Verdians are held "captive" by the dominant ideology, which devalues their own language. Not surprisingly, many progressive educators and leaders fail to recognize and understand the importance of their native language in the development of an emancipatory literacy. As we mentioned before, literacy programs in the ex-colonies of Portugal are conducted in Portuguese, the language of the colonizer. The same is true for industrialized nations such as the United States, where the language of instruction is always the standard language at the sacrifice of minority and less prestigious languages. The continued use of the dominant standard language as a vehicle of literacy will only guarantee that future leaders will be the sons and daughters of the ruling class.

In essence, progressive educators sometimes not only fail to recognize the positive promise of the students' language, but they systematically undermine the principles of an emancipatory literacy by conducting literacy programs in the standard language of the dominant class. The result is that the learning of reading skills in the dominant standard language will not enable subordinate students to acquire the critical tools "to awaken and liberate them from their mystified and distorted view of themselves and their world."²⁵ Educators must understand the all-encompassing role the dominant language has

played in this mystification and distortion process. They must also recognize the antagonistic nature of the subordinate language and its potential challenge to the mystification of dominant language superiority. Finally, they must develop a literacy program based on the theory of cultural production. In other words, subordinate students must become *actors* in the reconstruction process of a new society.

Literacy can only be emancipatory and critical to the extent that it is conducted in the language of the people. It is through the native language that students "name their world" and begin to establish a dialectical relationship with the dominant class in the process of transforming the social and political structures that imprison them in their "culture of silence." Thus, a person is literate to the extent that he or she is able to use language for social and political reconstruction.²⁶ The use of the dominant language only in literacy programs weakens the possibilities for subordinate students to engage in dialectical encounters with the dominant class. Literacy conducted in the dominant standard language empowers the ruling class by sustaining the status quo. It supports the maintenance of the elitist model of education. This elite model of education creates intellectualists and technocrats rather than intellectuals and technicians. In short, literacy conducted in the dominant language is alienating to subordinate students, since it denies them the fundamental tools for reflection, critical thinking, and social interaction. Without the cultivation of their native language, and robbed of the opportunity for reflection and critical thinking, subordinate students find themselves unable to re-create their culture and history. Without the reapropriation of their cultural capital, the reconstruction of the new society envisioned by progressive educators and leaders can hardly be a reality.