

A PEDAGOGY OF FAITH:
THE THEOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF PAULO FREIRE'S
EDUCATIONAL THEORY AND PRACTICE

by

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Abstract

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This dissertation examines the theological framework of Paulo Freire's radical-democratic pedagogy. Since the English-language publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1970, this Brazilian educator, activist, theorist, and public intellectual has been most commonly viewed in North America and Western Europe as a revolutionary Marxist, as a radical social democrat, or as a humanist educator. There has been a widespread among many of his readers to overlook the religious elements of his pedagogical system. This dissertation contends that a full account of Freire's lifelong work requires an exploration of its roots in mid-twentieth century Catholic thought, from the Christian humanism of Jacques Maritain and Emmanuel Mounier to the "prophetic" radicalism of Latin American liberation theology. It traces the evolution of Freire's thought from his immersion in middle-class Catholic activism before Brazil's April 1964 coup to his widely-acknowledged status as the most prominent and influential pedagogical thinker of his generation. It highlights the extent to which Freire's progressive Catholicism shaped such central aspects of his work as "conscientization," social justice, historical possibility, revolutionary socialism, and human nature, thus demonstrating the extent to which Freire's faith informed his pedagogical and political project.

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Introduction

The late Brazilian activist and public intellectual Paulo Freire (1921-1997) was one of the towering educational thinkers of the 20th century. His major statement *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is the most widely-read work of educational philosophy published since the end of World War II. His ground-breaking pedagogy has been discussed, emulated, and debated since the mid-1960s. Even during his lifetime, Freire achieved a mythic stature among progressives and radicals throughout the world,¹ especially after being imprisoned and exiled by the Brazilian military in the coup of 1964. In the United States, Freire's work continues to provide the cornerstone for the activist educational movement named "critical pedagogy," which seeks to help students analyze and oppose unjust ideologies and social arrangements.

Freire envisioned literacy education as a "cultural action for freedom" that enables and energizes learners to "read" the status quo critically and become transformative socio-political agents. As elaborated in Chapter One, his seminal Brazilian literacy campaign sought to "awaken" the "critical consciousness" of adult peasants and urban workers, thereby developing their ability to "unveil" and "demythologize" the cultural narratives that sustain the harshly unequal status quo. Through "dialogic" pedagogy, adult learners "emerge" from their "submergence" in the "culture of silence" that results from – and perpetuates – poverty and subordination. These former illiterates would subsequently develop into conscious agents of their own "liberation" within the concrete historical and material conditions of their lives. Freire

¹ For example, Cornel West hails *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as "a world-historical event for counter-hegemonic theorists and activists in search of new ways of linking social theory to narratives of human freedom" (xiii). He also lauds Freire as the "exemplary organic intellectual of our time" (xiii).

aspired to enable all learners – regardless of age, socioeconomic status, or educational background – to view themselves as historical actors, rather than passive victims of fate (or “God’s will”). With greater philosophical breadth,² moral urgency, and methodological concreteness than any other educator of his time, Freire developed a pedagogy that fused basic literacy acquisition with consciousness-raising and democratic activism, thus redefining what it means to teach and learn. Today, over a decade after his death, Freire remains an icon to left-leaning intellectuals, activists, and educators in North America, Western Europe, Australia, Africa, Asia, and his native Latin America. His work continues to be engaged by educators, activists, philosophers, sociologists, social workers, community organizers, historians, and religious scholars.³

Crucially for this dissertation, Freire has been most often viewed in the United States as the founder of a humanist pedagogy that draws much of its substance from Marxist revolutionary thought. While this characterization is accurate, it is also profoundly incomplete. Much of his Western audience seems largely unaware that Freire was a lifelong Catholic who professed, “My

² Educational scholar Daniel Schugurensky notes that in Freire’s pedagogy, “We find...elements of Socratic maieutics, philosophical existentialism, phenomenology, Hegelianism, Marxism, progressive education, and liberation theology. Together with Marx and the Bible are Sartre and Husserl, Mounier and Buber, Fanon and Memmi, Mao and Guevara, Althusser and Fromm, Hegel and Unamono, Kosik and Furter, Chardin and Maritain, Marcuse and Cabral...In reading Freire one may have the impression of listening to familiar sounds everywhere, but at the same time experiencing an overall harmony of the whole that is new” (20). I believe this diversity of sources is a prime source of Freire’s appeal to a broad audience to this day.

³ A steady stream of scholarship about Freire continues to appear, most recently *Paulo Freire and the Cold War Politics of Literacy* (2010) by Andrew J. Kirkendall. Several posthumous works have also been published, including *Daring to Dream: Toward a Pedagogy of the Unfinished* (2007) and *Pedagogy of Indignation* (2004).

love for Christ and hope that He is the light... led me to Marx” (*Letters to Cristina* 87).⁴

Elsewhere, he affirmed:

Being a Christian and [being] a revolutionary; these things are very close...I am a man trying to become a Christian; I am a Christian trying to become a revolutionary...as a Christian, I invite you to think about how much this is a revolutionary statement which is strongly inside the Gospels. (qtd. in Jarvis 32)

As these statements make clear, Freire’s underlying religious vision preceded and fed into his radical politics. This dissertation will highlight Freire’s vigorous participation in progressive Catholic youth movements from his young adulthood onwards.⁵ He came of age as an educational philosopher and activist within Brazil’s “Catholic Left,”⁶ an experience which indelibly marked his lifelong educational philosophy and activism.⁷

⁴ Indeed, he slept with a crucifix over his bed.

⁵ As early as 1972, he was described by an American journalist as “one of the two or three Catholic Christians since the Renaissance to have achieved a sizable and non-parochial reputation as an educational pioneer” (Donohue 167). However, he was also humble about his Catholicism, declaring: “I am not yet completely a Catholic, I just keep on trying to be one more completely, day after day” (“Conscientizing as a Way of Liberating” 10). As discussed in this dissertation, Freire’s notions of human “incompleteness” and potential for development are central to his educational system.

⁶ This was a predominately middle-class cohort of young activists that mobilized from the early 1950s to April 1964. See Chapter Three for a discussion of Freire as an exemplar of this movement.

⁷ Freire’s turn towards Marxist thought occurred after his traumatic experiences in the Brazilian coup. In Marxism, he discovered a powerful method of social analysis and a theory of revolutionary action that he integrated into his deeply-held Catholic faith. With characteristic exuberance, Freire described the relationship between his Catholic and Marxist commitments in an interview from the 1970s: “When I was a young man, I went to the people, to the workers, the peasants, motivated, really, by my Christian faith...I talked with the people, I learned to speak with the people—the pronunciation, the words, the concepts. When I arrived with the people—the misery, the concreteness, you know! But also the beauty of the people, the openness, the ability to love which the people have, the friendship...The obstacles of this reality sent me—to

In this dissertation, I contend that a full and accurate account of Freire's radical pedagogy requires an acknowledgment of its extensive theological roots. As educational scholar John Elias points out,

For Freire all education is religious since it deals with the immanent and transcendent dimensions of human life and activity. His Catholicism provides Freire with many of his richest symbols: Easter experience, death and resurrection, love, trust, humility, vocation, community, and prophecy...He does not make a deep separation between religion and culture, nor between the sacred and the secular. His Catholicism is an integral part of his vision of what persons can become in a world in which they work with God. (45)⁸

Yet many of his Western secular readers, including some of his most ardent supporters, have often failed to recognize Freire's underlying religious framework. For example, radical North American sociologist and activist Stanley Aronowitz leaves out Catholic theology when enumerating the main philosophical pillars of Freire's thought.⁹ Likewise, in his introduction to the 30th anniversary edition of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Cape-Verdean educational theorist

Marx. I started reading and studying. It was beautiful because I found in Marx a lot of things the people had told me—without being literate. Marx was a genius. *But when I met Marx, I continued to meet Christ on the corners of the street—by meeting the people*" (qtd. in Elias 42, emphasis in original). As this passage makes clear, Freire's Marxism was rooted in his religious faith. For Freire, these religious and secular discourses were complementary. This was an extraordinary philosophical synthesis achieved in a few other historical situations, but rarely with the political consequence and intellectual sophistication achieved in Brazil prior to April 1964.

⁸ Educational scholar Vernon Blackwood similarly asserts: "Such terms as incarnation, logos, conversion, born again, salvation, faith, hope, trust, love, justice, the Kingdom of God, Jesus Christ, freedom, transformation, commitment, creation, humility, sin, and reconciliation all reflect the foundation of biblical theology in Freire" (213). All of the theological concepts identified by Elias and Blackwood will be discussed in this dissertation.

⁹ Aronowitz lists Marxism, psychoanalytic theory, and existentialist-phenomenological thought (15). While these are all major sources for Freire's philosophy, I contend that leaving out Catholic thought constitutes a severe intellectual and biographical distortion.

Donaldo Macedo – one of Freire’s closest allies – remarkably fails to mention the importance of progressive Catholicism to Freire’s life and work. For his part, Canadian critical theorist and Marxist educator Peter McLaren confidently asserts that Freire’s lifelong project of “liberating others from their suffering...[does] not emerge from some transcendental fiat (“Postmodernism” 203). Aronowitz, Macedo, and McLaren, who are among the most prominent figures in the North American educational left, show a tendency among secular intellectuals to downplay the theological dimension of Freire’s work. As composition-rhetoric scholar Priscilla Perkins notes, a number of leftist U.S. academics, “far from recognizing Freire’s own critical Catholicism as integral to his lifelong project, [have seen] it in vestigial terms, at best the political equivalent of tonsils, at worst a birthmark that disfigured and obscured his theories” (590). Perhaps as a consequence, no full-length study of the theological dimension of Freire’s work has been produced. A range of estimable scholars such as Donohue (1972), Collins (1977), Mackie (1981), Walker (1981), Jarvis (1987), Blackwood (1987), Elias (1994), Gadotti (1994), Cooper (1995), Paiva (1995), Kanpol (1996), Oldenski (1997), Lange (1998), Schugurensky (1998), Daniell (1999), McLaren (2000), Cavalier (2002), and Stenberg (2006) have touched upon this subject to varying degrees, but none have fully situated the religious roots of Freire’s thought within its historical, sociological, and philosophical contexts. In sum, the scarcity of scholarship on such an essential aspect of his work is a regrettable gap in the vast Freirean literature.

In response, this dissertation investigates the underlying theological dimension of Freire’s work, highlighting the degree to which his work was informed by his lifelong immersion in progressive Catholic activism. Chapter One provides an overview of Freire’s life and experimental literacy practice, locating his work in the grotesquely economic stratification of the Brazilian Northeast. Chapter Two delves into the turbulent political and theological currents that

fed into Freire's evolving pedagogy in the middle of the twentieth century. Chapter Three situates Freire's literacy campaign within Brazil's middle-class "Catholic Left" movement, which mobilized to an unprecedented degree in the decade leading up to the April 1964 coup. Chapter Four illustrates the extensive give-and-take between Freire's educational work and Latin American "liberation theology," which was brought to a premature and violent end with the military takeover.

Chapter One:

Paulo Freire's Life and Educational Praxis

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of Paulo Freire's life, work, and the major tenets of his educational practice. It examines his ground-breaking pedagogy as an organic outgrowth of his Brazilian roots, highlighting his immersion in the currents of leftist mobilization that swept through the country in the 1950s and early 1960s. Since this dissertation explores the influence of leftist Catholic theology upon Freire's theory and practice, it is important to understand the historical context in which he developed as an educator, activist, and philosopher. Freire's biography, philosophy, and experimental literacy practice are inseparable from the society he inhabited, the political struggles he participated in, the language he spoke (Northeastern Brazilian Portuguese), and the religious faith he embraced throughout his life. This chapter surveys these formative factors, focusing upon his life prior to the April 1964 military coup d'état. Before the military takeover, Freire was about to his experimental literacy campaign on a nation-wide scale, which led to his seventy-day imprisonment. His subsequent expulsion from Brazil at the hands of the junta became an ironic credential of merit, as he rose to international fame as the most prominent educator of his generation.

I. Biography

A. Northeastern Brazilian Roots (1921 to 1964)

Paulo Reglus Neves Freire was born on September 19, 1921 to a middle-class family in the port city of Recife in the Northeastern region of Brazil.¹⁰ Recife was the capital of Pernambuco, a severely underdeveloped agrarian state and one of the poorest areas in the world.¹¹ His father Joaquim Themistocles was an army sergeant and a Spiritist¹² who was not affiliated with any religious denomination. His mother Edeltrudes Neves was a seamstress, home-maker, and devout Catholic.¹³ Freire's boyhood was spent in relative comfort and prosperity. He attended private school, and he has written lovingly of his parents as having provided a warm and nurturing home. The family's standard of living plummeted with the Great Depression of 1929, when Paulo was eight years old. Freire often pointed to these years as a watershed in his life. After a series of severe financial reversals, the Freires were forced to leave Recife for more modest accommodations in the nearby smaller city of Jaboatao. At the age of ten, Freire experienced severe hunger for the first time. At school, his hunger pangs became acute enough that he found it difficult to concentrate.¹⁴ His grades began to drop, which his teachers attributed

¹⁰ Relatively few full-length biographies of Freire have been published in English. The most extensive ones I have encountered are Denis Collins' *Paulo Freire: His Life, Works, and Thought* (1977) and Moacir Gadotti's *Reading Paulo Freire: His Life and Works* (1994). Freire did not write an autobiography, although personal anecdotes are scattered throughout much of his writing, especially in the second half of his career. See especially *Letters to Cristina: Reflections on My Life and Work* (1996) for an illuminating account of his childhood experiences and their impact on his educational thought.

¹¹ It was also the region of the country where Afro-Brazilian influences have long been strongest.

¹² Spiritism is a naturalist and rationalist philosophy that developed in France in the mid-19th century. It uses "scientific" methods to study spirits.

¹³ Freire eventually opted for Roman Catholicism, a decision that his father respected. Freire later asserted that his father's magnanimous reaction towards this decision was a memorable lesson in respecting the autonomy and choices of others.

¹⁴ Years later, he recounted: "It was a real and concrete hunger that had no specific departure. Even though it never reached the rigor of the hunger experienced by some people I know, it was not the hunger experienced by those who undergo a tonsil operation or are dieting. On the

to retardation. This trauma stayed with him for the rest of his life. Not only did he gain first-hand experience of poverty; he also realized how much the ability to learn was directly affected by one's material conditions. Thus, as his family slid precipitously down the economic ladder, he directly experienced the linkage between socio-economic status, knowledge, and school performance.¹⁵ Freire frequently asserted that he dedicated his life from that point onwards to the struggle against hunger and poverty, in order to spare other children from similar agonies. These experiences also planted the seeds for his lifelong refusal to accept poverty as "God's will."¹⁶

Throughout these difficult years, Freire's parents worked hard to maintain the outward signs of their middle-class background. Such efforts were epitomized by his father's insistence on wearing a tie every day, as well as the continued presence of a German piano in their living room.¹⁷ These precarious status markers elevated them in the eyes of the neighborhood, as well

contrary, our hunger was of the type that arrives unannounced and unauthorized, making itself at home without an end to sight. A hunger that, it was not softened as ours was, would take over our bodies, molding them into angular shapes. Legs, arms, and fingers become skinny. Eye sockets become deeper, making the eyes almost disappear. Many of our classmates experienced this hunger and today it continues to afflict millions of Brazilians who die of its violence every year" (*Letters to Cristina* 15).

¹⁵ "I wanted very much to study, but I couldn't as our economic condition didn't allow me to. I tried to read or pay attention in the classroom, but I didn't understand anything because of my hunger. I wasn't dumb. It wasn't lack of interest. My social condition didn't allow me to have an education. Experience showed me once again the relationship between social class and knowledge" (qtd. in Gadotti 5)

¹⁶ "Because I experienced poverty, I never allowed myself to fall into fatalism...because I had been born into a Christian family, I never accepted our precarious situation as an expression of God's wishes. On the contrary, I began to understand that something really wrong with the world needed to be fixed" (*Letters to Cristina* 14). In Freire's theology, God wants human beings to embrace their creativity and historical agency. This pivotal idea is explored throughout this dissertation.

¹⁷ The piano could have been sold to buy food.

as in their own eyes. Freire later recounted that this dissonance between his family's public image of prosperity and their private sufferings constituted his earliest exposure to class contradictions. While he was no less malnourished than his much poorer friends, Freire sensed that they deferred to him due to his seemingly higher social status. In the Marxist language he would adapt later in life, young Paulo had begun to realize the ugly reality of class stratification, and the role of cultural markers in perpetuating them: "By falling into poverty, I learned from experience what social class meant" (*A Pedagogy for Liberation* 29).

His father died in 1934 after a painful stomach disease. Paulo was 13. This devastating loss drove the family deeper into poverty, and it haunted Freire for years to come. The remaining family's economic situation gradually improved in the late 1930s, buoyed by the entry of Freire's siblings into the workforce. Freire's malnutrition came to an end, and his grades rebounded. The family moved back to Recife after nine years, and Freire entered secondary school on a hard-won scholarship.¹⁸ He became a teacher at the age of 20, being hired as a part-time instructor of Portuguese.¹⁹ He began to study the philosophy and psychology of language at the University of Pernambuco, marking the start of his lifelong engagement with these subjects. He was also exposed to the innovating ideas of modern French Catholic thinkers such as Jacques Maritain, Teilhard de Chardin, and Emmanuel Mounier, many of whose works were newly available in Portuguese translations. These intellectuals were instrumental to the development of Brazil's "Catholic Left" youth movement, a cohort of university students and

¹⁸ It was a fortunate intervention that allowed Freire to continue schooling. Many of his grades were poor as a result of malnutrition, which harmed his admission prospects. His mother went from school to school begging headmasters to accept Paulo as a scholarship boy. Her cause was finally embraced by the progressive head of a Recife private school, an institution that was run by the father of the woman who would become Freire's second wife.

¹⁹ He served as a high school teacher for seven years (1941-7).

young urban professionals that engaged in increasingly radicalized forms of leftist activism in the years before the April 1964 coup. As explored throughout Chapters Two and Three, Freire's participation in this vibrant political and intellectual milieu deeply shaped his evolving educational theory and practice.

During the 1940s, Freire joined Brazilian Catholic Action (ACB). This was a Church-supervised lay movement that was popular among urban, middle-class university students and young adults. This was a momentous development in Freire's life, as he became involved for the first time with an activist Catholic organization. Over the next two decades, the social thought of ACB would move steadily to the political left. Deeply influenced by progressive Catholic thought, most notably from Jacques Maritain,²⁰ these budding young activists began envisioning a society characterized by harmonious societal relations, socio-economic equality, and democratic collaboration to serve the "common good" and to promote the sacred dignity of all persons. They assimilated Maritain's view that Catholic activism and social thought were crucial to counter and transform the pervasive anti-humanism of the contemporary world. Freire and many other young and well-educated Catholics began advocating for more humane work environments that benefitted not just Brazilian employers, but their workers as well. They also tried to encourage more equitable economic development, coupled with harmonious relations between employers and workers. As explored in Chapters Two and Three, ACB's religious

²⁰ Maritain (1882-1973) was arguably the most prominent Catholic theologians of the first half of the twentieth century. He influenced Catholic Action, the Christian Democratic movement, and the Catholic Worker Movement in the United States. He was also an integral contributor to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Maritain's impact on Brazil's young Catholic intellectuals is discussed in Chapter Two.

humanism and liberal-democratic orientation shaped Freire's developing political thought before the 1964 coup.²¹

In 1944, Freire married Elza Marie Costa Oliveira, an elementary school teacher and one of his Portuguese-language students.²² Paulo and Elza became active in ACB. They spent much time in discussion and prayer with other middle-class couples in Recife. Together, these young Catholics reflected upon "the contradiction between social privilege and the radical demands of the Christian faith" (Mackie 102). They also sought to transform their own "hearts and minds" and practice loving openness to the poor. Around this time, Freire made a fateful decision. With Elza's strong encouragement, he decided to live out his intuited vocation for social justice in the realm of education, rather than pursuing the legal profession he had trained to practice.²³ Freire came to believe that the most effective way to challenge the extreme poverty he witnessed all around was through literacy education. He was especially interested in providing literacy training to peasants and urban workers – a project with notable political implications, given the statutes that restricted ballot access to those who could read and write. These laws effectively disenfranchised an enormous mass of Brazilian peasants and workers due to illiteracy. Given

²¹ Despite his later reputation (and notoriety) for radical Marxism, Freire was wary of Marxist organizations in the early phase of his career. His early socio-political thought was reformist, liberal-democratic, and Christian humanist. Freire's turn towards revolutionary Marxism occurred after his 1964 expulsion from Brazil.

²² The couple would stay married for 42 years, until Elza's death in 1986. They raised three daughters and two sons. Two years later Freire married childhood friend Ana Maria Araujo, a highly accomplished teacher and scholar in her own right.

²³ He had recently completed a law degree and immediately started working as an attorney for local labor unions among the Recife slums. However, Freire soon abandoned the legal profession after observing its predatory nature. The final blow to Freire's brief career as a lawyer came when he was obligated to sue a young dentist whose practice had failed, and whose creditors had taken everything he possessed. Freire left his law office that day, never to return.

these conditions, an educational project that enabled them to read and write would make them eligible them to vote, thus constituting a potentially dramatic challenge to existing power relations.

After quitting his law practice in 1947, Freire was soon invited to become the Director of the Division of Education and Culture at the Social Service Ministry (SESI) of Pernambuco. SESI was established by the Confederation of Industry, a local alliance of employers and business owners. One of the private institute's goals was raising working conditions and improving relations between employers and workers. This position was a fortunate development for Freire; not only did it save him from unemployment, but the organization's mission resonated with the aspirations of Brazilian Catholic Action. Freire stayed at SESI from 1947-59, a tenure that indelibly shaped his formation as an educational activist and philosopher. Acknowledging the importance of his experience at SESI, he described it as the "the most important political-pedagogical practice of my life" (*Letters to Cristina* 81).²⁴ Freire's work at SESI provided him with the opportunity to "rediscover" the working class life he had known in his youth, reconnecting after years of inhabiting the middle-class milieu of university life (*Pedagogy for Liberation* 29). It also gave him an institutional platform to "go to the people," an ideal that was emerging among Brazil's progressive young Catholics.

At SESI, Freire began to experiment with an alternative literacy program cultivated the full participation of the learners in their own education. As a crucial step in this new pedagogy, he started exploring how "to talk with the working class and to understand their way of learning

²⁴ "I would say...that everything I have been criticizing, discussing, questioning as an educator, as a thinker in books, articles, conferences, discussions, seminars, everything had its roots at [SESI]...[it] made a number of things viable that were absolutely necessary to my education as an educator" (*Daring to Dream* 74, 79).

about the world through their language” (Gadotti 6). Years later, he described an especially fruitful experience at SESI. One day, he was lecturing a group of workers about some ideas from the renowned Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget: “I said many beautiful things,” he recounted, “but made no impact. This was because I used my frame of reference, not theirs” (qtd. in Mackie 3). After his speech finished, one worker approached him and said, “You talk from a background of food, comfort and rest. The reality is that we have one room, no food, and have to make love in front of the children” (qtd. in Mackie 3). Freire explained that at this phase in his young teaching career, he could not decipher such reactions to his learned lectures. Instead, “it was only from a continual and prolonged process of both research and living with the poor in the slums of Recife that he finally understood the syntax of the people” (Mackie 4). This “syntax” was their entire lived culture and experiential reality. Freire learned a great deal from encounters like the one described above, and he ceaselessly modified his teaching practice in response.²⁵ He became increasingly committed to working with the real-life concerns, native knowledge, and material conditions of his adult students. In accordance with this guiding principle, he asked his literacy teachers to attend very closely to the linguistic universe of the learners, and to construct their lessons accordingly.²⁶ This “loving” commitment to the integrity and intrinsic intelligence of all learners, coupled with an abiding “faith” in their inherent

²⁵ In later years, he constantly stressed the need for educators to ground their practice upon the concrete, local, and historical conditions they operated within. In other words, Freirean teachers must reinvent his pedagogy in light of their own educational context, since “genuine theory can only be derived from some praxis rooted in historical struggles” (Goulet ix).

²⁶ “Freire’s concern for people is so central that it rules out any policy, program, or project which does not become truly *theirs*” (Goulet xii).

capacity to become active participants in their own education²⁷ and conscious agents of their own destinies²⁸ became central tenets of Freire's theory and practice. From this point onwards, he dedicated himself to making the material conditions of everyday life the starting point for his pedagogy. Thus, Freire's work at SESI helped him to develop his theory of "praxis," which he came to define as the unity of thought and action in shaping history.²⁹ While philosophical abstraction would always remain central to his educational practice, he now believed that pedagogy must be grounded on the real conditions of the learners' lives.

Freire slowly grew dissatisfied with SESI's approach towards social service and education. He came to view the organization as fostering dependency among the poor upon the patronage of their benefactors and insidiously perpetuating the unequal power relations of the status quo. SESI's work, according to his emerging perspective, inculcated the values of the dominant culture into the consciousness of the poor, rather than encouraging them to "problematize" and challenge existing social arrangements (*Letters to Cristina* 82). He

²⁷ The influence of John Dewey is clear in Freire's statement: "I was convinced that the Brazilian people could learn social and political responsibility only by *experiencing* that responsibility...They could be helped to learn democracy through the *exercise* of democracy; for that knowledge, above all others, can only be assimilated experientially" (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 36).

²⁸ "Democracy and democratic education are founded on faith in men [sic], on the belief that they not only can but should discuss the problems of their country, of their continent, their world, their work, the problems of democracy itself. Education is an act of love, and thus an act of courage" (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 33). Notably, Freire later apologized for his early use of male-centered language, which he attributed to having grown up in an intensely patriarchal society. He used his own experience of rejecting male-centric language as exemplifying the capacity of all human beings to change once they become aware of their own historical conditioning. Thus, "Change is difficult, but it is possible" (see especially Chapter 7 of *Daring to Dream* 73-88).

²⁹ According to Freire's formulation, theory without practice is empty "verbalism," while practice uninformed by theory is mindless "activism"; "authentic" transformative action requires both elements. See Chapter 4 for a discussion of Freirean praxis in light of Catholic theology.

increasingly saw SESI as a paternalistic bureaucracy that encouraged the poor to accept the injustices of their lives, rather than empowering them to take control of their own destiny. He now viewed SESI's activities as palliative measures that doled out incremental, paternalistic reforms in order to defuse social unrest by alleviating the worst excesses of the economic system, thereby leaving underlying exploitative social structures intact. Freire came to label such dispensations as "assistencialist"³⁰ measures that reduced human beings to "objects" and passive recipients of top-down charity, rather than encouraging them to be responsible "Subjects" of their own destiny. In time, this dichotomy between "object" and "Subject" developed a pivotal theme in Freire's educational theory and practice.

As explored more fully in Chapters Two and Three, the 1950s and early 1960s were years of intense socio-political ferment and ideological polarization in Brazil. These trends were spurred by rapid industrialization, surging nationalist sentiment, crippling inflation,³¹ chronic political instability, and widespread disillusionment with the national government. The political left, including the rapidly emerging Catholic activist movement, began to mobilize to an unprecedented degree. In the Freire's native Northeast, about thirteen hundred farm workers' unions were founded within a twelve month span. In 1963, two massive in Pernambuco involved over three hundred thousand unionized farm workers. Many of the country's urban

³⁰ "Assistencialism is an especially pernicious method of trying to vitiate popular participation in the historical process...The important thing is to help men (and nations) help themselves, to place them in consciously critical confrontation with their problems, to make them the agents of their own recuperation. In contrast, assistencialism robs men of a fundamental human necessity – responsibility...Assistencialism offers no responsibility, no opportunity to make decisions, but only gestures and attitudes which encourage passivity. Whether the assistance is of foreign or national origin, this method cannot lead a country to a democratic destination" (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 12-13). Note Freire's comparison of the dependency of workers upon their employers with Brazil's subservience to foreign economic interests.

³¹ The 1961 inflation rate was as high as 90 percent (Barnard 28).

universities had grown into fertile ground for leftist activism. For his part, Freire's educational activism during this period revolved around promoting more equitable economic development, broader electoral participation, cultural renewal, and overcoming what he perceived as the endemic authoritarianism, paternalism, and "alienation" of Brazilian culture. In addition, the era was permeated by a sharp rise in nationalist consciousness, fueled by growing antagonism towards Brazil's neocolonialist "dependency" on transnational corporations, foreign governments, and the International Monetary Fund. This surge in nationalism also stemmed from the legacy of three centuries of Portuguese colonial rule (1500-1822). The thrust towards the development of an "authentic" Brazilian culture on the political left coalesced into a vigorous activist movement. In the early 1960s, the Brazilian left organized a wide array of "popular" (i.e., grassroots) political and cultural activities, with Freire's literacy campaign on the vanguard of these efforts. His experimental "culture circles"³² featured discussions with adult peasants on issues such as democratization in society, economic modernization, and the development of a vibrant and authentic culture. Freire's pedagogy sought to help the illiterate poor realize their intrinsic political agency through "dialogic" teaching methods that invited the full participation of the learners in their own educational formation.³³ The liberal-democratic, anti-imperialist

³² These "culture circles" (also called "literacy circles") were small discussion groups of 25 to 30 adult peasants led by a coordinator trained in Freire's experimental "alphabetization" method. The learning groups met for one hour every weeknight over six to eight weeks, for a total of 30-40 hours.

³³ Drawing upon the educational philosophy of John Dewey, Freire viewed democratic and dialogic pedagogy as the antidote to Brazil's traditionally authoritarian cultural environment (Mackie 95-6). Freire viewed Brazil as a "closed" society that was characterized by technological and economic backwardness, authoritarianism, and cultural alienation. However, Brazil had entered a period of epochal transition to a more "open" society that was more developed, self-sufficient, democratic, and "authentic." Freire adapted this theoretical polarity between "closed" and "open" societies from the political thought of Karl Popper (Elias 34). Freire explained, "During the phase of the closed society, the people are *submerged* in reality.

thrust of his thought was visible in the most commonly discussed themes in his literacy courses: “nationalism, profit remittances abroad, the political evolution of Brazil, development, illiteracy, the vote for illiterates, and democracy” (Elias 34).³⁴ He believed that educational activities would be crucial in stimulating and shepherding the ongoing “passage of Brazilian society from its previous colonial...status to that of a Subject” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 10).³⁵ In 1959, Freire earned his doctorate in education from the University of Recife. The title of his dissertation, “Education and the Present Moment in Brazil,” reflected his concern with the relationship between pedagogy, social justice, contemporary historical conditions, and the rampant injustices of Brazilian society.³⁶ The University offered Freire a tenured professorship in the history and philosophy of education, and he quickly accepted. Having spent over a decade at SESI, he saw the University as a more effective and autonomous base for his experimentation with democratic alternatives to traditional education (Blackwood 204).

As that society breaks open, they *emerge*. No longer *mere spectators*, they uncross their arms, renounce expectancy, and demand intervention. No longer satisfied to watch, they want to participate” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 11, italics in original). As demonstrated throughout this dissertation, Freire’s trust in the capacity of impoverished and illiterate adults to become conscious historical actors is central to his educational system.

³⁴ Elias points out that Freire’s pre-1964 beliefs were “rooted in his work as an adult educator within the university, his involvement with a liberal reformist government, his connection with liberal Brazilian scholars, and his reading of European and North American liberal academics” (33). He adds that while Freire’s early thought was not explicitly radical, his pedagogy “undeniably contained the seeds of social revolt because it brought the people to a comprehension of the oppressive reality of their lives” (6). These “seeds” would soon draw the ire of the dominant sectors of society.

³⁵ “What was needed [during this period of societal “opening”] was to go to the people and help them to enter the historical process critically. The prerequisite for this task was a form of education enabling the people to reflect on themselves, reflect on their very power of reflection. The resulting development of this power would mean an increased capacity for choice” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 13).

³⁶ Gadotti believes the seeds of Freire’s mature thought are already present in this dissertation (8).

By the early 1960s, Freire's educational work was attracting national attention. In 1961, the University of Recife hired him to serve as the inaugural director of its newly-established Department of Cultural Extension. This organization was dedicated towards promoting "popular" education and cultural activities. That same year, Freire was invited by the dynamic young mayor of Recife, Miguel Arraes to design and implement a literacy program for the entire city. Arraes was an unabashed leftist and a rising star in Brazilian politics. Freire seized the opportunity and prepared to launch his new adult literacy campaign on a much larger scale. He was energized by his new access to greater resources, as well as the full support of a popular and energetic political leader. Along with a group of newly-trained literacy coordinators, most of whom were university students and recent graduates, Freire began to operate culture circles throughout the Northeast. The early results were astonishing. At one point, Freire and his staff claimed to have "alphabetized" 300 sugarcane workers in 45 days.³⁷ This feat caught the attention of Brazil's populist president, Joao Goulart, who had ascended to power in 1961. His turbulent tenure (1961-4) was marked by "the most extensive development of radical and revolutionary groups" in Brazil's modern history (Elias 6).³⁸ In 1963 Goulart invited Freire to direct the proposed National Literacy Plan, with an eye towards enacting the "Freire Method" throughout the country.³⁹ From June 1963 to April 1964, Freire established training programs for literacy coordinators in nearly all of Brazil's state capitals (Elias 5). This massive project

³⁷ Freire's campaign (and other similar "popular" educational activities) provoked great concern among the landowners and urban elites, who were alarmed at the sudden influx of the newly-literate poor into the electorate. This anxiety was a significant factor in triggering the 1964 coup.

³⁸ Chapter Two traces the major political events between World War II and the April 1964 coup.

³⁹ Goulart also intended to secure electoral support for his administration among these newly-enfranchised former-illiterates.

was estimated to reach up to two million adult students, with twenty thousand small groups scheduled to commence in early 1964. The full enactment of Freire's literacy method would have been a watershed moment in Brazilian history, where up to 90% of the poor (who constituted half of the country's population) were illiterate and therefore barred from voting. Freire's campaign might have profoundly shifted the nation's balance of power.

However, the great excitement of this period did not last. Conservative forces, most notably land owners, capitalists, the military hierarchy, and traditionalist members of the Church hierarchy, struck back to pre-empt the impending "Brazilian Revolution." On April 1, 1964, President Goulart was overthrown by a military junta.⁴⁰ Freire's literacy campaign was violently dismantled. His teaching equipment was destroyed, and he was arrested along with numerous Catholic activists. He was soon charged with being an "international subversive," a practitioner of a "Bolshevizing" pedagogical method "similar to that of Stalin, Hitler, Peron, and Mussolini" (Gadotti 35),⁴¹ and he was imprisoned due to "seditious" activities.⁴² After two months of captivity, Freire was released through the intervention of sympathetic elements within the Church. Along with around 150 other political prisoners, he was stripped of his Brazilian citizenship and forced into exile. (He was later joined by his family.) His literacy program collapsed within a newly hostile political climate, and his writings were banned by the military regime.

B. Exile, International Fame, and Homecoming (1964 to 1997)

⁴⁰ Goulart died in exile in Argentina in 1976 at the age of 58.

⁴¹ Notably, he was also accused of being "a traitor to Christ" (Gadotti 35).

⁴² This captivity included stretches of time in a small box with barely enough room to stand.

For the rest of his life, Freire described his arrest, imprisonment, and expulsion from Brazil as one of the most formative experiences of his life: “After the coup, I was really born again with a new consciousness of politics” (*Pedagogy for Liberation* 32). In exile, Freire decided that liberal-reformist measures were too weak to combat entrenched forces of wealth and power. He investigated and assimilated Marxist thought, particularly dialectics, class struggle, and the necessity of revolutionary action for social justice.⁴³ This radicalization is writ large in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which he began to compose soon after the military takeover. His experiences at the hands of the Brazilian junta provided an experiential knowledge of class conflict and conflictive social relations. In addition, the historical materialism of Marxist thought helped him to make sense of why the coup had occurred, and what needed to be done to reverse it. In terms of his pedagogy, the violent reaction to his literacy experiments led Freire to believe that all educational practices are political in that they either “domesticate” or “liberate” learners; there can be no middle ground. This was an insight he gained from the severity of the military reaction to his literacy project, which he had sincerely viewed as “non-partisan.”⁴⁴ In addition, education has an intimate relationship the distribution of power and wealth in society, particularly in relation to the ideas which sustain or challenge the status quo.⁴⁵ The non-neutrality of pedagogy became a central tenet of Freire’s lifelong thought. He also came to recognize limits of educational activities in promoting social change (*Pedagogy for Liberation*

⁴³ In his earlier writings, Freire made little mention of the dynamics of social class in his analysis of Brazilian society. Instead, he was preoccupied with the nationalist “struggle against cultural importation” and anti-authoritarianism that characterized liberal Brazilian intellectualism before April 1964 (Paiva 158).

⁴⁴ After the coup, he realized that “an educator is a politician also” (*Pedagogy for Liberation* 31).

⁴⁵ Moreover, ruling elites fund and regulate school systems to confirm the unequal social relations already in place.

31). That is, education by itself could never be the primary “lever” for societal transformation – a belief that seems implicit in his pre-1964 thought.⁴⁶

After a brief stay in Bolivia, Freire and his family moved to Chile. He served there for five years as an educational advisor to the Christian Democratic government of Eduardo Frei and to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (UNESCO). Notably, Freire was fully comfortable collaborating with both religious and secular groups. He gained experience in adapting his pedagogical method from Brazil to another country, rather than transplanting it without taking the uniqueness of each educational location into account (Blackwood 206). During this fertile period, he published the Portuguese-language versions of his two most important works: *Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1967)⁴⁷ and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968). With these books, Freire’s fame began to spread throughout Latin America. Importantly, there was a sharp ideological contrast between these texts. *Education as the Practice of Freedom*, which was drawn from Freire’s 1959 dissertation and Brazilian fieldwork, was predominately liberal-democratic, reflecting Freire’s pre-coup thought. In comparison, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was Marxist and revolutionary. In this later text, Freire declared his option to fight alongside the poor and downtrodden. Manifesting his assimilation of Marxism, he focused on power relations to a far greater degree than in any of his previous works, and he explicitly acknowledged the existence of class struggle for the first time. Most controversially,

⁴⁶ “Nevertheless,” he emphasized, “through education, we can first understand power in society. We can throw light on the power relations made opaque by the dominant class. We can also prepare and participate in programs to change society” (*A Pedagogy for Liberation* 31-2). Ultimately, “We need to know the limits and possibilities of teaching, reach to the limits, and extend ourselves beyond education to avoid...despair” (37-8).

⁴⁷ This work was published in English as *Education for Critical Consciousness* in 1974. It is cited by its English language title throughout this dissertation.

he declared that revolutionary action was necessary to overturn injustice, and he set forth the requirements for humane revolutionary leadership.⁴⁸ In all, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* reflected the sharp radicalization of his thought since the destruction of his Brazilian literacy campaign.

In recognition of Freire's growing fame as an educational theorist and activist, Harvard University and the Massachusetts-based Center for the Study of Development and Social Change invited him to teach a graduate seminar on education and international development in 1969. Freire and his family arrived in the United States later that year. It was his first visit to an industrialized country, and it coincided with the great social unrest of the era. To his surprise, he saw that conditions of political repression and socio-economic injustice were hardly confined to the "Third World." This insight played an important role in his future work, as he increasingly took up issues of domination within the context of the West.⁴⁹ During his time at Harvard, the English-language version of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was published. This version of the book was an instant success, and it solidified his reputation as the most prominent educator in the world. It also cemented his reputation as a radical Marxist among his Western readers.⁵⁰ At Harvard, he also wrote and published two pivotal essays, "The Adult Literacy Process as Cultural Action for Freedom" and "Cultural Action and Conscientization." In these works, he

⁴⁸ These requirements were humility, love, permanent commitment to dialogue with the people, and trust in their capability to be protagonists of their own destiny. See Chapter Four for a discussion of love in the revolutionary struggle.

⁴⁹ See especially *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education* (1987), which Freire co-authored with North American critical educator Ira Shor. This "talking book" encapsulates many of Freire's reflections on the relationship between formal education, power relations, and social justice in the United States.

⁵⁰ The prominence of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* among Freire's published works has been one of the most significant reasons that Western readers have tended to overlook the Catholic roots and theological dimension of his educational philosophy.

provided the most extensive and scholarly discussion of the theory of consciousness underlying his pedagogy.

After this stay in the United States, Freire continued his unfolding “dialogue with the West” by moving to Switzerland with his family in 1970. He spent the next decade as a Special Educational Consultant to the World Council of Churches (WCC), a liberal international ecumenical organization of Protestant churches established in 1948.⁵¹ At the behest of the WCC, he undertook a number of high-profile projects in several newly-independent African and Caribbean nations. One of his most high-profile assignments was in Guinea-Bissau, where he served as educational advisor to the revolutionary government. Freire reflected upon this experience in *Pedagogy in Process: Letters to Guinea-Bissau* (1978).⁵² He also maintained close relationships with progressive Catholic and Protestant organizations. During the 1970s and 1980s, Freire reached the height of his global fame as an educational theorist and activist.

Freire’s tenure at the World Council of Churches marked a deepening of his theological reflection, particularly regarding the role of the Christians as radical agents of justice and transformation.⁵³ He began to explore the theological dimension of his educational system to a greater degree than before, and he wrote some of his most explicitly religious works – most

⁵¹ Representing over half a billion people, the World Council of Churches is the largest institutional body of Christians next to the Roman Catholic Church. From the 1950s through the 1970s, the WCC was deeply involved with the issue of decolonization and national development.

⁵² Freire’s decision to use Portuguese as the language of his literacy campaign, rather than pre-colonial languages, drew controversy. Freire was accused of cultural invasion (Elias 12). He later claimed that he had originally advocated for using native languages, but the leadership of the revolutionary government preferred Portuguese.

⁵³ These were issues that were almost completely absent in his earlier writings, including the overtly revolutionary *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Blackwood 208).

importantly the article “The Educational Role of the Churches in Latin America” (1972).⁵⁴ In this piece, he lays out a stark theological contrast between the “traditional,” the “modernizing,” and the “prophetic”⁵⁵ forms of the church. In Freire’s analysis, building the “prophetic church” is the only faithful response to Jesus Christ’s example in the Gospels; the other two forms perpetuate the unjust social arrangements of the status quo. Freire also links this three-part ecclesial model to his educational theory, arguing that “prophetic” education is the only genuinely revolutionary practice, while “modernizing” and “traditional” forms serve the entrenched interests of dominant groups.

In the 1970s, the radical movement known as liberation theology⁵⁶ burst upon the world stage. Based primarily in Latin America, liberation theology viewed God as an active partisan on the behalf of the poor and the oppressed. Liberation theology envisioned Jesus Christ as a radical critic of imperialism and injustice, a “liberator” who was born into poverty and who suffered torture and execution because of his uncompromising stance against political and religious domination. Liberation theology professed to re-read the bible through the “eyes of the

⁵⁴ “The Educational Role of the Churches in Latin America” is the most substantial theological statement in Freire’s body of work. The essay is examined at length in Chapter Four.

⁵⁵ In his landmark *The Prophetic Imagination*, biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann defines a “prophet” as someone who feels summoned by God to speak out over and against the oppressive social, economic, political, and religious structures of the era. Prophets deploy vivid, energizing, and cathartic language which acts upon the imagination and consciousness of the oppressed. When successful, prophetic language begins to reshape social reality by introducing God’s transcendent vision of justice, freedom, human dignity, and radical equality. According to educational scholar Gillian Cooper, “Prophets do not usually announce events to come which are pre-ordained. There is a sense in which it is the aim of prophets to prove themselves wrong, since the purpose of proclaiming their message is to lead people to a change of action which will avert the worst consequences of their present situation” (75). Crucially, prophets offer vivid and energizing “ways of thinking and speaking which create hope and the will to work for a better future” (Cooper 75). See Chapter Four for an exploration of Freire’s “prophetic” discourse.

⁵⁶ It is also known as “political theology.”

poor.” It repudiated the institutional Church’s historical tendency towards self-interested accommodation with the powerful. Instead, liberation theologians aligned themselves with the masses trapped in the “underside of history.” They broadened the theological definition of “sin” to encompass unjust socio-economic structures. Similarly, the concept of “salvation” grew to include the well-being of the body, not just of the soul. From Marxist philosophy, liberation theology drew key concepts such as the existence of class struggle, the concept of ideological domination, and necessity for radical social change. (Predictably, liberation theologians drew a much criticism from within and without the church for their use of Marxist social analysis.) Notably, the liberation theologians considered Freire a “seminal precursor” to their movement. They viewed him as “an exemplar for what they believed the church should be about in the midst of oppression” (Blackwood 206).⁵⁷ They particularly revered Freire’s efforts to educate the poor in Brazil, and they admired the ordeals he had endured for his ideals. They also recognized the deeply theological nature of his educational philosophy. Accordingly, the leading figures of the movement hailed Freire as one of their own,⁵⁸ and some adapted Freire’s educational method into their “evangelizing” work with the poor. Freire’s influence on radical Catholic thought was writ large at the gathering of the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM)⁵⁹ in 1968, a

⁵⁷ See Chapter Four for an exploration of the extensive intersections between Freirean pedagogy and liberation theology.

⁵⁸ One of these figures was Gustavo Gutierrez, a Peruvian priest who is widely considered the principle spokesperson for liberation theology. Freire appreciated this designation, but he declined it; he preferred to be known as an educator.

⁵⁹ CELAM is the governing organization of Latin American Roman Catholic bishops. It was established by the Vatican in 1955.

watershed event in the development of liberation theology. In particular, the bishops' "Education" statement was unmistakably Freirean in tone, language, and substance.⁶⁰

Crucially, Freire was influenced by liberation theology in return. Much of his post-1964 work incorporated key themes from this movement. These ideas included his critique of the institutional Church,⁶¹ his theologically-grounded repudiation of capitalism, his "prophetic" utopianism, and his religious understanding of human nature. Freire's writings were increasingly filled with overtly religious elements from the 1970s onward. Thus, as Freire became more Marxist, "the theological inspiration of his social philosophy [became] more explicit" (Elias 79). For his part, Freire professed that his Catholicism stimulated and confirmed his Marxist commitment, even as Marxist thought gave him the "scientific" framework to concretely enact his religious faith.

In 1979, Freire and about 5000 other dissidents were granted amnesty by Brazil's military ruler, Joao Baptista de Oliveira Figueiredo. Freire returned to his homeland in June 1980, after sixteen years of exile. He joined the Workers Party (PT) in Sao Paulo, where he supervised the city's adult literacy program from 1980-1986. With the gradual return of civilian rule and the reemergence of leftist Brazilian politics, the Workers Party won the city's municipal elections in 1988. Given his international stature, Freire was promptly appointed the city's Secretary of Education in 1989. This colossal administrative position included authority over 600 schools, with a total of 700,000 K-12 students. In two years as Secretary, he instituted

⁶⁰ This document is discussed in Chapter Four.

⁶¹ During his over two decades as an educator and activist before the coup, Freire never wrote about the role the institutional Church might play in sustaining societal power relations. During his exile, under the influence of liberation theology, he began to criticize the Church for its role in fostering a culture of meekness, fatalism, and submission to authority among the poor. See Chapter Four for a discussion of Freire's ecclesiological thought.

reforms in curricular and administrative autonomy, community involvement in local schools, material conditions in the city's classrooms, teacher training, and the promotion of interdisciplinary studies. He resigned from the position 1991.

In his remaining years, Freire continued to write, teach at the local university, consult with local and international grassroots organizations, and attend international presentations and conferences. Notable publications from this period include *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1992), *Letters to Cristina: Reflections on My Life and Work* (1996), *Pedagogy of the Heart* (1997), and *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage* (1998, published posthumously). In these increasingly personal and meditative texts, he revisited and reflected upon his life's work. He addressed criticisms and clarified some previous stances.⁶² With sympathetic North American and European educators, he wrestled with the challenge of practicing his pedagogy within formalized educational settings in the industrialized world.⁶³ Throughout these discussions, he stressed the need for would-be Freirean educators to carefully analyze the socio-political location for their practice and to reinvent his work accordingly. He chided "Freire fundamentalists" (his term) who sought to transplant his method without considering the nuances and complexities of the proposed educational site.

Freire also asserted that while social movements require an educational dimension, educational

⁶² Religious educator Wayne Cavalier notes that in Freire's latter works, he is much more nuanced in his use of Marxist dialectical analysis, having recognized that class conflicts "in some contemporary societies is not as absolute or extreme as he witnessed them in Brazil in the 1960s" (260). Cavalier points to the following statement from *Pedagogy of Hope*: "I have never labored under the misapprehension that social classes and the struggle between them could explain everything, right down to the color of the sky on a Tuesday evening...The class struggle is not the [sole] mover of history...but it is certainly one of them" (qtd. in Cavalier 260-1).

⁶³ These reflections were stimulated by his extensive dialogues with teachers and students who were situated within formal institutions, as well as his own accumulated experiences as an educational administrator.

activism by itself could not bring about radical change.⁶⁴ Instead, radical educators must form alliances with activists in diverse fields to create and sustain broad social movements.⁶⁵

In all of his works, Freire tirelessly affirmed the foundational premise of his philosophy – that all human beings, regardless of socioeconomic status or educational level, are capable of critically analyzing and reshaping their world. Richard Shaull writes, “Freire...operates on one basic assumption: that man’s ontological vocation (as he calls it) is to be a Subject who acts upon and transforms the world, and in so doing moves toward ever new possibilities of fuller and richer life individually and collectively” (32). Freire’s educational philosophy is anchored upon his belief in the human capacity for freedom, growth, and effective social action. While all persons (and societies) are conditioned by the past, they are never fully determined but are permanently “unfinished” and “incomplete.” In theological terms, Freire’s optimistic worldview is grounded on his belief in humanity’s relationship to a loving Creator. As discussed in Chapter Four, this relationship is characterized by freedom and love, and it provides Freire with a radical, transcendent norm for just and “humanizing” social arrangements. Thus, the question of human nature lies at the center of his educational thought.⁶⁶ As Freire declares in *Pedagogy of Freedom*:

There is no theory of sociopolitical transformation that moves me if it is not grounded in an understanding of the human person as a maker of history and as one made by history.

⁶⁴ “There was a time when it was thought that education could accomplish it all, and there was a time when it was thought that education could not accomplish anything. I believe the great value of education lies in that, while not having it all, it can accomplish a lot” (*Daring to Dream* 86).

⁶⁵ The role of Freirean education is to help create “openings” in the ideological fog of normalcy and inevitability that perpetuates inequality and oppression. Freirean teachers, in alliance with mass movements and social justice organizations, can more effectively challenge the entities and ideologies which thwart social justice.

⁶⁶ Indeed, Freire’s career as a whole might be seen as a meditation on the struggle between “humanization” and “dehumanization.”

If it does not respect men and women as beings of decision, rupture, option. As ethical beings who in their ethicality are capable of being unethical, of transgressing the ethical code indispensable for human living...I have affirmed and reaffirmed the extent to which I rejoice in knowing that I am a 'conditioned' being, capable of going beyond my own conditioning. (115-16)

This passage from Freire's last full-length work echoes a statement from early in his career:

We [literacy coordinators] began with the conviction that the role of man was not only to be in the world, but to engage with relations with the world – that through acts of creation and recreation, man makes cultural reality and thereby adds to the natural world, which he did not make. We were certain that man's relation to reality, expressed as a Subject to an object, results in knowledge, which man could express through language. (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 39)

In these excerpts, which are separated by three decades, he acknowledges the philosophical cornerstone of his pedagogy: his faith in the capacity of human beings to recognize and understand their own limits, to transcend their conditioning, and to transform the social systems which hinder and oppress them. In this vein, the works from Freire's last decade are filled with "prophetic" denunciations of fatalistic and deterministic ideologies such as neo-liberalism, globalization, and the so-called "death of history." He invariably viewed such economic, political, and philosophical systems as profoundly destructive because they negate human agency and distort the well-being of all persons.

Freire died of a sudden heart attack in Sao Paulo on the morning of May 2, 1997, at the age of 75. He was survived by his widow Ana Maria Freire,⁶⁷ two daughters, three sons, four stepchildren, and eight grandchildren. He had been the most famous and controversial educator in the world for almost half of his life.

The second half of this chapter provides an overview of Freire's educational theory and practice, focusing on his literacy work in Brazil before April 1964. This context sets the stage for the next three chapters, which explore Freire's work in light of the Catholic theologies that sustained him throughout his life.

II. A Pedagogy of Freedom: Freire's Educational Praxis

A. The Brazilian Northeast

When exploring the development of Freire's educational work before April 1964, it is necessary to give an account of the historical conditions wherein his praxis emerged. The rural Northeast, where he was born, educated, and enacted his early literacy experiments, was "one of the most wretched regions on earth" (Barnard 18). Covering six hundred thousand square kilometers and stretching over seven states, the area had a population of around 30 million during the period of Freire's experimental literacy campaign. The majority of the people subsisted in conditions "of misery and poverty that defy description" (Barnard 18). The poor made up half of the population, while half the land was concentrated in the hands of the richest three percent. Starvation, malnutrition, thirst, disease, and infant mortality were rampant. These social ills were exacerbated by the widespread practice of sugar monoculture, which left little soil for farm

⁶⁷ Ana Maria Freire has since edited and published several collections of Freire's previously-unpublished works. See *Pedagogy of Indignation* (2004) and *Daring to Dream: Towards a Pedagogy of the Unfinished* (2007).

workers to plant crops for a sufficiently diversified diet. Reflecting these factors, the average life expectancy for peasants was 28 for men; for women, it was 32 (Barnard 18-19).

Unsurprisingly, this region was one of the most politically volatile areas of the country in the years leading up to the coup. It provided fertile soil for Freire's literacy work.

The primary organizing unit of Brazilian society from the Portuguese colonial era to the early twentieth century was the large sugar plantation. This was especially true for the Northeast, which was converted by landowners into the country's primary zone for sugar production for export. These plantations were patriarchal domains, where overlords wielded near-absolute power over their subjects. This social structure inculcated a culture of obedience and dependency of the peasants to their master. Such social relations persisted into the twentieth century, despite the ostensible institutionalization of participatory democracy (which was limited to property-owners). Thus, modern patrons would secure the electoral support of their "constituents" in exchange for benefits such as small jobs in local government (janitor, clerk, etc).⁶⁸ Freire believed that the landholding-based culture "bred the habits of domination and dependence" which manifested "in the form of paternalistic approaches to problems" (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 20). The "excess of power" concentrated in the hands of a tiny minority inculcated "an almost masochistic desire to submit to that power," as well as the "dehumanizing" habit of adapting to the status quo (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 21). He added:

The center of gravity in Brazilian private and public life was located in external power and authority. Men were crushed by the power of the landlords, the governors, the

⁶⁸ As discussed in Chapter Three, the largely middle-class Catholic activists who organized peasant movements in the late 1950s and early 1960s sought to reject paternalism and vanguardism. They stressed "listening to the people" instead of "manipulating" them.

captains, the viceroys. Introjecting this extreme authority, the people developed a consciousness which ‘housed’ oppression, rather than the free and creative consciousness indispensable to authentically democratic regime. (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 22)

The educational culture that developed within this societal structure was deeply conservative, hierarchical, and paternalistic. Freire saw traditional Brazilian curriculum as authoritarian, physically punitive, and anti-dialogic. It was “disconnected from [everyday] life, centered on words emptied on the reality they are meant to represent, lacking in concrete activity, could never develop a critical consciousness” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 33). Moreover, access to schooling was heavily skewed in favor of students from well-to-do families, especially those who lived in urban areas (Barnard 35).⁶⁹ Most poor families could afford to send only one child to school, and this for only a single year. This situation was exacerbated by many circumstances which rendered poor students far more susceptible to absenteeism than their wealthier counterparts. (Absences might occur because of harvest season, chronic poor health, or the need to care for an ill family member.) Such systemic obstacles, coupled with severe academic deficiencies in reading and writing skills, resulted in failure and drop-out rates were much higher than among the more privileged. As a result, entrance rates to secondary schools were severely tilted in favor of middle-class and upper-class children, resulting in “a powerful economic selection [that operated] to preserve the status quo” (Barnard 35). Those poor students who were fortunate enough to attend secondary school were subjected to educational practices

⁶⁹ For example, the Northeast’s educational budget only one-fifth the national average. In contrast, the city of Sao Paulo’s budget was two and a half times the national average (Barnard 35). The illiteracy rate in the Northeast was far higher than the national average (75% vs. 50%) (Barnard 18).

that were ideologically geared towards perpetuating the existing social structure. For example, the lower-income students who managed to complete primary school were likely to attend vocational or technical school. Moreover, even students from wealthier backgrounds were subjected to “an academic secondary education which was severely formal, dominated by rote-learning of theoretical knowledge” (Barnard 36). What mattered most in postwar Brazilian schooling was “the type of school attended and the piece of paper obtained at the end,” rather than the content of the education (Barnard 37). In all, secondary education functioned primarily as the gateway to membership in the middle and upper classes. The system served as a bulwark for the status quo by perpetuating social divisions and inculcating an unquestioning “respect for tradition and the established order” (Barnard 38).

Thus, formal schooling was antithetical to Freire’s developing vision (Barnard 38). In light of these conditions, Freire decided to set up an alternative system outside of formal structures. Recognizing the authoritarianism which traditionally permeated Brazilian culture, especially in rural areas, he began to develop a democratic and humanist pedagogical method targeted towards the poor. This experimental educational practice would draw upon their native knowledge, cultivate their participation, and ultimately encourage them to transform their life conditions (*Letters to Cristina* 89).

B. A New Form of Education

Having opted to work outside formal educational structures, and to work with adults rather than children, Freire turned his efforts to developing “non-alienated” social relations between teachers and students. A pivotal goal was abolishing the traditional dichotomy between teacher and

student in favor of a “loving” relationship of shared learning and growth.⁷⁰ Drawing on the anticolonial writings of Albert Memmi,⁷¹ Freire theorized that traditional classroom arrangements are intrinsically oppressive; the paternalistic teacher justifies “his own existence” by “projecting an absolute ignorance” onto the students, thus “presenting himself to students as their necessary opposite” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 72). Freire viewed such pedagogy as grounded in hierarchy and domination, born out of the authoritarianism of traditional Brazilian culture.⁷² As such, it negates the possibility of engaging in an open and “loving” process of mutual inquiry and development. In one of his most famous contributions to educational philosophy, he labeled this conventional mode of pedagogy the “banking method”⁷³ because it turns students into “containers” or “receptacles” that must be “filled” by the teacher’s official knowledge. “Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 72). Freire denounced such teaching practice as static, arrogant, alienating, and even “necrophilic”⁷⁴ because it rewards

⁷⁰ See Chapter Two of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* for Freire’s most extensive discussion of the relationship between educators and learners.

⁷¹ Memmi’s *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1957) is a classic investigation into the psychodynamics of colonial relationships.

⁷² “The social distance characteristic of human relationships on the great [sugar] estate did not permit dialogue. Even the more humane relationships between masters and slaves which prevailed on some estates produced not dialogue but paternalism, the patronizing attitude of an adult toward a child...Herein lies the roots of Brazilian ‘mutism’; societies which are denied dialogue in favor of decrees become predominately ‘silent’” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 21).

⁷³ He derived this metaphor from Jean-Paul Sartre, who criticized the “digestive” or “nutritive” form of education. In this model, the teacher “fed” students with pre-determined forms of “knowledge” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 76).

⁷⁴ Freire adapted this term from the existentialist-humanist psychoanalyst Erich Fromm. Drawing on Fromm’s work, Freire described banking education as “death-loving” since it is grounded in “overwhelming control” and creates inauthentic relationships between teacher and

rote memorization, passive acceptance of “dead” (i.e., received) truths, and the mechanical regurgitation of disembodied information. Such pedagogy conditions students to adapt to the status quo by clouding their ability to ask critical questions, and by normalizing existing structures and ideologies.⁷⁵ Freire refused to reproduce what he considered a profoundly immoral and dehumanizing educational system. Rather, he envisioned an alternative practice that fostered the “invention and re-invention” of reality through “the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 72). Such work would be grounded in what Freire believed was the “normal role of human beings in and with the world,” which is to “intervene in reality in order to change it,” as opposed to passively “adapting” themselves to the status quo (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 4). Crucially, this new pedagogy must be “dialogic.” For Freire, only when educator and learner are “linked by love, hope, and mutual trust” can they embark on free, authentic, and life-enhancing educational relationships. In contrast, “banking” practice is “acritical,” “hopelessly arrogant,” and based solely on the teacher’s “monologue” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 41). Rejecting dialogue, it “does not communicate, but rather issues communiqués” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 41). Freire’s commitment to dialogic

students. Moreover, banking pedagogy is “based on a mechanistic, static, naturalistic, spatialized view of consciousness” that “transforms students into receiving objects” and “leads women and men to adjust to the world” rather than seeking to question and transform it (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 77).

⁷⁵ According to Freire, banking education obfuscates the learners’ ability to critically “read” and transform reality. “Banking education...attempts, by mythicizing reality, to conceal certain facts which explain the way human beings exist in the world...Banking education inhibits creativity and domesticates (although it cannot completely destroy) the *intentionality* of consciousness by isolating consciousness from the world, thereby denying people their ontological and historical vocation of becoming more human... banking theory and practice, as immobilizing and fixating forces, fail to acknowledge men and women as historic beings” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 83-4).

education also reflected his underlying ethic of mutuality. He conceived of knowledge-making as a loving enterprise between collaborators, all of whom are all invested in the process. Freire predicated his pedagogy on a profound trust in the ability of *all* learners, regardless of their background or social status, to “discuss the problems of their country, of their continent, their world, their work, the problems of democracy itself” (Berryman 37).⁷⁶ Freire’s teaching was radical in his insistence that the poor “are rational and political [actors] and have the capacity to enjoy or exercise freedom” (Berryman 37). Freire aimed to subvert the quasi-feudal power relations of Northeastern Brazilian culture by declaring his trust in the capacity of illiterate adult peasants to participate fully in decisions that affected not just their educational experiences, but of the wider society. Coming from a middle-class background himself, he sought to abandon the authoritarianism and paternalism which had been the only conceivable ways for privileged Brazilians to relate to the poor.

Another thrust of Freire’s developing pedagogy was uniting teachers and learners in the “cognition of a knowable object that mediates between them” (“The Adult Literacy Process” 485). In other words, Freire viewed education was a process of “scientific” (i.e., rational and deliberative) investigation of a democratically chosen subject matter, undertaken in the spirit of shared curiosity between teacher and learner. He rejected the notion that teachers possessed a monopoly on knowledge which should be “deposited” into students in pre-determined, finished, and officially-sanctioned forms. Instead, his “dialogic” and “problem-posing” pedagogy invited *all* participants to engage with each other in the process of study, enrichment, and shared growth. He envisioned a “humble” and democratic educational practice, in contrast with the “arrogance”

⁷⁶ While this idea is revolutionary any educational environment (including the present-day U.S.), it was especially so in the Brazilian Northeast during Freire’s time. In this cultural milieu, peasants were largely viewed as sub-human.

and authoritarianism of the school system he grew up within. Freire called on teachers to surrender their deeply-ingrained privileges in terms of knowledge, social status, and control over students. Repudiating the dichotomy between “master” and student, Freire endeavored to create a community of “teacher-learners.” His ideal of “total respect” for learners was driven by his humanistic conviction that even illiterate peasants can contribute useful and valuable knowledge. Conversely, no person’s knowledge or expertise is complete or unassailable. These were subversive positions to take within an intensely patriarchal culture.

C. The “Freire Method” in Practice

Once Freire and his team of literacy coordinators⁷⁷ arrived at a chosen pedagogical site, they set out to familiarize themselves with the linguistic-cognitive universe of the community. This immersion in the “reality” of the learners reflected Freire’s commitment to grounding his practice in local conditions, as opposed to imposing a predetermined agenda or lesson plan.⁷⁸ Such meticulous attention to the community’s daily existence helped the literacy coordinators to create lessons that spoke to the actual experiences and worldviews of the learners. In addition, by “tuning in” to the linguistic and cognitive universe of the community, Freire enacted his conviction that language and the human experience of “reality” are profoundly intertwined. Colloquial language delineates the speakers’ perceived boundaries of the “real” and the “possible”:

⁷⁷ Freire preferred the term “literacy coordinator” as opposed to “teacher”; he found the former term more non-authoritarian.

⁷⁸ In his view, authoritarian and paternalistic educational practices replicated and perpetuated the unequal power relations of the status quo.

To the peasant submerged in the daily business of survival, often not consciously aware of oppression and exploitation since they are synonymous with living, freedom has no meaning because the unknown cannot be thought about. Freire...spent his life helping people to find a meaning for freedom by giving them the tools to name the world – that is, to become conscious of their own oppression and therefore seize the opportunity to change it. (Barnard 12)

“Ordinary” language, particularly the low-status dialects of the marginalized members of society, constitutes a powerful medium for dialogic educators to better apprehend the everyday consciousness through which the potential learners interpret their world. The premise of this pedagogy is that language is the decisive medium for knowing the world, the premier tool of consciousness. In this spirit, Freire declared:

Insofar as language is impossible without thought, and language and thought are impossible without the world to which they refer, the human word is more than mere vocabulary – it is word-and-action. The cognitive dimensions of the literacy process must include the relationships of men with their world. These relationships are the source of the dialectic between the products men achieve in transforming the world and the conditioning that these products in turn exercise on men. (“The Adult Literacy Process” 485-6)

In short, human beings and the material world exist in a dialectical process that is mediated by language.⁷⁹ Given the existence of unequal power relations, those who have been dominated by the ruling elites are deeply submerged in a “culture of silence” wherein they are “prohibited from

⁷⁹ Along with mediation by language, the process of interaction between human beings and the physical world is also mediated by conscious human action to transform “reality.” This is why Freire describes the “authentic” human utterance as “word-and-action.”

creatively taking part in the transformation of their society and therefore prohibited from being” (“The Adult Literacy Process” 486). In other words, they are denied the use of language as a tool for critically understanding and reshaping the world they inhabit. These “silenced” persons are ideologically conditioned to “speak the word”⁸⁰ of their oppressors. Freire saw this as a “dehumanizing” condition that needed to be transformed. He wished to encourage the adult peasants to recognize their inalienable capacity to have a historical “voice” and “presence” in society: “Acquiring literacy does not involve memorizing sentences, words, or syllables...but rather an attitude of creation and re-creation, a self-transformation producing a stance of intervention in one’s context” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 43). Freire believed that authentic “humanization” begins when subjugated persons begin to exercise their right and ability to become conscious Subjects in history. Ultimately, it is difficult to overstate the importance of the concept of “humanization” to Freire’s work. A person who undergoes the process of “humanization” has begun to “awaken” from the ideologically-induced “culture of silence” that envelops and legitimizes the status quo. Rather than adapting to present conditions, a “humanized” learner has begun to “emerge” as a conscious, critical, and energized protagonist of his or her own destiny.⁸¹ Unsurprisingly, Freire saw this journey of “humanization” primarily

⁸⁰ The term “word” has extensive theological connotations. In the Gospel of John, Jesus Christ is often named the embodiment or incarnation of the eternal Word (or *logos*) of God. There is no single equivalent of *logos* in English; it can mean “truth,” “absolute reality,” “essence,” “logic,” or “reason.” In the Book of Genesis, God brings the universe into existence by employing language of creation (“Let there be light”) and affirmation (“It is good”). As discussed in Chapter Four, Freire saw human beings as made in the image of a loving Creator, thus possessing the capacity to shape the world through conscious action.

⁸¹ Freire’s colleague and biographer Moacir Gadotti defines humanization as “the way in which men and women can become aware of themselves, their way of behaving and of thinking, when they develop all their capacities by thinking not just of themselves but of the needs of everyone” (164).

through pedagogical lenses.⁸² For Freire, dialogic educational practice is first and foremost “a fight against the dehumanizing forces of oppression” (Cooper 68).

Freire and his literacy coordinators recognized that galvanizing illiterate peasants to challenge the status quo would be extremely difficult. Given their destitute living conditions and their lifelong “immersion” in the “culture of silence,” they seemed largely apathetic, enervated, and fatalistic. They first needed to be convinced “of their own worth... [and to be shown] that no matter how denuded of dignity they considered themselves to be, they were in fact makers of culture, of history, and subjects in life, not merely objects of manipulation” (Bee 40). As such, Freire’s literacy teams commenced their practice in each new location by introducing a key concept *not* drawn from the local community: the “anthropological notion of culture.”

According to this pivotal idea, all human beings already possess the capacity to be active shapers of the world through “cultural action for freedom.”⁸³ Freire theorized that peasants were largely unaware of this universal human competence because they had been deeply conditioned to believe in their own lack of agency. He posited that peasants did not possess the awareness that

⁸² As mentioned above, Freire came to recognize that education by itself cannot bring about radical transformations within society. Instead, it constitutes an essential first step in the larger process of achieving social justice. He viewed dialogic pedagogy as an ongoing project whose full impact would require wide-scale societal transformations through broad political movements. Educational activism must be embedded in the wider struggle. This was the case for Freire’s Brazilian “literacy circles” Brazil, which fed into mass movements for democratization before April 1964.

⁸³ Freire defined the “anthropological notion of culture” as “the distinction between the world of nature and the world of culture; the active role of men *in* and *with* their reality; the role of mediation which nature plays in relationships and communication among men; culture as the addition made by men to a world they did not make; culture as the result of men's labor, or their efforts to create and re-create; the transcendental meaning of human relationships; the humanist dimension of culture; culture as a systematic acquisition of human experience (but as creative assimilation, not as information-storing); the democratization of culture; the learning of reading and writing as a key to the world of written communication” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 41, emphasis in original).

they are *already* culture-makers. Proposing this explosive concept of the “anthropological notion of culture” to the adult learners constituted the starting point for Freire’s literacy circles. The literacy coordinators introduced this idea through ten pre-prepared images (“codifications”) that invited participants to reflect on the distinction between “nature” and “culture.”⁸⁴ These slides explored the idea of “nature versus culture,” emphasizing the intrinsic human ability to transform the world through “cultural action” (tools, work, cooperation, technical skills, etc.).⁸⁵ According to the Freirean dichotomy of nature vs. culture, “culture” is the native human competence to create artifacts from the raw material of “nature.” Through projecting various slides, the literacy coordinators proposed that “the normal situation” of the human person is to be “a being who, through work, constantly alters reality” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 57). They suggested that human persons are meant to “engage in [creative] relations with the world” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 39), thus being dynamic makers of “culture.” One pre-prepared image depicted a peasant hunter shooting a bird. Through this slide, the coordinators proposed the existence of “man’s increasing opportunity, because of his work and his creative spirit, to transform the world” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 63). Although illiterate, peasants were already capable of acting upon nature, not just being acted upon by it. The deliberate act of shooting a bird with a created object (the rifle) exhibits a powerful act of

⁸⁴ Freire thought that beginning the culture circles with illustrations depicting familiar scenes from everyday life allowed peasants to ease their way into subsequent literacy activities involving the printed word, which many of the participants found intimidating. He also wanted to encourage the learners to recognize their already-existing capacity to “read” the *world* even before they could apprehend the written *word*.

⁸⁵ Moreover, this opening sequence of ten pictures invited adult learners to engage in critical dialogue even *before* learning to read or write.

“culture.”⁸⁶ To provide a contrast to this image, the coordinators presented a “codification” of a cat hunting a mouse. This second image was “decodified” (critically interpreted) as representing animal behavior that lacked reflection, creativity, culturally-generated tools, and intentionality towards the world.⁸⁷ The literacy coordinators prompted the learners to compare the cat’s instinctive behavior to the hunter’s “cultural action.” After projecting nine slides exploring this theme of “nature versus culture,” the literacy coordinators presented an illustration of the culture circle itself. With this image, the peasants were introduced to the idea that they themselves *already* possessed the capacity to “read” and transform the world. According to Freire,

From [this] point of departure, the illiterate would begin to effect a change in his former attitudes, by discovering himself to be a maker of the world of culture, by discovering that he, as well as the literate person, has a creative and re-creative impulse. He would discover that culture is just as much a clay doll made by artists who are his peers as it is the work of a great sculptor, a great painter, a great mystic, or a great philosopher; that culture is the poetry of lettered poets and also the poetry of his own popular songs – that culture is all human creation. (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 47)

In sum, the literacy course aimed not just to help peasants develop instrumental reading and writing skills, but to transform their consciousness and self-perception. Freire emphasized the

⁸⁶ Echoing this theme, another slide depicted two potters molding clay. This image was entitled “Man Transforms the Material of Nature by His Work.”

⁸⁷ Unlike the hunter, the cat was limited to its physical resources (claws, teeth, etc.) in order to catch its prey. “Adaptation [to the world] is behavior characteristic of the animal sphere; exhibited by man, it is symptomatic of his dehumanization.” Similarly, “Inheriting acquired experience, creating and re-creating, integrating themselves into their context, responding to its challenges, objectifying themselves, discerning, transcending, men enter into the domain which is theirs exclusively – that of History and of Culture” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 4). The dichotomy between human and animal behavior would recur throughout Freire’s educational writings.

belief that being “fully human” means relating to the world “in a critical way” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 3). Since human beings are “not limited to the natural (biological) sphere but participate in the creative dimension as well, men can intervene in reality in order to change it” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 4).

After the foundational concepts of the “anthropological notion of culture” and “nature versus culture” had been discussed, the literacy circle’s conversation turned to “generative themes” drawn from the linguistic-cognitive universe of the community. In the eyes of Freire’s coordinators, these “generative themes” lay at the heart of learners’ daily experience. These themes were also chosen to be easily legible and culturally legitimate to the learners. After discussing visual illustrations of these generative themes, the coordinators projected “generative words” that summarized these generative themes. These “generative words” were similarly drawn from the everyday speech of the community, and they constituted the focal point of the literacy training. These carefully-chosen words were tackled on two levels. First, their syllabic structure was broken down into shorter units. For example, the generative word *favela* (“slum”) was broken down into three syllables (*fa*, *ve*, and *la*), each of which yielded their own “phonemic families” (*fa-fe-fi-fo-fu*, *va-ve-vi-vo-vu*, *la-le-li-lo-lu*). These syllables were then reassembled in various combinations, leading to a rapidly expanding vocabulary (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 76-8).⁸⁸ Secondly, these words were discussed with regards to their experiential meaning for the peasants in terms of their social, economic, and political conditions. For instance, *favela* (“slum”) could be discussed in terms of “the problems of housing, food, clothing, health, and education in a slum”; *riqueza* (“wealth”) in terms of “the confrontation between

⁸⁸ This method is well-suited to the Northeastern Brazilian language, but it difficult to replicate it in English. This is an example the need to “reinvent” Freire’s educational practice when enacted in new contexts.

wealth and poverty” or “rich man vs poor man”; and *terreno* (“land”) in terms of “economic domination” and the sugar plantations (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 76). As the literacy skills and critical consciousness of the participants developed in tandem, they also embarked upon increasingly sophisticated reading and writing activities. They practiced printing words on paper, reading newspapers, and expressing their opinions on local issues (Bee 45). Remarkably, those who completed Freire’s literacy course could apparently “read and write simple tasks, make something of the local newspapers and discuss Brazilian problems” (Bee 45-6). Having achieved basic written literacy, the adult learners were now qualified to vote. Given such outcomes, it is easy to see why Freire’s educational experiments drew the ire of the landowners, business owners, and the military.

D. Freire’s Theory of Consciousness

As demonstrated by this overview, Freire’s pedagogy profoundly redefined “literacy” and “illiteracy.” He conceived of “illiteracy” as the inability to “read” the world in a critical and historically-conscious way. In contrast, “literacy” is the ability to “decode” and intentionally shape “reality.” For Freire, literacy requires a transformative stance towards the status quo. Being literate “does not involve memorizing sentences, words, or syllables – lifeless objects unconnected to an existential universe – but rather an attitude of creation and re-creation, a self-transformation producing a stance of intervention in one’s context. (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 42-3)⁸⁹ In his cosmology, human beings are “intended” to be dynamic historical Subjects. This educational process of “emerging” from cultural silence, passivity, and fatalism is

⁸⁹ For Freire’s most extended comparison of literacy and illiteracy, see *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (1987), co-authored with Donaldo Macedo.

called “conscientization.”⁹⁰ Conscientization is composed of two interrelated stages: “an awareness of the social and cultural situation in which one lives and an awareness of one’s ability to change situations through actions” (Elias 123). For Freire, “unveiling” the hidden “essence” of a mutually-chosen object of study would lead both teachers and learners towards a higher level of consciousness, one characterized by a “structural perception” of the world.⁹¹ The conscientized learner is then capable of “critical self-insertion into reality” (“The Adult Literacy Process” 493) – that is, conscious socio-historical agency.

Freire’s theory of “conscientization” is grounded upon a three-part model of consciousness. In this system, learners progress from “magical” or “semi-intransitive” consciousness to “critical” consciousness (with “naïve transitive” consciousness lying in between). He believed that “magical” consciousness was the most widespread form of consciousness among illiterate peasants. Persons with “magical” consciousness “apprehends facts and attributes them to a superior power [i.e., God or destiny]...to which [they] must therefore submit” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 39). Those with such consciousness are largely superstitious, fatalistic, deterministic, and trapped on the surface level of perception; they can only “fold their arms, resigned to the impossibility of resisting the power of facts” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 39). They are credulous, “irrational,” and adapt

⁹⁰ As discussed in Chapters Two and Three, the term “conscientization,” which has become widely associated with Freire, did not originate with him. The theory of conscientization circulated among leftist activists before the 1964 coup. Freire’s pivotal contribution was to create a concrete educational method to realize this vision. “Conscientization” was first popularized by Dom Helder Camara, an outspoken radical bishop and close friend of Freire’s. Camara was a guiding light behind Brazil’s Catholic youth movement (Roberts 179-80).

⁹¹ Freire approvingly cited Noam Chomsky’s theory on the difference between linguistic “surface structure” and “deep structure” (“The Adult Literacy Process” 487). He argued that only an apprehension of the “deep structure” of the object of study constitutes a genuine understanding of reality.

themselves obediently to the status quo, no matter how unjust or inhumane it might be (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 39). According to Freire, the next level of consciousness is “naïve transitive.” In this intermediate level of consciousness, the person recognizes the possibility of changing his or her immediate environment but still lacks structural perception. Thus, social action undertaken with “naïve transitive” consciousness is isolated and episodic. Since “naïve transitive” consciousness fails to apprehend the underlying context for social problems and potential solutions, it is incapable of transformative activity. Finally, “critical” consciousness – the highest “level” in Freire’s model – “represents things and facts as they exist empirically, in their causal and circumstantial correlations” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 39). Persons with “critical” consciousness recognize that the status quo is socially constructed and therefore never inevitable or immutable. Through detachment, reflection, and collective action, they have discovered the systemic structures that constitute and perpetuate everyday “reality.”⁹² Freire theorized that the dialogic, loving, and “scientific” analysis of social problems enables illiterate peasants to begin replacing their “magical” understanding of reality with critical and structural perception. These psychological and intellectual developments would pave the way for the poor to emerge from their “culture of silence”: “We [literacy coordinators] felt that even before teaching the illiterate to read, we could help him to overcome his magic or naïve understanding and to develop an increasingly critical understanding...[of] the role of man as Subject in the world and with the world” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 46).

Freire envisioned two interconnected ways for the participants of his culture circles to gain political power. First, they would acquire functional instrumental and writing skills, which

⁹² Freire’s epistemology is firmly ensconced within the Enlightenment tradition’s valorization of rational thought and scientific inquiry.

meant that potentially unprecedented numbers of Brazil's vast underclass could become qualified to vote for the first time. Secondly, the learners would encounter a powerful new way of viewing their "presence" in the world. They would begin to see themselves as Subjects capable of shaping society, apprehending the structural underpinnings of "reality," and transforming their own living conditions.⁹³ He described adult peasants who completed his literacy circles as emerging from "detemporalization" and beginning to "integrate themselves in time" (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 42). Given this vision, Freire insisted that education should not be exclusively geared towards technical or instrumental training. It must also stimulate the learners' "critical apprehension of reality," foster their awareness of their capacity to be protagonists of their own liberation, and cultivate their God-given human potential for growth and development. He never tired of asserting that social "reality" is never a "given" to be endured. Rather, it is a "problem" to be solved by historically conscious persons acting collectively to build a better world. Through "conscientizing" education, learners become more free, and ultimately more fully human (Gadotti 21). While animals "adapt themselves to the world to survive, men modify the world in order to be *more*" ("The Adult Literacy Process" 501, emphasis in original).⁹⁴ "Awakening" from the deadening "culture of silence" generated by

⁹³ Freire's drive to foster self-respect among the peasants was in opposition to overwhelmingly powerful cultural messages that insisted upon their supposedly intrinsic and immutable laziness and lack of intelligence.

⁹⁴ As stated above, Freire's comparison between humans and animals is central to his educational philosophy. Animals act reflexively, while "humanized" persons act with intention and self-awareness. Animals are adaptive, while conscientized humans are transformative. However, the implication of Freire's dichotomy is that persons with largely "magical" consciousness are like animals – an idea that has been attacked by Freire's critics as paternalistic and elitist. In Freire's defense, educational scholar Peter Roberts argues that Freire saw his adult students with "magical consciousness" not as "lower beings," but as "operating at a different level of consciousness to that which he regarded as necessary for their liberation from conditions of

social, political, and cultural subordination, the former illiterates grow into their “ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 66). For Freire, this journey towards “humanization” is the “central concern” of human history (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 43). His view of human potential was deeply optimistic; he never stopped professing the capacity of all persons to be “more-so” tomorrow. Through courageous struggle and loving solidarity, human beings acting as conscious historical Subjects can build a world that is “*menos feio, menos malvado, menos desumano*” (qtd. in Mayo 5).⁹⁵

oppression...His point in identifying magical and naïve modes of consciousness is that these forms of thought are shaped by, and serve the interests of, oppressor classes” (186).

⁹⁵ “Less ugly, less cruel, less inhumane.”

Chapter Two:

The Brazilian Context

Introduction

This chapter investigates the historical context which shaped Paulo Freire's educational philosophy and activism before Brazil's April 1964, when rightist elements overthrew the democratically-elected government, set up a military dictatorship, and crushed his rapidly-expanding literacy project. His evolving pedagogy was "wholly consonant" with the progressive religious consciousness of the era, particularly that of Brazil's rising generation of young, urban, university-educated, Catholics (Mackie 94). Freire's immersion within this volatile cultural milieu would shape his lifelong theory and practice.

As described in Chapter One, Freire was deeply involved with public debates about the relationship between education, Catholicism, socio-economic policy, nationalism, and activism. As a teacher, scholar, and educational administrator in Recife⁹⁶ for over two decades, he went from being an eager young participant within middle-class religious circles to becoming the leading national figure in experimental pedagogies aimed at mobilizing the poor. He came into contact with the burgeoning Catholic youth movement. As a politically-oriented and theologically-engaged teacher and scholar, his social thought, educational philosophy, and literacy experiments were inevitably molded by the era's turbulent social currents. Moreover, Freire's "political-intellectual road epitomizes what occurred with a large part of Brazil's

⁹⁶ Recife was the capital of Pernambuco, a predominately agrarian state in one of the most deeply impoverished and economically stratified regions in the world. The rural poor made up half of the population of the region, while half the land was concentrated in the hands of the richest three percent. Predictably, this was one of the most politically restive areas of the country, and it provided a highly fertile environment for leftist activists like Freire.

Catholic intellectuals” in the middle decades of the 20th century (Paiva 161). For this reason, probing the “political-intellectual road” of Brazil’s young Catholic intelligentsia sheds light on the development of Freire’s pedagogy.⁹⁷ Accordingly, this chapter explores the historical context that shaped the Brazilian Catholic activists’ aspirations for broad societal transformation before April 1964.⁹⁸ It begins with an historical overview of Brazil in the first half of the twentieth century, underlining the political and economic factors that led to the widespread restlessness of the 1950s and early 1960s. The chapter will then consider powerful currents within mid-century Brazilian Catholicism that informed Freire’s theory and practice.

I. Political Overview: 1930 to April 1964

A. The Vargas Era

Much of twentieth century Brazilian history revolved around Getulio Vargas, the President of the Republic from 1930 to 1945 and from 1951 until 1954. A wily tactician, Vargas was “one of the most skillful political jugglers in Brazilian history” (Barnard 23). Throughout his nearly two decades in office, he balanced competing political and economic interests with improbable success. He was a master of the politics of compromise and strategic concession, and his tenure

⁹⁷ This chapter depicts the Catholic activist movement as a unified entity for the sake of narrative clarity. However, it is important to note that the movement was not an ideologically or theologically monolithic group. Its membership exhibited varying degrees of radicalism.

⁹⁸ Tellingly, prominent Catholic activists such as Freire reportedly experienced more severe persecution at the hands of the military junta than members of any other opposition group, including Brazil’s main Marxist and Communist parties (De Kadt, *JUC and AP* 208).

was characterized by nimble placation of disparate and often antagonistic sectors.⁹⁹ He also styled himself as the “father of the poor” by granting welfare-type benefits to workers (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 35).¹⁰⁰ Vargas’ mediation between conflicting interests reflected an explosive new political reality for Brazil: “Henceforth, no one group would have total hegemony, as for example the sugar planters had enjoyed in earlier times” (Barnard 23). The stranglehold of rural landowners on regional and national power was in decline, and the state bureaucracy was being filled by an emerging class of urban white-collar professionals (Barnard 23). By the start of World War II, Brazilian society was in greater flux than it had been for decades, having entered a period of massive and rapid industrialization.¹⁰¹

Despite his considerable political skills, Vargas was ousted by the military in 1945, due in part to widespread disillusionment with his opportunistic governing style. His successor Enrico Dutra embraced “open door” economic policies which stimulated massive levels of foreign investment. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, Brazil witnessed “increasing penetration by western interests,” especially from the United States (Barnard 26). Notably,

⁹⁹ For instance, Vargas endowed coffee planters with continued governmental funding, enriched the military leadership to pacify its periodic grumblings, and granted the expanding Brazilian middle class with greater employment opportunities within the civil service. He also mollified the still-powerful landowning interests by largely ignoring the urgent issue of agrarian reform.

¹⁰⁰ Vargas was a master at populist rhetoric. He stressed his personal largesse to the poor, emphasizing that any improvements in living conditions were “granted” by him (Barnard 23). His governing style reflected the generally paternalistic nature of Brazilian social relations. Emmanuel de Kadt suggests that the patron-dependent relationship is the most decisive phenomenon to consider when studying Brazilian social patterns, especially in rural communities (see Chapter One of *Catholic Radicals in Brazil*). Similarly, Freire believed that the culture of paternalism and dependency, which he considered a legacy of Brazil’s sugar plantation history, was one of the greatest barriers to the emergence of a truly democratic and “open” society (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 20 ff).

¹⁰¹ These developments were fueled by Vargas’ implementation of vast, state-driven infrastructure projects.

Dutra's economic policies did not proceed without native resistance; a populist backlash against foreign corporations and the "theft" of Brazilian resources and profits emerged as well. Vargas, who was biding his time as a state senator, took advantage of these populist sentiments.

Employing the rhetoric of economic nationalism and welfare-statism, he was re-elected to the Presidency in October 1950. However, his second term proved to be even more tempestuous than the first, as the fault lines in Brazilian society continued to widen due to intense domestic and international pressures.¹⁰²

The issue of economic development rose to the forefront of national discourse in the 1950s. Modernizing Brazil's "backwards" economy was widely accepted as the most pressing societal goal, and debates raged among the educated classes regarding how to bring it about. Public opinion coalesced around two antagonistic schools of economic thought – neocolonialism and nationalistic developmentalism.¹⁰³ On one hand, Vargas was under pressure from international entities (including the United States and the IMF) to institute "free trade" policies. On the other hand, outspoken sectors of the Brazilian middle and urban working classes pressed him to adopt nationalistic developmentalism. The final years of Vargas' second term were permeated by gridlock, restlessness, political scandal, and renewed weariness with Vargas' governance style. He again lost the crucial support of the military. Facing the specter of forced resignation, he shot himself in the chest in August 1954. Vargas' shocking suicide had a

¹⁰² In 1950, half of Brazil's population was composed of peasants and urban workers (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 47).

¹⁰³ Nationalistic developmentalist thought asserted that Brazil should break free from the "orbit" of economic "neocolonialism" and become the agent of its own development. As such, Brazilian resources and profits should not be remitted overseas. For his part, Freire was a nationalistic developmentalist. Like many left-leaning intellectuals, he saw a parallel between the master-slave dynamic of traditional Brazilian culture and the "dependent" position of Brazil vis-à-vis foreign economic interests (see *Education for Critical Consciousness*).

paradoxical psychological impact. It fueled the growing sense of national instability and uncertainty, even as it briefly reenergized a political system which had seemed to be headed towards collapse (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 41).

B. The Kubitschek Years: Brazil's Great Leap Forward

After a new round of elections, Vargas was succeeded by the reformist Juscelino Kubitschek. Kubitschek embraced the goal of rapid economic modernization, famously promising “fifty years of progress within five.”¹⁰⁴ He employed both nationalistic-developmental and “open-door” economic policies. His administration embarked on colossal infrastructure projects, most notably the construction of the city of Brasilia, while also providing generous incentives to foreign investments. The early years of Kubitschek's term were permeated by a powerful sense of optimism, as Brazil's economic productivity skyrocketed. For several years, the country boasted one of the highest growth rates in the world. The perennial “sleeping giant” of Latin America had begun to transform itself “from a backward producer of primary goods to a semi-industrialized society” (Sanders 86). During this heady time, educated Brazilians “could foresee for the first time the possibility of Brazil's becoming a developed nation” (Sanders 86). However, the material conditions for the vast majority of the population hardly improved. Employment rates and real wages decreased, and inflation peaked at 90 percent in the early 1960s (Barnard 28).¹⁰⁵ These conditions triggered popular discontent and exacerbated class

¹⁰⁴ Notably, Kubitschek described socioeconomic inequality as “a great sin against Christ” (qtd. in Berryman 15).

¹⁰⁵ Kubitschek's opponents quipped that he had achieved “fifty years of inflation in five.”

tensions. The waning years of Kubitschek's administration witnessed an unprecedented rise in peasant and urban worker mobilization.

The Kubitschek era also witnessed a powerful surge in nationalist sentiment, especially among the educated classes.¹⁰⁶ Reflecting the intensifying anti-colonial tenor of the time, Freire declared that Brazil "had begun to find itself" (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 26). Rather than continuing to emulate Western models of development, intellectuals began to "think of Brazil as a Subject" and to "identify...with Brazil as it really was" (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 34-5). Freire saw Brazil as beginning to transition into a more developed, democratic, and "open" mode of society. Foreign investments had been pouring in at very high levels, accumulating control of sensitive sectors of the Brazilian economy in the hands of non-citizens. Many intellectuals on the political left believed that such developments "made economic independence for Brazil more unlikely than ever," (Barnard 27). Various nationalist groups began to raise questions about economic dependency, the remission of oil revenues, the use of natural resources for the enrichment of foreigners, and the costs of focusing on short-term profit rather than social utility or long-term investment (Sanders 86-7). At the advent of the 1960s, the optimism of the early Kubitschek years was replaced by a strong backlash against the belief that economic growth in and of itself was the solution for Brazil's social ills (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 44). The vexing issue of land reform had also arisen to the forefront of public discourse. The urban proletariat emerged in this period as a significant social and political force, spurred greatly by the country's rapid industrialization (Sanders 87). Labor unions began to

¹⁰⁶ The rise in nationalism was connected to growing popular hostility to policy mandates imposed by the IMF as preconditions to loans.

achieve historic levels of membership and political influence.¹⁰⁷ The traditional ruling classes watched all of these developments with growing anxiety.

Kubitschek was succeeded by the left-leaning Janio Quadros, whose brief presidency (January to August 1961) was marked by high political drama. An outspoken idealist, Quadros was palpably impatient with the Vargas-style politics of compromise and deal-making. His promised “new style of politics” appealed powerfully to younger voters, and his election fed into the rising hopes of the left. Reflecting these hopes, Freire described the election of Quadros as “perhaps the greatest electoral victory in the nation’s history” up to that point (“*Cultural Action and Conscientization*” 505). Yet Quadros was ultimately stymied by entrenched resistance to his reformist agenda. He failed to secure the crucial backing of the military leadership and much of the Congress, and he resigned after seven tense months in office. He was replaced by his vice president Joao Goulart in September 1961.

C. The Goulart Administration: On the Brink of Revolution

Goulart assumed a Presidency which had been institutionally weakened by Congress. This was partly a response to Quadros’ turbulent tenure and partly an attempt to neutralize Goulart himself, who was considered a leftist sympathizer by the conservative elements within Congress. The national government had been transformed into a parliamentary republic, thus stripping the Presidency of most of its authority. During the first sixteen months of Goulart’s term, the country’s political system “presented a picture of complete frustration and ineffectualness,” a “complete sense of drift,” and “the unqualified absence of effective government” (De Kadt,

¹⁰⁷ The recently-legalized Communist Party experienced such electoral success that it was soon outlawed again (Sanders 87).

Catholic Radicals 46). Some observers suggest that Goulart actively exploited this sense of disorder by making “the business of government appear as difficult as possible,” with the aim of restoring the full powers of the Presidency by cultivating public frustration (Barnard 29). After a year of chaos, he succeeded in forcing a 1963 plebiscite wherein 80% of voters called for the abolishment of the parliamentary system and the restoration of the full powers of the presidential office. Goulart’s already contentious relationship with conservative politicians and the military was further exacerbated when he subsequently moved to expropriate oil refineries and land held by foreign companies. His appeal to the Congress for extraordinary powers to expedite his aggressive reforms was interpreted by his opponents as a power-grab on the path towards a leftist dictatorship. In all, Goulart’s actions contributed greatly to the atmosphere of polarization and unrest that culminated in the military takeover of April 1964.

The Goulart era was highly conducive to the emergence of revolutionary political movements which envisioned a “total break” with the past (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 46). As a result, his term witnessed an unprecedented explosion in the size and activity of leftist organizations. The economic boom of the Kubitschek years had faded, and there seemed to be no possibility of returning to the traditional politics that characterized Vargas’ rule. By this point, it had become clear that

the time had passed when the government could consist of little more than arbitration between different claims, of judicious giving in to different pressures at different times. And it was no longer possible to ignore the existence of 50 percent of Brazil’s population - the peasants and rural workers - when the political deals were made and the economic cake was shared out. (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 47)

Goulart's term witnessed an unprecedented explosion in the number of peasant organizations and urban unions, many of which were supported by the increasingly active Catholic youth movement. This period also inaugurated the rise of outspoken, charismatic, and uncompromisingly leftist politicians throughout the country. One of the most exemplary of this new generation of leaders was Miguel Arraes, who was elected governor of Freire's home state of Pernambuco in October 1962. Arraes instituted dramatic reforms on behalf of the poor such as actively enforcing the minimum wage and refusing to lend the state police to landowners for strike-breaking and harassment of peasant leaders. Sympathetic to Freire's literacy experiments, Arraes was instrumental in providing him with the resources to implement his educational experiments on a region-wide stage.¹⁰⁸ Arraes' rise was a watershed for Freire's literacy program; in the impoverished Northeast, where Freire had been hard at work for two decades, an unabashedly populist leader had taken command of the governing apparatus and afforded him an opening to carry out his work on a larger scale than ever before. (Unsurprisingly, Arraes was seen as a dangerous subversive within conservative sectors.)¹⁰⁹ Freire himself now rose to public attention as part of the gathering threat to the ruling elite.

The "awakening" of the Brazilian poor in the early 1960s posed an unprecedented threat to the entrenched political and economic elites (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 48-9). In the predominately agrarian Northeast, thirteen hundred farm workers' unions were founded within a twelve month span (Elias 4). In 1963, two massive strikes by farm workers in the state of Pernambuco involved a total of over three hundred thousand union members (Elias 4). These numbers indicate the depth of popular mobilization at the time, reflecting the new intensity of

¹⁰⁸ This occurred during Arraes' tenure as mayor of Recife.

¹⁰⁹ President Goulart also viewed Arraes as a potentially dangerous challenger for the Presidency.

power struggles within Brazilian society. In this historical moment, Freire's innovative pedagogy for farmers and workers took on immediate political relevance. His literacy campaign was concretely embedded within the political and cultural contests of his time and place, drawing force from the conflicts underway and feeding back into them from the political left. As such, Freire and his literacy coordinators became targets for the gathering coup. In the months before April 1964, Brazilians waited with bated breath for the seemingly immanent revolution. Freire later described the activist left as possessing "almost a certainty that [they] would move forward to power" (*Pedagogy for Liberation* 32).¹¹⁰ However, the anticipated "Brazilian Revolution" would not materialize. It was instead pre-empted and violently suppressed by the military junta.

II. Theological Context for Catholic Activism

A. The Catholic Revival

The rise of Catholic activism in mid-twentieth century Brazil can be traced to a "Catholic revival" movement that took place in the 1920s and 1930s (Sanders 84). This "revival" had been initiated by conservative elements within the Church leadership, which had been seeking to strengthen its position after centuries of being subordinate to the interests of the state (De Kadt, *JUC and AP* 192). The primary members of the Catholic Revival were middle-class lay persons who responded to the hierarchy's call for greater participation in Catholic life (Sanders 84).

¹¹⁰ During this time, Freire advertised for 600 students to work as adult literacy teachers near Rio de Janeiro. Instead, 6,000 applicants showed up – so many that he had to hold the interviews in a soccer stadium (*Pedagogy for Liberation* 32).

Brazil's Catholic Revival stimulated a sense of openness to "modern" theological ideas from Europe, especially the liberal Christian humanism of Jacques Maritain. It also encouraged lay participation in social issues, albeit in conservative terms.¹¹¹ Nevertheless, the Revival was a watershed for Brazilian Catholicism. It signaled a more permissive stance towards lay social action on the part of the institutional Church – a sharp departure from its traditional insistence on centralization and authoritarianism. The Revival began to erode the long-standing belief that rebelling against established authority was inherently sinful.¹¹² In addition, the Church had tended to be minimally concerned with poverty and social injustice.¹¹³ Throughout Brazil's colonial period, clergy were largely subject to the control of the landowners on whose plantation chapels they served (De Kadt, *JUC and AP* 191). The Church hierarchy had been almost completely subordinate to secular authorities, to the extent that appointments to religious offices were made according to secular patronage rather than talent or pastoral necessity (De Kadt, *JUC and AP* 191). This acquiescence to the ruling class reaped great rewards for the Church; it became "not only the church of the rich, but also a rich church" (Brown 14). In essence, the

¹¹¹ For example, the Catholic Electoral League mobilized in 1934 to "defend" such "natural" social obligations" such as "the indissolubility of marriage" (Sanders 85). The next generation of Catholic activists would be far more leftist and explicitly political, sparking an inter-generational conflict within Brazilian Catholicism.

¹¹² A 1915 pastoral letter issued by the Brazilian bishops urged parish priests to "inculcate the spirit of obedience and submission to those who govern in civil society, in religion and in the family" and to "lead the faithful to accept their proper situation and the conditions in which they are born and to not hate the modest and difficult life in which Providence has placed them" (qtd. in McGovern 227).

¹¹³ The Church essentially taught that human existence is essentially "a transitory phase" on the journey to the afterlife (Berryman 94). According to this doctrine, earthly life is a testing ground to be endured in hope of heavenly bliss. The poor were promised their eternal spiritual reward after death, so long as they remained obedient to their divinely-appointed earthly rulers (Brown 14).

Church in Brazil served for generations as a stabilizing entity that defused social unrest by cultivating obedience and other-worldly piety among the impoverished majority.¹¹⁴

Given the long-standing conservatism of the Brazilian Church hierarchy, its socio-political ideology could hardly be expected to change overnight. Thus, while the hierarchy began to encourage lay participation in public life, the issues that were sanctioned for Catholic involvement were largely moralistic and individualistic.¹¹⁵ However, the Catholic Revival inadvertently laid the groundwork for the rise of leftist Catholic activism by legitimizing the engagement of laypersons with contemporary social issues, thus acknowledging that participation in secular affairs could be a rightful way of expressing one's faith. Middle-class Catholics could now feel that public action was a legitimate form of religious expression. These laypersons became far more receptive to European theological currents, which stimulated ever-deepening reflection on the social problems of their time. In these subtle but consequential ways, the Catholic Revival of the 1920s and 30s opened the door for the leftist Catholic activism of future generations.

B. Brazilian Catholic Action, Jacques Maritain, and "Integral Humanism"

The primary vehicle for Catholic activism in the 1930s and 40s was Brazilian Catholic Action (ACB). A Church-sponsored lay organization, Catholic Action originated in Italy in the late 19th

¹¹⁴ Freire saw such sentiments as inculcating the fatalistic "culture of silence" among devout peasants. Having internalized the belief that challenging their living conditions was tantamount to disobeying God's will, the poor could not comprehend that such unjust social arrangements were not natural, inevitable, or necessary. Freire's critique of such doctrines from the "traditional church" is explored in Chapter Four.

¹¹⁵ In contrast, the new generation of Catholics activists was interested in issues of nationalism and socio-economic development (Sanders 85).

century. It was founded as an instrument for preserving the Church's political and cultural influence in the aftermath of Italian unification (Mainwaring 61). Numerous chapters were founded throughout the Catholic world over the next few decades, with the Brazilian branch being established in 1935. Paulo and Elza Freire were committed members of ACB from the late 1940s to the early 1950s. As mentioned in Chapter One, the couple spent much time meeting and praying with other middle-class laypersons in Recife. Together, these idealistic and well-educated young Catholics reflecting upon the question of what it meant to be a follower of Christ (Mackie 102). Through the Brazilian Catholic Action, the hierarchy aimed to spread Catholic ideas and behavior among laypersons by integrating religious reflection with everyday life. ACB was also one of the Church's primary ways of responding to the intensifying challenges of modernity and pluralism, as the institution found itself in the unfamiliar position of having to compete for adherents – most notably against Protestant and Marxist groups. Through the various social activities of ACB, the Brazilian hierarchy sought to draw lapsed Catholics (especially young people and intellectuals) back into the fold, with an eye towards the “re-Christianization” of Brazil. ACB proved to be popular among elite university students and young urban professionals, all of whom were eager to discover new ways to live out their Catholic heritage. Their discussions of social issues broadened from issues of sexual morality and family life to such questions as rural poverty and workers' rights – areas of concern their parents hardly have considered appropriate for religious inquiry.

In the late 1940s, clerical supervision of ACB fell into the hands of Brazilian Dominicans. The Dominicans promptly started to channel modern theological ideas into the ACB (Sanders 86-88). The socio-political reflection of ACB became deeply influenced by the French philosopher and activist Jacques Maritain (1882-1973). One of most prominent Catholic

thinkers of the first half of the twentieth century, Maritain was a founding figure of the international Christian Democratic movement. He was also a guiding light to the Catholic Worker movement in the United States and a leading contributor to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. His philosophy emerged from the “crisis of modernity” that resulted from the cataclysm of the Great War (Amato 128). Importantly, Maritain wrote primarily for a highly-educated “modern” Catholics, as opposed to “ordinary” believers (Cox 177).¹¹⁶ For Maritain, Western civilization desperately needed Catholic spirituality to counter three powerful “anti-human” secular systems: bourgeois individualism, Leninist Communism, and totalitarianism (Zwick and Zwick 179). He condemned these systems because they “disregard the human *person* in one way or another, and, in its place, consider, willingly or not, the *material individual* alone” (qtd. in Zwick and Zwick 179, emphasis in original). Maritain professed that the spiritual dimension of human existence must never be denied. Since the source and meaning of humanity is ultimately grounded in God, the person cannot be reduced to any single facet of his or her experience. In Maritain’s pivotal work *Integral Humanism* (1936), which was widely read and discussed within ACB, he argued that philosophical and political systems that reject the spiritual dimension of human life are only “partial” and therefore alienating and dehumanizing. He advocated for an “integral humanism” that embraces all facets of human existence.¹¹⁷ A staunch

¹¹⁶ This helped account for the popularity of his work among the members of ACB, who were hungry for “sophisticated” new theologies.

¹¹⁷ Maritain’s educational thought informed Freire’s definition of “humanizing” pedagogy. Freire approvingly echoed Maritain’s well-known critique of technical education: “If we remember that the animal is a specialist, and a perfect one, all of its knowing-power being fixed upon a single task to be done, we ought to conclude that an educational program which would only aim at forming specialists ever more perfect in ever more specialized fields, and unable to pass judgment on any matter that goes beyond their specialized competence, would lead indeed to a progressive animalization of the human mind and life” (qtd. in *Education for Critical Consciousness* 36).

humanist, Maritain affirmed the supreme value of the person over and against all political, economic, and social arrangements. He proposed the creation of a “new Christendom” informed by Christian social thought yet also responsive to the plurality of the modern world. Maritain envisioned the creation of a “theocentric”¹¹⁸ world in which economic development, social justice, and individual development could be achieved through consensual, collaborative, and democratic methods among diverse peoples who were willing to act in good faith to discern the “common good” (Shaul 140). Through prayerful social action and divine guidance, human beings could learn to transcend their divisions and set aside their narrow self-interests (Amato 142).

Crucially for Brazil’s emerging Catholic activists, Maritain professed that authentic Christianity could never be disengaged from worldly problems. Rather, spiritual conversion is manifested by participation in the struggle to create a more just and compassionate world. In addition, while Maritain recognized the existence of socio-economic structures that shaped human behavior, he believed that material conditions would change *after* the transformation of personal consciousness:

Selfishness and addiction to consumerism and power could be overcome through prayer and contemplation... A Christian approach to the social order, rooted in love... could be seen...[as] the natural fruit of prayer. [Maritain’s] theology presented work toward the common good as participation in and flowing from the mystery of God. (Zwick and Zwick 179)

¹¹⁸ He believed that the opposite of a materialist, exclusively human-centered world is one centered on God.

According to Maritain, the joyful participation of Christians in building a new world proceeded from “the superabundance of contemplation” (qtd. in Zwick and Zwick 184). In other words, social activism is a natural outgrowth of spiritual maturity and God’s grace. Moreover, while the spiritual dimension of human existence is always primary, it never precludes secular engagement. Finally, Maritain stressed the need for would-be Christian activists to embrace “pure means” in achieving social change. Peter Maurin, a founding member of the Catholic Worker movement, states that Maritain viewed Machiavellianism as “the modern heresy” (qtd. in Zwick and Zwick 182). Indeed, Maritain insisted that laudable ends could never be achieved through “sinful” means, and he was stringently committed to nonviolence. The transformation of the world must start with “a revolution in one’s heart,” not through a bloody overthrow of political structures (Zwick and Zwick 188). As he declared:

A Christian revolution can succeed only by the use of just those means which are beyond the ability of others to use. If Faith is able to move mountains, is it powerless to shift the mighty from their seats? If Christians, who live by Faith in their private lives, lay aside their faith when they approach the things of political and social life, they must be content to be towed like slaves in the wake of history. (qtd. in Zwick and Zwick 189)

Thus, Christian life (or “discipleship”) ought to be lived publicly with one’s neighbors, not privately or individualistically. People of faith have an invaluable role to play in transforming the world through non-violent social action and commitment to “integral humanism.”

Seeking ways to put Maritain’s ideas into concrete practice, the young members of ACB turned their attention to the plight of Brazilian workers. They envisioned the establishment of humane work environments that were less exploitative and more community-oriented. They also sought more equitable sharing of profits between workers and employers, and the establishment

of more harmonious social relations. Freire's decade-long tenure at SESI began during this time, and his liberal-humanist agenda at the institute reflected the social thought of ACB in the 1940s. For example, he sought to raise labor conditions, share earnings more equitably, and improve relations between local employers and their workers. Moreover, in accordance with Maritain's teachings, many young Brazilian Catholics like Freire believed that social transformation must be preceded by widespread spiritual conversion to the "common good." This conversion was a painstaking process that could only take place one person at a time. Thus, ACB members such as Freire and his wife Elza spent much time in contemplation and discussion, and they sought to open their "hearts and minds" to the plight of the poor (Mackie 102).¹¹⁹ They agonized over the apparent contradiction between their socio-economic privilege and the Gospel imperatives for solidarity with the less fortunate. Progressive Brazilian Catholicism in this period was largely Christian-humanist and reformist. It aimed to ameliorate poverty, promote social harmony, and curb the worst excesses of capitalism.

By the late 1940s, many members of ACB were starting to believe that their social impact had been minimal (De Kadt, *JUC and AP* 196). Their efforts to persuade employers and landowners to share their power and wealth with workers and peasants had largely failed. Defining the "common good" had proven far more difficult than they had anticipated, especially in a society wracked with extreme socio-economic stratification. By the beginning of the 1950s, ACB was philosophically and politically adrift. Maritain's ideas remained inspiring, but it became evident that the group lacked a clear program of action, especially one that was specifically applicable to the Brazilian context. Moreover, the country had entered a period of

¹¹⁹ As mentioned in Chapter One, Freire abandoned such beliefs after the April 1964 coup, professing that "to change hearts without changing [social] structures which prevent good hearts is insane" (qtd. in Mackie 102).

accelerating socio-political transformation. Successive national administrations embraced economic policies which encouraged massive levels of foreign investment, stirring a nationalist and populist backlash, and stimulating heated debates about modernization. Brazil had entered a period of upheaval and polarization. For his part, Freire had begun working with the poor in his social and educational work at SESI. These first-hand experiences outside of his socio-economic class galvanized the development of his literacy experiments.

C. New Forms of Social Analysis

By the early 1950s, public discourse had turned to Brazil's perceived technological, economic, and cultural underdevelopment, and to the role of foreign interests in perpetuating these ills.

This decade was a watershed for Brazilian Catholicism.¹²⁰ Buoyed by a rising tide of nationalism, young Catholic activists were "awakening" to Brazil's status as a severely "backwards" and "dependent" society (Sanders 86). A key intellectual contributor to the emergence of this viewpoint was the Higher Institute of Brazilian Studies (ISEB), a government-funded think-tank established by President Kubitschek. The institute was populated by thinkers "who attempted to spread the social sciences as an instrument of analysis and of the critical understanding of the Brazilian situation" (Gadotti 163). The ISEB became the focal point of discussion of nationalism, modernization, economic policy, and the "relationship of ideology to

¹²⁰ Along with many progressive Brazilian intellectuals, Freire interpreted unfolding historical events as manifestations of the transition from a "closed" society to a more "open" and democratic one ("Cultural Action and Conscientization" 506). Throughout this period of change, "culture, the arts, literature, and science showed tendencies towards research, identification with the Brazilian reality, and planning of solutions rather than importation." Ultimately, "the country had begun to find itself," and "the people [had] emerged and began to participate in the historical process" (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 26). These promising developments "continued with fits and starts to 1964, when the military coup violently returned the nation to silence" ("Cultural Action and Conscientization" 506).

development” (Sanders 87). The ISEB’s scholarship, particularly its early support for nationalist developmentalism, was hugely influential over the Catholic activists (Paiva 161).¹²¹ For his part, Freire considered the establishment of the ISEB one of the most significant developments in the modern intellectual life of Brazil:

Until the formation of ISEB, the point of reference for the majority of Brazilian intellectuals was Brazil as the object of European or North American thought. As a rule, they thought about Brazil from a non-Brazilian point of view; our cultural development was judged according to criteria and perspectives in which Brazil itself constituted a foreign element. The Brazilian intellectual lived in an imaginary world, which he could not transform...ISEB, which reflected the climate of dis-alienation characteristic of the transitional phase, constituted the negation of the negation by thinking of Brazil as its own reality, as a project. To think of Brazil as a Subject was to identify oneself with Brazil as it really was. (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 34-5)

Social scientists at ISEB sought to interpret contemporary events in light of the nation’s colonial past. They give special emphasis to the role of the master-slave relationship in shaping present-day social dynamics (Elias, *Pedagogue* 33). In response, the ISEB thinkers “attempted to construct a nonalienating Brazilian conscience” (Gadotti 163). Their modes of analysis were tremendously influential upon leftist activists such as Freire. Indeed, it was while participating at an ISEB gathering that Freire first heard the term “conscientization.” He recounts:

¹²¹The think-tank’s ideology underwent a steady radicalization throughout the decade. By the early 1960s, a rift had developed between intellectuals who continued to favor nationalist-developmentalism and those who began to advocate for more radical solutions to Brazil’s social ills.

The word was born during a series of round table meetings of professors [at the ISEB]...The word was excogitated by some one of the professors there, but I really can't remember who. Anyway, it came out of our group reflections...As soon as I heard it, I realized the profundity of its meaning, since I was fully convinced that education as an exercise in freedom, is an act of knowing, a critical approach to reality. It was inevitable, then, that the word became a part of the terminology I used thereafter to express my pedagogical views, and it easily came to be thought of as something I had created.

(“Conscientizing as a Way of Liberating” 3)

Echoing and reinforcing the impact of ISEB scholarship was the emerging work of the French Dominican social scientist Louis-Joseph Lebret. Lebret arrived in Brazil in the early 1950s to conduct a number of sociological studies. He emphasized the need for a more “objective” and “scientific” analysis of Brazil’s social conditions, in contrast to “the [abstract] philosophical speculations that [had traditionally] passed for sociology in Brazilian Catholic circles” (Sander 89).¹²² According to Lebret, the vast socioeconomic problems facing Brazil could only be addressed by carefully analyzing their roots in the nation’s historical and sociological context. Lebret’s ideas were eagerly discussed within ACB, generating a newfound interest in the particularities of Brazil’s problems (Sanders 89). Brazil’s young Catholics were increasingly convinced of the need to analyze their social context in order to generate effective action.

¹²² Freire believed that until the turn towards concrete social analysis that occurred in the 1950s, Brazilian education and intellectual inquiry had been crippled by the absence of “a theory of intervention in reality, the analytical contact with existence which enables one to substantiate and to experience that existence fully and completely” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 32).

The enthusiastic reception of such scholarship indicated the emerging orientation of towards social analysis and concrete action among Brazil's young middle-class Catholics. As mentioned in Chapter One, Freire abandoned his nascent legal career to work directly with the poor in his native Northeast. His tenure as Director of SESI exemplified the evolving social thought among many middle-class Catholics. He had grown impatient with the difficulty and seeming ineffectuality of "changing hearts and minds" within his own socio-economic circle, and he chose instead to work directly with "the people." His fateful decision to study the concrete culture and living conditions of the Northeastern poor reflected the turn towards "scientific" social analysis advocated by Le Bret and the ISEB. It also represented his personal response to Maritain's call for Catholics to participate in transforming the world. Freire's early agenda at SESI involved raising working conditions, improving relations between workers and employers, and working to achieve social harmony and the "common good" – all of which manifested the reformism and Christian humanism of Maritain.

D. Emmanuel Mounier and Christian Personalism

During this period of deepening sociological and religious reflection, many young Brazilian Catholics became powerfully drawn to a new French theologian: Emmanuel Mounier (1905-50). Through his "Christian Personalist" philosophy, Mounier became one of the most wide-ranging and long-lasting influences on Brazil's religious activists. His thought germinated in the aftermath of World War I and the Wall Street crash of 1929. Like his friend (and fellow French Catholic philosopher) Maritain, Mounier believed that Western civilization was wracked by political and spiritual crisis. Both men sought to develop a "philosophy of man in the modern world" (Amato 13). Notably, Mounier's thought developed along more radical lines than

Maritain's, which helps explain his growing appeal to Brazil's Catholic activists as the 1950s unfolded. Synthesizing elements of Marxism and Existentialism with Catholicism, Mounier created a philosophy of human nature and social action that was grounded in a fundamentally optimistic view of history. Mounier rejected what he saw as the pervasive nihilism, anti-humanism, and egotism of his time. He called upon Catholics to embrace the "vital struggles of active service," thereby realizing their vocation as free and transformative beings inhabiting a sacred order saturated with purpose and meaning. Human beings are summoned by their Creator to be the protagonists in the perpetual "adventure" of transforming the world (Mounier xiv, 100, 102, 161). His philosophy of social engagement insisted on the indelible connection between Christian love, free will, and social action (Zwick and Zwick 110). For Mounier, being a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ demands a lifelong orientation towards sociopolitical engagement, not evasiveness or passivity (105). He viewed Christianity as a revolutionary force that permanently challenges the status quo. As such, he was contemptuous of self-declared Christians who stayed aloof from worldly affairs. For Mounier, authentic faith is radical and dynamic, not static or reactionary; it is "a madness, an irrational force for upheaval and progress," not a "brake" upon conflict and social change (Mounier 171).

Mounier diagnosed contemporary human beings as living in a constant state of alienation from themselves, from others, from the natural world, and above all from the Creator. Drawing upon Marxist social critique, he denounced "bourgeois individualism" as antithetical to authentic fullness of human existence (Amato 17, 129). Mounier's signature philosophy, Christian Personalism, was deeply concerned with the struggle to heal the alienation of human beings in the modern world. Approvingly citing Marx, Mounier affirmed that the vocation of humanity is

struggling to transform the world (172).¹²³ He denounced industrial capitalism as a “social disease” that reduced persons to “men-objects,” and which sacrificed the dignity, freedom, and well-being of humankind at the altar of profit and consumerism (Zwick and Zwick 107). He was particularly sensitive to the plight of European factory workers, whom he viewed as condemned by capitalism to be fodder for the propertied class.¹²⁴ Further echoing Marxist thought, Mounier denounced mainstream Christianity for becoming “dangerously allied to capitalist and bourgeois Liberalism,” rather than serving as a revolutionary force for social transformation (170).

Importantly, he also condemned “collectivist” Communism for its totalitarianism, as well as its materialist denial of the spiritual dimension of human existence. Mounier found Communist societies dehumanizing because they distorted human freedom, individuality, and potentiality. As an alternative to both capitalism and Communism, Mounier envisioned a democratic-socialist, Christian-humanist civilization grounded upon love, justice, and the sanctity of the “whole person.” He advocated for socio-economic structures that treat human beings as ends in themselves.¹²⁵ Thus, he rejected all forms of political or educational manipulation. Moreover, since the ultimate meaning of human existence comes from the Creator, persons cannot be reduced to any single facet of their experience. As a result, he deplored social and philosophical systems that reduced human beings to the material *or* spiritual dimension alone.

¹²³ Mounier believed that Personalism and Marxism are complementary systems that also “mutually surpass” each other (172).

¹²⁴ Like Maritain, Mounier was a guiding influence on the Catholic Worker Movement in the United States.

¹²⁵ Along these lines, he shared the Existentialist concern with individuality, freedom of choice, and “authenticity.”

Mounier's Christian Personalism embraced courageous and vigorous social action. The "Personal man," Mounier affirmed, is always "on the move, under summons" (150). Such activity is the highest form of human action (Amato 22-3). Being a follower of Jesus Christ means total commitment to the sacred work of building the Kingdom of God.¹²⁶ Faith gives Christians the responsibility and capacity to help create a better world through social action.¹²⁷ Like Maritain, Mounier affirmed the need for personal spiritual transformation. However, while Maritain was convinced that individual conversion necessarily *preceded* societal change, Mounier argued that personal transformation and historical progress are interwoven processes that must occur simultaneously (73, 75). There is an indissoluble unity between the fate of the universe, the destiny of humanity, and the progress of the individual person (Mounier 75). This means that Christians must engage in social action even *before* their "hearts and minds" have been fully converted or transformed. Mounier envisioned religious life as a long and difficult "journey towards the perfection of being," one that is permeated with loss, uncertainty, wounding, and darkness (83). Faithful Christians cannot shirk these risks; they must have the courage to act, despite imperfect knowledge. Thus, the Personalist activist must "choose and act even in the most dramatic obscurity of judgment [since] there are times when only a choice can illuminate the shadows" (Mounier 181). This idea has some resonance with the Marxist concept of praxis, as Personalism and Marxism both accentuate the unity of thought and action.¹²⁸ Both

¹²⁶ Even so, Mounier adhered to the doctrinal orthodoxy that the ultimate manifestation of the Kingdom is not fully within human reach. Rather, it is a mystery that depends ultimately upon God's grace and will occur at some unknowable time "beyond" temporal history (193).

¹²⁷ "Yesterday, Christianity needed to be the philosophy of dissatisfaction; today, it must be the builder of hope and duty" (Mounier 104).

¹²⁸ Mounier asserted the unity of body and spirit, "meditation" and "operation" (182-3).

philosophies also call for the permanent dialectic between analysis of empirical conditions and transformative activity. Mounier affirmed that “Truth, and particularly historic truth, can only be known in living engagement” (180-1). He emphasized that Personalism is a bold “orientation towards life” rather than a pre-established schema or finished intellectual system (182-3). Personalist commitment is a permanent “adventure” that demands constant re-envisaging in response to changing historical conditions (Mounier 182-3). Thus, it is not a “calcified” philosophical system or an empty “verbalism,” but rather a “continual creation” (175).¹²⁹ ¹³⁰

Mounier’s thought was ultimately grounded in a “tragic optimism” about the human condition (193).¹³¹ He believed that while human freedom is limited and situated, persons always have the intrinsic capacity to change the world in solidarity with each other. As such, he was contemptuous of fatalism, resignation, and forms of “theological sadism” that enervate social action (Mounier 90). Historical determinism, he asserted, is “a description of what is past,” not an adequate program for the future (161). He added: “A strict determinism is incompatible with the dialectic concept of knowledge and action” (161). As an Existentialist, he believed that human existence demands a radical and courageous “openness” to the needs and possibilities of life. As a radical Christian, he affirmed that human beings are endowed by their Creator with the sacred responsibility to “make a new earth” (Mounier 95). He rejected the

¹²⁹ Freire also used the word “verbalism” to indicate “empty” words that are unsupported by material activity or consequence (see Chapter Four for a discussion of Freirean praxis). Like Mounier, he had little patience for philosophizing or pious statements that lacked a dimension of concrete practice.

¹³⁰ However, the Personalist concept of praxis differs from its Marxist counterpart in affirming a non-material dimension of human experience. Mounier advocated for the dialectic between three levels of existence: the mental (“inward”), the material (“outward”), and the spiritual/transcendent (“absolute”) (163).

¹³¹ This was in opposition to “ingenious optimism” or “irrational skepticism” (Mounier 193).

“narcissistic” tendency to define sin on purely individualistic and moralistic terms, which overlooks the historical forces and social structures that shape personal behavior (Zwick and Zwick 110).

Finally, while Mounier did not write extensively about pedagogy, he suggested that education has a crucial role to play in building a better world. Education “should prepare the way” for social action by helping human beings to reject the “dead frames” that cloud their recognition of their own capacity to be effective historical actors (Mounier 194). Pedagogies organized along Personalist principles are oriented towards the “formation of total man” and acceptance of “the profession of being man” (Mounier 195). Such educational practices cannot be imposed from above; they must originate from the ground up, in keeping with the Personalist emphasis on authenticity and non-manipulation.¹³² He envisioned that “humanizing” education could contribute to the spiritual and political revitalization of Western civilization (Mounier 195). Such pedagogy would help awaken and nourish the sacred vocation for transformative social action embedded in each person by the Creator.

Mounier’s imprint on Freire’s educational thought was profound.¹³³ He was a primary inspiration for Freire’s deeply optimistic view of historical possibility¹³⁴ and human agency. Both men believed that since the world has been created in an “incomplete” or open-ended

¹³² This anticipates Freire’s notion of “generative themes” drawn from the lived experience of the learners.

¹³³ Freire acknowledged Mounier’s influence on Catholic activist circles before the 1964 coup. He highlighted Mounier’s belief that history is meaningful and is ultimately moving towards “man’s liberation.” He also echoed Mounier’s belief that “man is charged with being the author of his own liberation” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 17).

¹³⁴ For example: “A future that is inexorable is a denial of history” (*Pedagogy of Freedom* 69).

manner, its transformation and further development are always possible.¹³⁵ Human beings are similarly “unfinished” and thus possess the inalienable potential for action and growth. They are always endowed with the freedom and capacity to work against the injustices of the present moment, thereby fulfilling their God-given “vocation” for historical “self-insertion” and becoming “more fully human.” Mounier’s faith in the agency of human persons, as well as his fierce repudiation of historical determinism, provided Freire with a powerful theological antidote to fatalism, apathy, and despair (Blackwood 209). Moreover, Freire shared Mounier’s Existentialist concern with authenticity, responsibility,¹³⁶ free will, and careful, considered choices – all of which fed into his practice of dialogic and non-manipulative pedagogy, and his insistence that all persons have the freedom to choose to act for or against “humanization” and justice (Mackie 101). Given the extent of Mounier’s influence, Freire’s literacy practice might even be viewed as an educational form of Christian Personalism.¹³⁷ Moreover, as explored in Chapter Three, Mounier’s ideas would be taken up by a brilliant young Brazilian Jesuit named Henrique Lima Vaz, who developed it into a theology of historical change and social action that guided the reflection and activism of Brazil’s Catholic activists during their most radical period before April 1964.

¹³⁵ As a group, Brazil’s Catholic activists took the “incompleteness” of history and of human persons as their philosophical starting point. They arrived at the “strong theological conviction that the world had been deliberately created in an incomplete manner and that it was the destiny of humankind to join with the creator in completing the process and building a world that was both just and free” (Jarvis 31).

¹³⁶ “Insofar as I am a conscious presence in the world, I cannot hope to escape my ethical responsibility for action in the world” (*Pedagogy of Freedom* 26).

¹³⁷ Towards the end of his life, Freire used Personalist language when he declared, “All my arguments in favor of the legitimacy of a more *people-oriented* society have their deepest roots in my faith” (*Pedagogy of the Heart* 106, emphasis in original).

III. Activist Currents in the Institutional Church

A. The Divided Hierarchy

Historical trends within the institutional Church mirrored the ideological polarization of the 1950s and early 1960s. Although the vast majority of the Brazilian hierarchy never approached the degree of radicalization reached by some lay activists, events within the Church served to foster and legitimize the lay movement's emergence as an outspoken voice for social change. One such development was the establishment of the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB) in 1952. The CNBB was the first such episcopal organization in Latin America (Mainwaring 48). In establishing the Conference, Pope Pius XII was responding to Brazil's socio-economic unrest. He was also dismayed at the "dismal condition" of the Brazilian Church, which was the largest in the world in terms of membership (Sanders 86-7). In response to this perceived crisis, the Vatican expanded the number of Brazilian dioceses and appointed highly capable clergy to positions of strategic importance (Sanders 87). The CNBB was established in order to coordinate these efforts. It quickly developed into the "most important force for reform" within the Brazilian Church before the 1964 coup (Mainwaring 48). The first secretary general of the CNBB was Helder Camara, an outspoken leftist bishop from Rio de Janeiro, and a man whom Freire greatly admired.¹³⁸ Along with Dom Camara, much of the CNBB leadership was filled by young, highly-educated, and remarkably progressive clergy who were open to "scientific" discussion of Brazil's problems and envisioned a more "socially relevant" Church

¹³⁸ Dom Camara came to describe himself as a "humanist socialist" after the coup. He became one of the most powerful voices for radical Catholicism in Latin America. He eventually served as Archbishop of Recife, Paulo Freire's home city. Camara famously declared, "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a Communist."

(Sanders 87). Paralleling and strengthening these developments, a cohort of highly competent, European-educated, reform-minded clergy was appointed to positions of guidance within ACB (Sanders 88). These young priests and bishops were anxious to “appropriate the technological and ideological necessities for modernization” (Sanders 88). In this regard, they were attuned to the political “awakening” that had been taking place within the left-leaning sectors of the middle-class laity. By the mid-1950s,

a growing number of clergy and laity who sympathized with the nationalism and developmentalism advocated by ISEB were active in major Brazilian cities. As Christians they were disturbed by the backwardness and suffering of the Brazilian people; they felt that only through governmental planning, public control of key sectors of the economy, and greater domestic industrialization could this condition be overcome.

(Sanders 89)

These progressive Catholics saw a desperate need for national modernization and cultural democratization. Influenced by European intellectuals and highly receptive to the scholarship pouring out of the ISEB, they reflected upon the need for a “conversion” to the “Brazilian reality” within the institutional Church itself.

Yet despite the rise of dynamic figures like Camara, the hierarchy as a whole remained ideologically divided. In response to the increasingly prominent progressives, there arose a traditionalist “Catholic Right” that rejected any hint of Marxist thought and denounced the involvement of Christians in political affairs (Mainwaring 46).¹³⁹ Moreover, the vast majority of the clergy was not aligned with either ideological extreme, but was split between “reformists”

¹³⁹ The “Catholic Right” was a critic of President Goulart and strongly approved of the 1964 coup.

and “conservative modernizers” (Mainwaring 46). Both of these centrist factions recognized the need for the Church to respond to historical changes. However, the “conservative modernizers” focused on reinforcing lay obedience to the hierarchy and on fostering a “stronger Catholicism.” They agreed with the traditionalists that the Church should remain “above” politics. While they acknowledged the Church’s social mission, they advocated for moralistic and individualistic measures rather than broad social transformation (Mainwaring 46). In these regards, the “conservative modernizers” were the ideological successors to the Catholic Revival of the previous generation.

On the other hand, the reformist clergy adopted increasingly leftist positions throughout the 1950s and early 60s. They helped to bring progressive theological and political positions into mainstream Church discourse. Thus, they provided a bulwark for their more radical counterparts on the left by helping to legitimize a wide range of bold ideas, as well as by providing a measure of institutional support. They promoted a wide range of reforms including: emphasizing the autonomy and “co-responsibility” of the laity; giving greater weight to the Church’s vocation for social justice; and promoting a world-affirming theology that challenged the traditional bifurcation between religious and secular matters (Mainwaring 47). The reformists accepted the ongoing secularization of Brazil as a potential force for good, rather than as a cultural evil to be resisted.¹⁴⁰ Rejecting the Church’s traditional aloofness from a sinful and corrupting world, they embraced participation in earthly affairs:

The radical theological separation between the heavenly Kingdom and earth disappeared. Concomitantly, the idea that the Church should Christianize a fundamentally evil world started to erode. One [reformist] priest criticized the “pastoral work of the clerical

¹⁴⁰ This openness to modernity and ideological diversity was a hallmark of the Catholic Left.

monopoly, legacy of a distant past in which the culture and entire physiognomy of the society had a sacred character,” and he insisted that the church “cannot and should not dominate temporal structures and institutions.” (Mainwaring 49)

In blurring the line between heaven and earth, the reformist clergy affirmed social engagement as a central dimension of the Christian faith. They taught that Catholics should stop seeking to “escape” the world, but to participate in its transformation – dramatic theological shift that fed into Freire’s insistence that “humanization” was a process that unfolded *within* history.

Moreover, the reformists were interested in working with previous rival groups (most notably Protestants and Marxists) to achieve secular goals such as economic development (Sanders 83). Although they generally eschewed revolutionary politics, they advocated for broad social change and greater solidarity with the poor (Mainwaring 47, 49).

In keeping with its democratizing thrust, the reformist faction of the Church hierarchy encouraged a significant amount of lay autonomy, especially within ACB.¹⁴¹ The reformists also established innovative social programs geared towards adult education and community development, most importantly the Movement for Grassroots Education (MEB). Along with Freire’s state-funded literacy campaign, the MEB constituted the most effective educational effort of activist Catholicism in the early 1960s.¹⁴² The reformists’ social programs were geared towards overcoming, or at least alleviating, socioeconomic suffering (Mainwaring 48-9). As such, they departed from traditional teachings which had encouraged the poor to accommodate

¹⁴¹ A noteworthy branch of the ACB that mobilized throughout the 1950s was Catholic University Youth (JUC). As discussed in Chapter Three, JUC was at the forefront of Catholic activist movement.

¹⁴² See Chapter 3 for a methodological comparison of the MEB and Freire’s educational campaign.

to their lives in the hope of heavenly rewards. By the early 1960s, the reformists had begun to articulate some strikingly stringent critiques of the extreme inequality within Brazilian society. They condemned the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a tiny minority, the conditions in urban slums, and the almost non-existent opportunities for education and social mobility for most of the population (Mainwaring 50). Moreover, many reformists had grown disenchanted with capitalism. By the early 1960s, even the CNBB had started to express ambivalence towards the government's development policies. In 1962, the bishops criticized the "egoism and profit" of capitalism (qtd. in Mainwaring 57). In 1963, the CNBB expressed pessimism about the capacity of economic growth to improve the lives of the poor. The reformist bishops also called for aggressive agrarian reform to raise the living standards of peasants (by far the poorest segment of Brazil's population). Thus, the reformists' position had evolved from supporting economic modernization without land redistribution (their primary position throughout the 1950s) to pressing for modernization with sweeping agrarian reform. They argued that "land expropriation not only does not contradict the Church's social doctrine, it is one of the means of realizing the social function of rural property" (qtd in Mainwaring 56).

Despite these rapid changes in their social thought, the reformists continued to reject revolutionary politics. They were fundamentally supportive of Presidents Kubitschek, Quadros, and Goulart, and they continued to profess belief in the possibility of harmonious relations between landowners and peasants (Mainwaring 57, 58). They professed trust in the "good intentions" of the Brazilian elites and were critical of Communist groups that sought to organize the peasantry. Most of the hierarchy were wary of radical movements, and they watched the ideological polarization of the early 1960s with anxiety. The reformists called for broad social reforms to defuse the escalating unrest, while the conservatives and reactionaries allied

themselves with the military and the wealthy elites to suppress the mobilization of the activist left.

B. Pope John XXIII: “Throwing Open the Windows of the Church”

When examining the evolution of radical Catholicism in Brazil, the influence of Pope John XIII cannot be overlooked. His brief tenure (1958-63) overlapped exactly with the period of most intense Catholic activism in the Brazil. This was not a coincidence, as John XXIII initiated a series of wide-ranging reforms that reverberated throughout the Catholic world. The immense Brazilian Church, with its highly-educated segment that was attuned to European theological developments, was profoundly influenced by his papacy. John XXIII was widely expected to be a caretaker pontiff when he was elected at the age of 76 to succeed Pius XII, who had served as pope since 1939. Upending these expectations, the new pontiff proved to be a reformer of historic significance. He transformed the face of 20th century Catholicism, famously “throwing open the windows of the Church” to the modern world. For leftist Catholics in Brazil, John XXIII effectively provided papal legitimacy to their vision of the Church as a vigorous agent of social justice (Cox 113). During his tenure, the Vatican’s social thought shifted towards the political left, even to the point of expressing sympathy for elements of humanist socialism (Nunez 90). John XXIII promoted a vision of the Church in the world that was far more in tune with modernity, secularity, and religious and ideological diversity. He published eight Encyclicals,¹⁴³ two of which were especially influential on modern Catholic social thought: *Mater et Magistra* (1961) and *Pacem in Terris* (1963). These documents were particularly

¹⁴³ These are high-profile papal documents addressed to bishops throughout the world. They usually tackle issues of Church doctrine.

resonant for Catholic activists in Brazil, galvanizing their mobilization before the 1964 coup (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 84).

In *Mater et Magistra* (“Mother and Teacher”), John XXIII declared that “perhaps the most pressing question of our day concerns the relationship between economically advanced commonwealths and those that are in the process of development” (qtd. in Nunez 91). He envisioned international relationships that were grounded on mutuality and cooperation, and he denounced aid measures that perpetuated neocolonial relationships in the guise of generosity and disinterested “good deeds.”¹⁴⁴ Aside from criticizing such subtle forms of manipulation, the pope declared the Church’s strong concern for the total well-being of persons (Nunez 91). Echoing Maritain’s concept of “integral” humanism, he asserted that Christian “salvation” encompassed not just the spiritual realm, but embraced all dimensions of human existence – including the material. As such, he denounced ideologies and systems that “neither encompass man, whole and entire, nor...affect his inner being” (qtd. in Nunez 91). Moreover, while John XXIII reaffirmed the long-standing doctrine that private property is an expression of “natural law,” he also called on states to intervene more forcefully to achieve equitable distribution of resources, and to reduce “so far as possible” the “class difference arising from disparity of wealth (qtd. in Nunez 91)” Importantly for Brazil’s leftist Catholics, *Mater et Magistra*

¹⁴⁴ Freire took up this theme in *Education for Critical Consciousness*. Citing John XXIII’s injunction against “disguised forms of colonial domination,” he argued that aid from wealthy to poorer nations “should be given without self-interest, with the sole intention of making it possible for nations to develop themselves economically and socially” (17-18). Drawing a parallel between international and interpersonal relationships, he added: “The important thing is to help men (and nations) help themselves, to place them in consciously critical confrontation with their problems, to make them the agents of their own recuperation. In contrast, assistencialism robs men of a fundamental human necessity – responsibility... Whether the assistance is of foreign or national origin, this method cannot lead a country to a democratic destination” (12-13). He repeats this critique in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (139-40).

approvingly discussed the concept of “socialization,” which had been used pejoratively by previous pontiffs to describe the state’s intrusion into the private lives of citizens (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 85). The term “socialization” lost most of its negative connotation in the 1950s, and *Mater et Magistra* completed the process of legitimizing it as a part of official Catholic thought. John XXIII redefined “socialization” as the historical process of “progressive multiplication of relations in society, with different forms of life and activity, and juridical institutionalization” (qtd. in Mackie 98). He argued that “socialization” was “the fruit and expression of a natural tendency, almost irrepressible, in human beings – the tendency to join together to attain objectives which are beyond the capacity and means at the disposal of single individuals” (qtd. in Mackie 98).¹⁴⁵ In other words, human beings are created to collaboratively in pursuit of the common good. This papal pronouncement signaled a turning away of the reflexive disdain for collective action that had long characterized the Church’s stance towards social movements. For the Catholic activists in Brazil, John XXIII’s outspoken support for collective public action energized “the activities of those who struggled together in pursuit of goals which were beyond them individually” (Mackie 98).

Alongside *Mater et Magistra*, the other encyclical that had the greatest impact on Brazilian Catholicism was *Pacem in Terris* (“Peace on Earth”). This statement was released in April 1963 – one year before the coup and less than two months before John XXIII died from stomach cancer. Like *Mater et Magistra*, it has been widely recognized as one of the most consequential and influential encyclicals of the twentieth century. Written during a particularly volatile stretch of the Cold War, *Pacem in Terris* has become known as the “peace encyclical.”

¹⁴⁵ A theological forerunner of this view was the French Jesuit philosopher and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955). Teilhard’s key influence upon Brazil’s Catholic activists is discussed in Chapter Three.

It was John XXIII's most urgent call for nuclear disarmament and international harmony. Notably, it was the first encyclical addressed not just to Catholics, but to "all men of good will" – a rhetorical sea-change that reflected the pope's commitment towards ecumenism. *Pacem in Terris* influenced international organizations such as the Geneva Conference on Disarmament, the League of Human Rights, and the United Nations.

Like its predecessor *Mater et Magistra*, *Pacem in Terris* affirmed the intrinsic dignity of human beings. It called for all social relationships, from the interpersonal to the international, to be grounded upon the "common good." John XXIII also urged wealthy nations to "deal justly, fairly, and respectfully" with those that are less wealthy (Nunez 92). Importantly for the Brazilian scene, *Pacem in Terris* gave Catholics the freedom to collaborate with non-Catholic groups in "the pursuit of objectives which are of their nature good, or conducive to good" (qtd. in Nunez 92). This declaration sanctioned the cooperation of Catholics with those who professed materialist or even atheist views (Nunez 93).¹⁴⁶ Notably, such alliances had already been initiated by activist Brazilian Catholics in the late 1950s, when university-based groups began exploring ties with secular groups to mobilize for leftist causes.¹⁴⁷

Pacem in Terris galvanized the Brazilian Catholic Left in the period immediately before the 1964 coup. Soon after the encyclical's publication in April 1963, the Conference of Brazilian Bishops released an accompanying declaration that "spoke to the profound aspirations of the people who do not participate in the Brazilian [political] process" (Mackie 99). The document condemned the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of an elite minority,

¹⁴⁶ This "universal opening" helped lay the groundwork for the Christian-Marxist encounter that gave rise to liberation theology (Nunez 93).

¹⁴⁷ Similarly, Freire had long been involved with SESI, a secular organization devoted towards liberal-reformist goals.

while the vast majority of the Brazilian people were deprived of the fundamental human rights that had been affirmed by *Pacem in Terris* (Mackie 99). The CNBB's statement reflected and fed into the climate of radicalization sweeping through the country. This declaration was more radical than any previous ecclesial statement (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 84). Echoing John XXIII's encyclical, the CNBB's document criticized the "heavy burden of a capitalist tradition" that had resulted in the immoral gulf in resources and social opportunities between the wealthy and the poor (qtd. in De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 84). In addition, the CNBB affirmed the urgency of land reform, called for wide-ranging changes in education and taxation, and advocated for profit-sharing between employers and workers (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 84). The CNBB's 1963 document was the most radical statement offered by the institutional Church before the coup, and it reflected a striking degree of alignment between leftist elements within the Church hierarchy and the activist laity.

Aside from his two social encyclicals, John XXIII made one more historic contribution to reformist Catholicism. In 1962, he convened the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican (more commonly known as "Vatican II"). Held in four annual sessions from 1962 to 1965, the Council constituted the Roman Church's sweeping attempt to respond to the far-reaching cultural, political, economic, and technological changes that had accelerated since the end of the World War II (Nunez 83). It also represented the flowering of currents for theological and ecclesial reform that had been voiced by such figures as Maritain and Mounier. Under the leadership of John XXIII, the Vatican hierarchy acknowledged that an "*aggiornamento*" ("bringing up to date") was imperative if the Church was to speak effectively to the modern world (Nunez 84). The Council drew bishops and representatives from all over the world, including a relatively small but outspoken Latin American contingent. Among its many effects,

Vatican II provided the papal imprimatur on the “New Catholicism,” a matrix of modernizing ideas, pastoral practices, and theological innovations that had been initiated in numerous local branches of the Church throughout the world. In effect, the Second Vatican Council

emphasized the Church’s social mission, affirmed the importance of the laity in the Church, encouraged greater coresponsibility...within the Church, developed the notion of the Church as the people of God, called for more ecumenical dialogue, [and] changed the liturgy to make it more accessible...the new doctrine significantly revised patterns of authority in the Church and the relationship between faith and the world. (Mainwaring 43-4)

Reflecting the work of a relatively small but highly active cohort of progressive theologians and bishops, Vatican II re-envisioned the “Universal Church” not as “a hierarchical judicial institution that speaks and acts in a spirit of triumphalism,” but rather as the earthly manifestation of the “people of God” (Nunez 84). The Council marked the Church’s conscious effort to be more ideologically inclusive, less hierarchical, and more engaged with contemporary social problems. In sum, Vatican II was the most significant institutional development in the Church since the Counter-Reformation. Although John XXIII died midway through the Council, his successor Paul VI would largely consolidate the reforms of Vatican II until his own death in 1978.

The Brazilian clergy and laity were acutely aware of the historic events unfolding in Rome. As discussed above, many of the innovations in theology, social thought, and pastoral practice sanctioned by the Second Vatican Council were already being attempted within Brazilian Catholicism’s progressive circles. Numerous theologians, bishops, and lay persons throughout the Catholic world had worked for change within the Church even before John

XXIII's papacy. In this regard, his tenure did not create something new, but rather "incorporated and legitimated existing trends" (Mainwaring 44). Thus, one of the main contributions of John XXIII (and his successor Paul VI) to activist Catholicism in Brazil was the legitimization of developments that had already been initiated "from below" (Mainwaring 44). The Second Vatican Council "led Latin American Catholics to take a much more critical look at their own church and their society. Not only did they seek to adopt the council to Latin America – they began to ask Latin American questions" (Berryman 17). The progressives in the Brazilian Church were eager to take up the changes promulgated by John XXIII. Archbishop Jose Maria Pires, a leading figure of the leftist clergy, described the impact of the Second Vatican Council on Brazil:

Vatican II was the motor of all this change; it systematized things. There were always theologians, pastors, and lay people in the Church who assumed a dialectical position in favor of the oppressed, but it was only with Vatican II that this position became official and the attitudes were systematized...What made me opt for the poor was Vatican II. (qtd. in Mainwaring 44)

The relationship between progressives in Rome and in Brazil was deeply symbiotic. Currents towards reform, modernization, and social action were generated from below, but they also took firmer hold after being legitimized from above. In short, Brazilian Catholicism was influenced by the Vatican, and vice versa. Moreover, the Brazilian hierarchy – and the wider Catholic Church – was pushed leftwards by vigorous grassroots activism such as rapidly expanding Freire's literacy experiments. The next chapter will examine the theology and activism of leftist Catholicism in Brazil, highlighting the degree to which Freire's pedagogy was embedded within this historical moment.

Chapter Three:

Paulo Freire and Catholic Activism in Brazil

Introduction

This chapter locates Paulo Freire's pedagogy within Brazil's social and theological context leading up to the April 1964 coup.¹⁴⁸ As mentioned in the previous chapter, a generation of highly-educated, middle-class lay Catholics "awakened" to the harshly unequal "Brazilian reality" in the 1950s and early 1960s. In response to the economic "dependency" and cultural "alienation" of Brazilian society, they committed themselves to create a more developed, "authentic," equitable, and democratic "society of persons" along lines envisioned by leading Catholic theologians like Jacques Maritain and Emmanuel Mounier. Freire's activism took the form of a mass literacy campaign which threatened Brazil's oligarchy in at least two crucial ways: by encouraging impoverished adults to critique and voice collective opposition to the status quo, and by enabling them to vote at a time when the franchise legally excluded those who could not read or write. Freire's developing educational practice was deeply influenced by his immersion in the relatively small but highly energized cohort of Catholic activists. By locating his "conscientizing" praxis within this turbulent religious and intellectual environment, this chapter underscores the extent to which he drew from a deep pool of Catholic social thought.

I. General Characteristics of the Catholic Lay Movement

¹⁴⁸ This chapter is profoundly indebted to the scholarship of Emanuel de Kadt.

Brazil's Catholic activists emerged as a liberal-humanist faction in the 1940s and 1950s. Most of these burgeoning activists were affiliated with urban universities scattered throughout the country, including the University of Pernambuco – Freire's alma mater and the eventual staging ground for his literacy experiments. Freire and other Catholic lay elites came of age in an era of rising nationalism and escalating cultural, political, and economic turmoil. These societal currents intruded into formerly placid campuses of Brazil's universities (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 66). Assimilating the turn towards "scientific" social analysis among intellectual circles, the Catholic activists began to reflect critically upon their own social locations. This led to the disturbing "discovery" of the undemocratic nature of their home universities, and which reflected unequal power relations within society as a whole. They came to believe that "changes in the university and education would result from, rather than bring about, a basic restructuring of society (De Kadt, *JUC and AP* 203). Freire's conviction that conscientizing education is "cultural action for freedom" reflected the Catholic activists' insight into the link between university reform and wider societal change (Palmer and Newsom 185).¹⁴⁹

The Catholic youth were growing frustrated with the traditional religiosity of their parents, which seemed increasingly irrelevant in the face of modern issues such as democratization, cultural renewal, and Brazil's technological and economic underdevelopment (Sanders 82). They were also captivated by modern theologians such as Maritain and Mounier, whose works were becoming available within Brazil for the first time. Galvanized by these ideas, they embarked on an increasingly radical ideological and activist trajectory – a development that drew the ire of conservative elements throughout society. By the early 1960s, a critical mass of

¹⁴⁹ After the coup, Freire came to believe that social change would *precede* sweeping educational reform, in contrast to the misperception among some of his Western adherents that pedagogy by itself can transform students, teachers, and society in general.

young, well-educated activists had started working with the poor to an unprecedented degree. Some members of the Catholic Left were calling for such radical measures as the abolition of capitalism, the “unshackling” of Brazil from “imperialist” trade relationships, the nationalization of vital sectors of the economy, and the implementation of sweeping land redistribution. Speaking out against “cultural importation,” they advocated for a new society “where capitalist property could be replaced by ‘humane property’” in accordance with Christian Personalist vision of Mounier¹⁵⁰ (Paiva 158).

Freire moved with these intellectual and political events although, not as quickly as some of his activist peers. He was not yet part of the radical vanguard; before being forced into exile in 1964, he was committed to a nationalist-developmental and liberal-humanist agenda that emphasized the “democratization of culture” through conscientizing education.¹⁵¹ He was particularly concerned with the lack of electoral access by illiterate peasants and urban workers.¹⁵² He aspired to redress this injustice through his pedagogy, while simultaneously fostering the emergence of a “de-alienated” and “authentic” Brazilian culture.¹⁵³ The liberal-humanist thrust of Freire’s thought was evident in the themes that surfaced repeatedly in his experimental culture circles: “nationalism, profit remittances abroad, the political evolution of

¹⁵⁰ See Chapter Two.

¹⁵¹ A characteristic Freirean statement along these lines: “Since our cultural history had not provided us even with habits of political and social solidarity appropriate to our democratic form of government, we had to appeal to education as a cultural action and by means of which the Brazilian people could learn, in place of the old passivity, new attitudes and habits of participation and intervention” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 34).

¹⁵² Illiterate Brazilian adults finally gained the legal right to vote in 1985.

¹⁵³ “We had...to accept the challenge of our alarming rates of illiteracy, and ideally, since a literacy program was only part of the need, to work on it and education for [historical] intervention simultaneously” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 34).

Brazil, development, illiteracy, the vote for illiterates, democracy” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 38). His main concern was the development of “an active educational method” that would help the adult illiterate “to become consciously aware of his context and his condition as [a historical] Subject,” at which point the learner becomes “politicized” and renounces the characteristic “emotional resignation” and fatalism of the poor (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 48). In short, Freire was vitally concerned with what he described as the “creation of a new attitude – that of dialogue, so absent in [Brazilian] upbringing and education” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 45).¹⁵⁴ During his nearly two decades of work at SESI and the University of Recife, Freire remained suspicious of the most radical leaders of Brazil’s Marxist-Communist parties, viewing them as manipulative, opportunistic, and latently authoritarian. Elias notes that Freire’s early liberal-humanism was “no doubt rooted in his work as an adult educator within the university, his involvement with a liberal reformist government, his connection with liberal Brazilian scholars [especially within the ISEB], and his reading of European and North American liberal academics¹⁵⁵” (33). However, although Freire eschewed revolutionary politics, the conservative elites realized that Freire’s literacy program implicitly contained the “seeds of social revolt” because it stimulated critical consciousness and awakened the “submerged” sense of historical agency among peasant learners (Elias, *Pedagogue* 6). The harsh treatment Freire received at the hands of the military, as well as his expulsion from Brazil, reflected the threat his work posed to the status quo. Moreover, Freire’s lack of affiliation with Communist organizations might have saved him from execution, and his ties to leftist clergy were instrumental in winning his release from jail.

¹⁵⁴ Dialogue was related to democratization, equality, and justice in a mediating capacity.

¹⁵⁵ This includes thinkers like John Dewey, Karl Popper, and Karl Mannheim.

Importantly, leftist Catholics were open to holding dialogue with non-Catholic thought, including strands of humanist socialism. This reflected a newfound willingness to collaborate with other groups in the pursuit of theologically desirable objectives.¹⁵⁶ The Catholic lay activists took the secularizing nature of modern society as the starting point of their reflection. As such, they no longer insisted on establishing a new “Christendom.” While the Church had traditionally taught that secularization was an evil to be resisted, the Catholic leftists accepted it as an inevitable process. Nor did they assume that Catholicism would constitute the default position for any socio-political program. Accordingly, they demurred from promoting an explicitly Christian blueprint for addressing Brazil’s social ills (Sanders 82-3). They recognized the equitable development of Brazilian society – an ostensibly secular goal – as a moral end in its own right. They professed that “the proper ethical objective for Catholics” is “the promotion of human dignity and well-being” (Sanders 83).

However, it is crucial to note that their ultimate vision remained grounded upon a theological ideal inspired by Emmanuel Mounier: the establishment of a “society of persons” that enabled the full flourishing of human beings (Sanders 83). Thus, despite their openness to secular alliances, the Catholic activists did not “reduce faith to political action or put Marx ahead of Christ” (Mainwaring 72).¹⁵⁷ Rather, they were enacting a new interpretation of the Christian faith which insisted upon social action to change the world. As Catholics, they affirmed that all

¹⁵⁶ This openness to non-Catholic ideas receive papal sanction in John XXIII’s 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris*. In this regard (and many others), Brazil’s Catholic activists were well ahead of the Vatican’s official thought. In addition, there was a pragmatic element to their cautious rapprochement with Marxist-Communist groups. The Catholic students realized that strategic alliances with other leftist organizations were indispensable if they were to grow into a viable force for social change, especially given the relative modesty of their numbers (Mainwaring 64).

¹⁵⁷ In addition, many Catholic intellectuals never fully trusted the Communist groups.

human beings are “children of God” and are therefore of infinite moral worth. Thus, all persons deserve decent living conditions and life opportunities. Social structures preventing “the realization of God’s temporal designs” are immoral and must be dismantled (Mainwaring 72). Catholic educators like Freire came to view their work as “communication in the service of the *transformation* of the world” (Azevedo 153, italics in original). Like other Catholic intellectuals on the political left, Freire viewed Brazilian society as transitioning from being silenced, alienated, and “closed” to being more democratic, authentic, and “open.” He affirmed that “the special contribution of the educator to the birth of the new society would have to be a critical education which could help to form critical attitudes” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 29).

As mentioned in Chapter Two, the young Catholic activists were indebted to European thinkers such as Maritain, Mounier, and John XXIII. Closer to home, they were profoundly influenced by the work of the brilliant Jesuit Henrique de Lima Vaz, who was the most outspoken advocate for Mounier in Brazil.¹⁵⁸ Brazilian Catholics worked to adapt European ideas and modes of analysis to their unique context, thereby developing an understanding of the Church’s social mission that was rooted in their own historical conditions.¹⁵⁹ Brazil’s Catholic movement was at the global forefront in developing theologies and social programs that were uniquely suited to its native soil (Mainwaring 72-3).¹⁶⁰ It was also on the leading edge of modernizing energies sweeping through the wider Church, which were introducing “a new

¹⁵⁸ Vaz’s pivotal theological contributions to the Catholic movement are examined later in this chapter.

¹⁵⁹ Along these lines, Freire’s insisted that dialogic education must be grounded upon the culture, language, and lived experience of the learners.

¹⁶⁰ As a result, the Brazilian Catholic Left was an important precursor to liberation theology (see Chapter Four). It also helped to explain why the Brazilian Church became one of the most progressive in Latin America over the next two decades (Mainwaring 73).

understanding of the relationship between faith and politics,” and which fed into the historic reforms of the Second Vatican Council (Mainwaring 72).

Finally, any examination the Catholic youth movement requires recognition of the impact of its class background on its social thought and activism. The most dynamic mobilization occurred among social class fractions with a high degree of cultural capital, with university students and urban professionals constituting the vast majority of the movement (Mainwaring 60-1). These middle-class Catholics struggled to reconcile the impoverished conditions they encountered when “going to the people” with their own socio-economic privilege. These contradictions helped give rise to the movement’s ardent populism. Rejecting paternalism and manipulation, the Catholic activists committed themselves to the tenet that the poor themselves must “make the major decisions concerning their [own] lives” (Mainwaring 67). They also embarked on “a quest for ways to spare the popular classes the hardships of capitalism,”¹⁶¹ embracing the belief that “social and political truth should be looked for within the people, who actually experience exploitation” (Paiva 158). For Freire’s part, he grew disillusioned with the “assistencialist” and “palliative” program of SESI, which he believed cultivated the workers’ dependence upon the “false generosity” of their employers and stultified their ability to shape their own fate. In his educational experiments, he repeatedly emphasized the need to respect the intelligence of the poor. His dialogic pedagogy went to unprecedented lengths to foster the

¹⁶¹ This concern was linked with the phenomenon of large-scale urbanization taking place throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, which the Catholic activists viewed as “uprooting rural populations” and “making them lose touch with their beliefs and customs” (Paiva 159). In their view, this alienating “massification” and social destabilization rendered the masses susceptible to “manipulation” by “unscrupulous politicians and by Machiavellian vanguards who want to lead the people down paths which the vanguards themselves pre-define as in the people’s interest” (Paiva 159).

active participation of the illiterate peasants in their own learning process.¹⁶² Yet subtle tensions which remained at the heart of his pedagogy may have reflected his privileged educational background. As described in Chapter One, Freire viewed the characteristic level of consciousness in peasant society as “naïve” and “superstitious,” even as he called for “total respect” for the culture of the poor. He grappled with reconciling his commitment to non-manipulative and non-paternalistic pedagogy with the intrinsic potential for “cultural invasion” in his literacy method, which intervened in rural communities to transform the consciousness of the peasants. These vexing issues mirrored the Catholic activists’ quandary; they struggled to navigate between their urgent desire for sweeping social change and their populist commitment to non-manipulation and freedom of choice (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 200). Freire himself opted for a middle ground: dialogic educators must always practice dialogue and humility, but they also have the responsibility to lead, to propose new ideas, and to be directive when necessary.¹⁶³ His methodology of proposing the “anthropological notion of culture” to adult learners at the start of the literacy program reflected his pedagogical compromise. As he explained:

We felt that even before teaching the illiterate to read, we could help him to overcome his magic or naïve understanding and to develop an increasingly critical understanding.

Toward this end, the first dimension of our new program content would be the

¹⁶² “I was convinced that the Brazilian people could learn social and political responsibility only by experiencing that responsibility...Democracy and democratic education are founded on faith in men, on the belief that they not only can but should discuss the problems of their country, of their continent, their world, their work, the problems of democracy itself” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 32, 33).

¹⁶³ See especially *A Pedagogy for Liberation*, where Freire stresses the need for dialogic educators to also be leaders.

anthropological concept of culture...the role of man as Subject in the world and with the world. (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 41).

As discussed in Chapter One, the introduction of this foundational premise in the early stages of literacy training signified Freire's intention to transform the self-perception of the adult peasants by proposing that they were already capable of acting upon nature, not just being acted upon by it.

This chapter will examine the three primary manifestations of Brazil's Catholic activist movement: Catholic University Youth (JUC), Popular Action (AP), and the Movement for Basic Education (MEB). It will highlight these groups' deepening reflection upon the "Brazilian reality," highlighting the extent to which Freire's experimental pedagogy reflected powerful theological currents circulating within the wider movement.

II. Catholic University Youth (JUC)

The primary vehicle for Catholic activism in the second half of the 1950s was Catholic University Youth (JUC), the student branch of Brazilian Catholic Action (ACB). In JUC, the circulating progressive Catholic theologies found a viable platform for enactment. Indeed, JUC drew the ire of much of the Church hierarchy from 1959 onwards. Although the student group had supporters among the clergy, these sympathizers were greatly outnumbered by those who were alarmed at JUC's radicalization. Relations between the student activists and the hierarchy grew increasingly tense. JUC was eventually dissolved, only to be succeeded by the even more radical Popular Action (AP).

JUC was established by the Church hierarchy in the early 1930s. It was hardly revolutionary in its first two decades; its founding mission was to "Christianize" the future

Brazilian elite (Mainwaring 62). As such, JUC's early agenda was in line with the Catholic Revival of the 1930s. For instance, the organization was concerned with issues of sexuality, spirituality, family life, and Catholic "formation" (i.e., religious education). The group devoted most of its resources to sponsoring religious retreats, pilgrimages, and courses on Catholic life and doctrine. JUC in its early form was geared towards spreading "generally accepted Catholic ideas" and fostering "religiously approved behavior" in elite universities (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 60-1). Throughout the 1940s and 50s, JUC experienced the same sense of drift and ineffectuality as its parent organization, Brazilian Catholic Action (ACB). Like their counterparts in ACB, JUC's members came to view their traditional agenda as irrelevant in the face of socio-political events, and dissatisfaction steadily deepened with the group's apparent disconnectedness from the pressing issues of modern life. By late 1950s, many thoughtful and outspoken members of JUC were calling for a "more concerted effort in self-criticism" (De Kadt, *JUC and AP* 197). The organization's annual conference in 1958 marked a turning point. At this gathering, student delegates articulated a sense of

desperation about the working of the movement, which seemed unable to reach anyone but those centrally engaged in its direction. The cause of the JUC's ineffectiveness was seen in the 'lack of life' within the movement, its excessively abstract theoretical discussions and orientation, its lack of engagement in concrete reality. This had become obvious because 'Brazilian reality' was being increasingly discussed in the country at large. (De Kadt, *JUC and AP* 198)

At this time, Freire was criticizing the country's traditional school curriculum along very similar lines. He described Brazilian formal education was "centered on words emptied of the reality they are meant to represent, lacking in concrete activity" (*Education for Critical Consciousness*

33). He believed that Brazilian activists lacked a “theory of intervention in reality” that was grounded in the “analytical contact with existence which enables one to substantiate and to experience that existence fully and completely” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 33). Such cultural alienation crippled attempts to transform Brazilian society (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 33). For the Catholic students in JUC, the increasing orientation towards “intervention” into the “Brazilian reality” among intellectual circles brought a fundamental question to light: how does a lay organization formally subordinated to the Church assume concrete political positions, in light of the hierarchy’s disapproval? JUC was grappling with what De Kadt has called its central existential problem – the struggle to “find a course between the Scylla of excessive theorizing and the Charybdis of concrete political commitments” (*Catholic Radicals* 62).

This organizational crisis also ushered in a greater willingness to criticize the economic policies of the government. Brazil’s Catholic intellectuals grappled with large-scale issues such as the technological underdevelopment of their society, the country’s “dependence” on foreign economic interests, the apparent failure of capitalism to end poverty and inequality, and the need to cultivate an “authentic” and “non-colonized” popular culture (Paiva 157).¹⁶⁴ Such questions

¹⁶⁴ These issues reflected the influence of modern Catholic theology, particularly Mounier’s emphasis on individual responsibility and societal authenticity. Along these lines, Freire viewed Brazil as a “dependent society” whose “voice is not...authentic...but merely an echo of the voice of the metropolis” (“Cultural Action and Conscientization” 504). He compared these relations of domination to social relationships within Brazil itself, where the “power elites...silence their people in turn” (504). He attributed the “closed” “mutist,” and “alienated” nature of Brazilian society to the enduring legacy of Portuguese rule, as well as the “habits of domination and dependence” left over from plantation culture (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 20). Thus, “the excess of power” that characterized Brazilian culture created “an almost masochistic desire to submit to that power” and “led men to *adapt* and *adjust* to their circumstances, instead of seeking to integrate themselves into reality” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 21, emphasis in original).

reflected a new insistence on investigating the *structural* roots of Brazil's social ills. They also expressed a nationalistic rejection of Western socioeconomic models. In many universities, academic curriculums began shifting towards "objective" forms of social science and away from the abstract philosophizing "that [had] passed for sociology in Brazilian Catholic circles" (Sanders 89).

In addition to these issues, JUC took up the question of university reform. The members demanded reforms including democratizing university culture, "de-alienating" and modernizing the curriculum, and increasing access to higher education to broad segments of the population. They reflected on the value and purpose of university education, the role of intellectuals in society, and ultimately the future course of the country (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 68). Thus, JUC's involvement in students politics provided a bridge to larger societal concerns. Its members began discussing the "interrelationship of university and national problems, as well as the responsibility of Catholics to act upon them" (Sanders 90). Given their failure to bring about substantial university reforms despite numerous strikes and demonstrations, the students grew to believe that institutional changes would come about only after major changes in the society were accomplished. This insight led to a rise in student participation in activities that were based outside the universities, particularly those that involved political and educational work with the poor (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 69).¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁵ Reflecting these currents, many middle-class adult Catholics (including Freire) were establishing social service and educational projects in cities like Recife, Belo Horizonte, and Natal (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 65). The JUC branch in Freire's home city of Recife was particularly active; it had focused on public health issues as early as 1957, and by 1958 its members were already active in the city's slums (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 62). This immersion in the living conditions of the poor provoked shock and indignation among the budding activists, and it fed into their gradual radicalization.

An event that catalyzed the gathering activist energy within JUC was the arrival of a French Dominican friar named Thomas Cardonnel, who published a series of articles based on his Brazilian sociological research in July 1960. The famous “Cardonnel incident” electrified Brazil’s young Catholic activists. His scholarship, which was published in a university student journal, “marked the watershed between the thought of two generations” (De Kadt, *JUC and AP* 199). For young activists, who had drawn increasing criticism from Catholic conservatives, Cardonnel became a powerful symbol of the continued relevance of their religious heritage to contemporary social problems (Sanders 91). In his writings and lectures, Cardonnel condemned the “hypocrisy” of the Brazilian Church in colluding with the unjust status quo. He challenged reflexive anti-Communism in mainstream Catholic thought (Sanders 91).¹⁶⁶ Denouncing the concept of “social harmony” that dominated the Church’s teaching, he declared:

We can never insist enough on the need to denounce natural harmony, class collaboration. God is not so dishonest, so false as a certain kind of social peace, consisting in the acquiescence of all in an unnatural injustice. *Violence is not only a fact of revolution. It also characterizes the maintenance of a false order.* (qtd. in De Kadt, *JUC and AP* 201, emphasis added)

With such statements, Cardonnel broke decisively with Jacques Maritain regarding the viability of class harmony. For Cardonnel, social conflict was unavoidable. His fiery pronouncements resonated with many members of JUC, who had begun to view political struggle as the only way to redress the inequities of Brazilian society. The overwhelmingly positive reception bestowed

¹⁶⁶ Cardonnel also declared: “After eight months in Brazil, I think that the first and most urgent problem is the fight against misery, against the brutal fact that the majority of men do not have an elementary possibility of living like men...To contest the legitimacy of this fight for men...and in the name of a Communist danger, seems to be the worst of impostures” (qtd. in Sanders 91-2).

upon Cardonnel by JUC signaled its radicalization. Unsurprisingly, Cardonnel was harshly censured by conservative Catholics, including members of the hierarchy. Under intense pressure, the Dominican order sent him out of the country. Describing Cardonnel's impact, one student stated: "[He] inaugurates in Brazil a new stage in Christian social-philosophical thought: this stage in which the Christian encounters history and adheres to its factuality through incarnation¹⁶⁷ itself" (qtd. in Sanders 92). From Cardonnel's visit onwards, the already tense relationship between younger and older Catholics seemed to break down for good (Sanders 92).

The middle of 1960 witnessed another watershed event for Catholic activism in Brazil. At JUC's annual council, the delegates unveiled a manifesto that articulated a sharper critique of capitalism than had ever been articulated by an explicitly Catholic group in Brazilian history.¹⁶⁸ JUC's 1960 declaration called for Brazil to overcome its underdevelopment, break free from the "gravitational field" of capitalism, and unfetter itself from its "dependence" upon wealthy nations. It was a sweeping theological rejection of the political and economic status quo. Reflecting the growing influence of Mounier's Christian Personalism, the manifesto called for Brazil's economy to reflect the needs of the people, thus becoming a "personal economy of persons and for persons, using means which are appropriate to persons" (qtd. in De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 67). Labor must be given primacy over capital, and private property must be replaced by a system of "personalization" for all citizens, "with due regard to the higher

¹⁶⁷ The term "incarnation" captured the Catholic activists' commitment to social transformation *within* history. In Catholic belief, the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth represented the "in-breaking" of the divine into actual history.

¹⁶⁸ The attendance roll at JUC's 1960 National Congress reflected the energized mood of the movement. Rather than the usual twenty or so delegates, the event drew over five hundred students from throughout the country (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 66).

requirements of the common good”¹⁶⁹ (qtd. in De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 67). The delegates called for workers to become co-managers in their industries, and for the Brazilian masses to receive a fair share of the fruits of their labor (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 67). The delegates also criticized the “anonymous” nature of social relations within capitalist structures.¹⁷⁰

The 1960 manifesto was grounded upon a vision of a just and democratic “society of persons.” In this regard, the delegates were particularly influenced by the scholarship of a young Brazilian priest, Almerly Bezerra. He urged JUC to develop a “more systematic development of a body of thought...which would provide the basic ideas to orient all [social] action” (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 62). According to Bezerra, JUC needed a more “scientific” program of action than could be derived from Christianity alone. Such laudable goals as “creating a Christian social order” or “restoring all things to Christ” were too vague in light of the complex social ills facing Brazil (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 63). On the other hand, social scientists had accumulated a great deal of technical knowledge, but they were unmoored to any moral or theological compass. Bezerra proposed that Catholic activism needed to be guided by a synthesis of “eternal” theological principles with “scientific” social analysis. By combining these elements, JUC could derive a set of “intermediate principles” which express a “Christian

¹⁶⁹ Despite the ascendancy of Mounier’s influence, the rhetoric of the “common good” reflected the Catholic activists’ continuing theological debt to Maritain’s conciliatory vision of social relations.

¹⁷⁰ Similarly, Freire declared: “By requiring a man to behave mechanically, mass production domesticates him. By separating his activity from the total project, requiring no total critical attitude toward production, it dehumanizes him. By excessively narrowing a man’s specialization, it constricts his horizons, making of him a passive, fearful, naïve being...One cannot solve this contradiction by defending outmoded and inadequate patterns of production...The answer does not lie in the rejection of the machine, but rather in the humanization of man” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 31). In a telling footnote, Freire added: “On this topic, I recommend the valuable analysis of Emmanuel Mounier” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 35).

historical ideal” (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 63). These “intermediate principles” would guide individuals in making moral and political choices appropriate to their historical moment.

Bezerra emphasized that such “intermediate principles” must be derived through social action and personal experience, not just through reflection and theoretical knowledge. Notably, Bezerra’s theory of a “Christian historical idea” was drawn from the theology of Maritain, who stated in *Integral Humanism*:

A concrete historical ideal is...an ideal *essence* which is realizable (with more or less difficulty, more or less imperfectly...and not as a finished thing, but as a thing in process), an essence able to exist and called to exist in a given historical atmosphere, and as a result corresponding to a *relative* maximum (relative to that historical state) of social and political perfection. (qtd. in De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 63, emphasis in original)

Bezerra channeled these ideas into JUC, thus providing the Catholic activists with a dialectical theory of social action that fused “eternal” religious values with contemporary social science.¹⁷¹

His presentation was welcomed warmly by the delegates, as it resonated with their efforts to develop a theological perspective for Christian historical engagement (Sanders 92).

As JUC’s reflection deepened, the groundwork laid by Bezerra was taken up and expanded by Henrique de Lima Vaz. Lima Vaz was one of the most brilliant and radical members of the Brazilian clergy. Assigned by the hierarchy to mentor JUC, his work generated tremendous enthusiasm among the membership. As Brazil’s socio-political terrain spiraled towards the 1964 coup, Lima Vaz grew into the most influential Brazilian theologian of his generation (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 70). Like Bezerra, Lima Vaz was interested in the

¹⁷¹ In Freirean terms, the “historical ideal” might correspond to the concept of “limit acts” against “limit situations,” which amount to “untested feasibility.”

“philosophical and theological bases of modern change,” and he sought to reconcile the “universal truths” of Christianity with the concrete problems of modern Brazil (Sanders 89, 92). Building upon Bezerra’s concept of “historical ideal,” he developed a theory of “historical consciousness” that affirmed the Christian “vocation” to be shapers of history.¹⁷² For Lima Vaz, the “essence” of Christianity consisted of “the Existence and Action of Christ, which is located and exercised in the very heart of history” (qtd. in Sanders 92-3). In other words, Christianity is a profoundly historical phenomenon; it was not just transcendent but immanent as well. Lima Vaz viewed “historical consciousness” as arising from “conscious and critical reflection on the historical process,” with present history “understood as a result of the past and as a potentiality for the future” (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 87). “Historical consciousness” results from one’s critical examination of the world, whereas “history unfolds in an empirical time-span, which is given substance by the action of man in the form of historical initiative; action, that is, which transforms the world” (qtd. in De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 88). Lima Vaz’ concept of “historical consciousness” provided a theological justification for social action. For the young Jesuit, Christian historical activity, which “humanizes the world,”¹⁷³ had to be grounded on a critical perception of the “real conditions found in the here and now” (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 88). Reflecting Mounier’s thought, Lima Vaz declared: “The person encounters, in the participation in an absolutely personal and concretely universal Center of history, the basis of his historical action: he cooperates then in a real process of *personalization* of the universe” (qtd. in Sanders

¹⁷² Lima Vaz’s “historical consciousness” is a philosophical forerunner of Freire’s notion of “critical consciousness.” Both thinkers were advocating for conscious intervention in history in the name of establishing a more humane world.

¹⁷³ Echoing these ideas, Freire opens *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by affirming that “the problem of humanization has always...been humankind’s central problem” (43).

93, emphasis in original). Through social action, Catholics participate in a “historical process directed toward human possibilities and fulfillment into which the Christian conscience inserts itself” (qtd. in Sanders 93). Moreover, Christians who refuse to “shoulder the destiny of creation” are guilty of “original sin” (qtd. in De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 88). In Lima Vaz’s theology, God is not “a cosmic power operating in mythical time, but a Word which unpredictably breaks the regularity of worldly time...and provokes man to accept a historical destiny” to help bring about “the historical realization of the Kingdom of God” (qtd. in De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 88).

Elements of Lima Vaz’s work found their way into Freire’s educational philosophy. Both men were powerfully focused with the relationship between consciousness and historical change. Like Lima Vaz, Freire underscored the historical dimension of human existence:

If we reflect on the fact that our human condition is one of essential incompleteness, that as a consequence, we are incomplete in our being and in our knowing, then it becomes obvious that we are “programmed” to learn, destined by our very incompleteness to seek completeness, to have a “tomorrow” that adds to our “today.” In other words, wherever there are men and women, there is always an inevitably something to be done, to be completed, to be taught, and to be learned. In my opinion, none of this makes any sense if attempted outside the socio-historical context in which men and women find themselves, and within which they discover their vocation to find “completeness,” to become “more.” (*Pedagogy of Freedom* 79, emphasis added).

Human beings are permanently “in the process of coming to be” (*Pedagogy of Freedom* 25).¹⁷⁴ The present moment, which is always incomplete, is the product of the past and holds potentiality for the future (Mackie 100). For human beings, “there is no *here* relative to a *there* that is not connected to a *now*, a *before*, and an *after*. Thus [persons’] relationships with the world are per se historical, as are [persons] themselves” (“Cultural Action and Conscientization” 502, emphasis in original). As historical beings, “we know ourselves to be *conditioned* by not *determined*,” so we are capable of “recognizing that History is time filled with possibility and not inexorably determined – that the future is *problematic* and not already decided, fatalistically” (*Pedagogy of Freedom* 26, emphasis in original). Like Lima Vaz, Freire believed that critical reflection on the material world and on the process of historical change gives rise to an awareness of human agency: “Only beings who can reflect upon the fact that they are determined are capable of freeing themselves” (“Cultural Action and Conscientization” 500).¹⁷⁵ The “point of departure” for this reflection “must always be with men and women in the ‘here and now,’ which constitutes the situation in which they are submerged, from which they emerge, and in which they intervene” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 85). History and the material world are “humanized” through conscious, creative intervention, which is grounded in the dialectic between reflection and transformative activity: “For men, as beings of praxis, to transform the world is to humanize it...because they impregnate the world with their reflective presence, only men can humanize or dehumanize” (“Cultural Action and Conscientization” 501-2). Social

¹⁷⁴ Similarly, “Man [is] a being who exists *in* and *with* the world” (“Cultural Action and Conscientization” 499, emphasis in original).

¹⁷⁵ Likewise, “Conscientization is viable only because men’s consciousness, although conditioned, can recognize that it is conditioned...Whereas animals adapt themselves to the world to survive, men modify the world in order to *be more*” (“Cultural Action and Conscientization” 501, emphasis in original).

structures that prevent human development and well-being must be eradicated. Just as Lima Vaz called on Christians to “shoulder the destiny of creation,” Freire affirmed that human beings have the “ontological vocation to intervene in the world” (*Pedagogy of Freedom* 55) and to struggle against injustice. Thus, “insofar as I am a conscious presence in the world, I cannot hope to escape my ethical responsibility for my action in the world” (*Pedagogy of Freedom* 26). For Freire and his fellow Catholic activists, it was crucial to trust in the ability of human beings to shape history and be agents of their own destiny. One of Lima Vaz’s greatest contributions to the Catholic Left was his vigorous affirmation that historical agency was always possible. As the leading Brazilian religious thinker of the pre-coup era, he provided a sophisticated theological framework for Christian activism. His influence upon the Catholic youth movement was especially visible in JUC’s 1960 manifesto, which sought to combine “universal” Catholic principles (“humanization” and “personalization”) with socioeconomic proposals that were specific to modern Brazilian society (the abolition of capitalism, profit-sharing between workers and employers, nationalization of the commanding heights of the economy).

By 1961, the radicalization of JUC was fully underway. Early in the summer, Aldo Arantes, a prominent leader of the Catholic student movement, was elected president of the National Student Union. This electoral outcome was the result of a coalition between JUC with Communists and other leftist groups (Sanders 94). In August, President Quadros resigned after seven difficult and frustrating months in office. His succession by Joao Goulart, a former labor organizer, thrilled the Catholic students. In addition many Catholic activists were shifting from nationalist developmentalism to socialism. They had grown disillusioned with Brazil’s bourgeoisie, which seemed to lack the capacity or motivation to reject Brazil’s “dependence,” much less overturn capitalism itself. Many Catholic activists began assisting the formation of a

united front of workers and peasants, viewing it as the next necessary step to broad social transformation (Sanders 94-5). Through the early 1960s, thousands of young Catholics started participating in a wide range of “popular” activities. JUC’s collaboration with secular groups, as well as its increasingly revolutionary positions, reflected the degree to which the organization had drifted away from the hierarchy’s control (Sanders 95). By mid-1961, relations between the students and the bishops had deteriorated, with most of the clergy deeply alarmed by JUC’s radicalization (De Kadt, *JUC and AP* 205). At JUC’s 1961 national council, a visiting Church spokesperson issued an “extremely strong statement” forbidding the students from making further radical declarations or engaging in “undesirable political activities” (De Kadt, *JUC and AP* 205). Singling out JUC’s interest in socialist ideas, he declared: “Christians cannot consider socialism a solution to socioeconomic and political problems, much less the solution. In discussing the Brazilian revolution, JUC cannot consider a doctrine that espouses violence as a valid and acceptable” (qtd. in Mainwaring 62). The hierarchy expelled Arantes from the youth group due to his radical positions as the president of the National Student Union. The institutional Church had reached the limit of its tolerance, even as the young activists were no longer willing to be controlled from above. A crisis had broken out,

as members of JUC, the only nationwide Catholic organization in the universities, the students had embarked together in an exciting journey of discovery. On this journey they had met others, non-Catholics, similarly engaged, and they were proud of what they had found and committed to hold on to it...it was intolerable that the bishops now wanted to control them. JUC was their organization, they had shaped it into what it now was, they made use of its structures to think and act together. (De Kadt, *JUC and AP* 207)

This standoff reflected the new dynamic between the hierarchy and the emboldened cohort of activists. As a result of this crisis, most of JUC's most politicized and socially active members migrated to other leftist organizations, including Freire's rapidly expanding literacy campaign. JUC entered a period of terminal decline. In last few years leading up to its formal dissolution in 1966, the attention of its remaining members turned away from activism and towards abstract, philosophical reflection. From 1961 onwards, the main outlets for leftist Catholic activism were Popular Action, the Movement for Grassroots Education (MEB), and Freire's literacy project (Mainwaring 63-4).

III. Popular Action (AP)

JUC's successor Popular Action (AP) was the peak of radical Catholic student activism. AP had started to coalesce by mid-1961 and was officially launched the following June, with less than two years to go before the military takeover. In this brief period, AP became one of the most active leftist groups in the country. Its members played key leadership roles in union work, popular education, and peasant organizing (Mainwaring 64).¹⁷⁶ From the start, the organization drew many non-Catholics, and it seemed to have attracted adherents from outside the small orbit of elite universities that had constituted JUC's home base (De Kadt, *JUC and AP* 208). Yet while the membership of AP was somewhat more diverse than JUC's, it was still largely composed of young, highly-educated, middle-class students and recent graduates. In this regard, the composition of AP was highly similar to the staff implementing Freire's literacy campaign, which was gaining national attention at this time. Tellingly, AP was less successful in

¹⁷⁶ As a result, AP activists reportedly suffered more brutal treatment at the hands of the military junta after April 1964 than did the members of any other leftist group.

establishing itself in Recife than in other parts of the country. This may have been due to the existence of other forms of leftist activity, including Freire's educational work (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 82).

Mindful of JUC's fate, AP rejected any formal ties with the Church from the outset. The new organization was composed exclusively of laypersons.¹⁷⁷ Popular Action wanted to avoid being perceived as a Christian movement. However, "neither the bishops' [hostile] attitude toward AP nor its lack of a formal connection to the institutional Church [could] obscure its Catholic origin and imprint" (Mainwaring 64). Its ranks featured JUC's most socially-committed and politically active members. Moreover, radical clergy like Lima Vaz were deeply involved in guiding the movement's theological reflection. Despite the organization's efforts to present a non-denominational public identity, it was widely and accurately regarded as a "para-Christian organization" (De Kadt, *JUC and AP* 209).

By AP's emergence onto the national stage in 1962, the lack of social engagement that had been prevalent among Catholics in previous decades was long gone (De Kadt, *JUC and AP* 208). Social action was paramount for Popular Action's members, who constantly emphasized the unity of theory and practice. They were deeply concerned with enacting their personal "commitment," professing an idiosyncratic synthesis of Catholicism, Marxism, and Existentialism that reflected the profound impact of Mounier.

In late 1962, the AP released a remarkably radical "Base Document" that articulated the group's philosophical tenets in Christian Personalist terms:

¹⁷⁷ Sympathetic priests and bishops continued to contribute to the movement in advisory roles, on the expectation that if they joined the group, they would receive the status of "citizen" (Sanders 96).

Our single commitment...is with man. With the Brazilian man, above all. He who is born with the shadow of premature death extending itself over his cradle. Who lives with the specter of hunger inhabiting his miserable roof, accompanying inseparably his uncertain steps, the steps of one who journeys through life without hope and without aim. Who grows up brutalized and illiterate, exiled from the benefits of culture, from creative possibilities, from the authentically human ways of real liberty. Who dies an animal and anonymous death, stretched out on the hard floor of his misery. (qtd. in Sanders 96)

In condemning the brutalization of the poor and calling for the establishment of a society that nurtures “authentically human ways of real liberty,” AP avowed its central concern: the defense of human well-being. Full human development could only take place after capitalism is abolished, since this economic system only leads to ever-increasing relationships of domination and alienation between nations and between persons (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 91).

Dismantling the market economy and establishing a socialist-humanist society would constitute “a victory for humanity as subject of the socialization process” (qtd. in Mainwaring 64).¹⁷⁸

Explicitly reflecting Mounier’s thought, the Base Document professed: “It is the movement of recognition, of *personalization*, and of solidarity which orients History...and provides the ultimate standard for historically valid options, and the very measure of the human” (qtd. in De Kadt, *JUC and AP* 211, emphasis added). AP viewed “man” as “a free, transcendent being” who is the “norm and end of history” (Sanders 96). Accordingly, social structures should be remade

¹⁷⁸ At this moment, AP was far more radical than Freire, who embraced revolutionary Marxism only after being expelled from Brazil. Before April 1964, he was primarily concerned with economic development, electoral reform, and the revitalization of Brazil’s popular culture (Palmer and Newsom 186). Despite these differences, Freire and Popular Action were in broad agreement in terms of their populism, humanism, and Christian Existentialism (De Kadt, *JUC and AP* 217).

to suit human needs, not vice versa. Like the French Catholic philosopher, Popular Action viewed capitalism as the primary obstacle to the establishment of a “society of persons” where relationships are grounded on cooperation, respect, freedom, and “openness to the other.” As Mounier asserted, “The economy of the person is an economy of gifts, not one of compensation and calculation” (qtd. in De Kadt, *JUC and AP* 213). In this envisioned “society of persons,” responsible human persons can make free and conscious choices in their everyday lives. AP placed tremendous emphasis on the human capacity to shape history – a concept was also central to Freire’s educational philosophy. As mentioned in Chapter One, his literacy project was grounded upon his conviction that illiterate peasants already possessed the capacity to become makers of culture and protagonists of their own destiny (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 41).

AP’s Base Document also referred to the process of “socialization” as the central line of human development: “The fact of socialization presides...over the emergence of human history, and appears as the fundamental matrix for the interpretation of its evolution” (qtd. in De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 87). This language directly echoed John XXIII’s newly-published encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, wherein the pope defined “socialization” as the “progressive multiplication of relations in society, with different forms of life and activity, and juridical institutionalization” (qtd. in Mackie 98). Furthermore, the pope affirmed that “socialization” was “the fruit and expression of a natural tendency, almost irrepressible, in human beings – the tendency to join together to attain objectives which are beyond the capacity and means at the disposal of single individuals” (qtd. in Mackie 98). John XXIII’s statements signaled the Church’s approval for “the activities of those who struggled *together* in the pursuit of goals which were beyond them individually” (Mackie 98, emphasis added). Similarly, Freire argued that “humanization” was a

social process, not an individual one; “no one liberates himself by his own efforts alone” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 66). Freire’s dialogic pedagogy emphasized that human beings “cannot think, speak, read, write, learn, or *be* alone. To *be human* is to be a social being. Humans are beings of relationships: beings whose very existence cannot be comprehended without reference to others” (Roberts 192, emphasis in original). Thus, the “pursuit of full humanity cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 85). Freire’s view, which mirrored that of AP, the development of human potential could only occur through cooperation and solidarity.

Another influential theological formulation of “socialization” was generated by the late Jesuit philosopher, anthropologist, and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955). His work was posthumously circulating among Brazil’s Catholic intellectuals (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 86). Teilhard described “socialization” as a “process of growth among humanity which was the result of an ultimately inevitable and irreversible dynamic grounded in the biological and psychosocial nature of human beings” (Mackie 99). He viewed the drive towards “socialization” as built into the very nature of human beings. Fusing his training in paleontology and theology, Teilhard envisioned a cosmic arch of evolution wherein humanity is pulled towards a mystical final state. This “Point Omega” is conceived as the “Man-God whose second coming will bring about the plenitude of the universe of persons” (Mackie 99). Although Teilhard conceded that time and manner of this ultimate revelation (“Point Omega”) was unknowable, he believed that humanity’s arrival is guaranteed by God’s redeeming presence within history (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 87). For Teilhard, history is being progressively and irreversibly “hominised” by the emergence of conscious, reflective human activity over vast spans of time (Elias 40).

Brazil's Catholic activists eagerly adapted these innovative concepts. AP's Base Document affirmed the centrality of "socialization" to human existence, describing it as "the fundamental matrix for the interpretation of evolution" (qtd. in De Kadt, *JUC and AP* 209). Similarly, Freire proposed that the "original source" of the conscientization process "is that point far off in time that Teilhard de Chardin calls 'hominisation,' when human beings made themselves capable of revealing their active reality, knowing it and understanding what they know" (*Politics of Education* 172).¹⁷⁹ Drawing on Teilhard's *The Appearance of Man*, he added that "man is not only 'a being who knows' but 'a being who knows he knows'" ("Cultural Action and Conscientization" 519). For Freire, this conscious and creative human stance towards the world can lead to "the exercise of a profoundly transforming action" upon it ("Cultural Action and Conscientization" 500). As human beings become increasingly "hominised" by their reflective and transformative action within history, they "become capable of having a biography" ("Cultural Action and Conscientization" 502). In contrast, animals can only "live a life without time...submerged in life with no possibility of emerging from it, adjusted and adhering to reality" ("Cultural Action and Conscientization" 499-500). In one of his most memorable statements, Freire described conscious human activity as "impregnating the world with man's curious and inventive presence, imprinting it with the trace of his works" ("Cultural Action and Conscientization" 501). Freire's foregrounding of the "anthropological notion of culture" in his literacy circles, which proposed the idea that all human beings have the

¹⁷⁹ According to Gadotti, Freire's interpretation of "hominisation" points to "the evolutionary stage of the world when man and woman appeared; in other words, when the capacity to reflect and act on reality in order to transform it appeared" (166). See Chapter Four for an examination of the theological dimension of "conscientization."

capacity to be creators of culture and shapers of history (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 41), can be seen as a pedagogical expression of Teilhard's concept of "hominisation."

As demonstrated by the wide dissemination of these ideas among Brazil's Catholic activists, they were deeply preoccupied with the relationship between consciousness and historical change. Henrique Lima Vaz theorized that "historical consciousness" developed from critical reflection on historical processes, where the present is understood as resulting from the past and holding the seeds of the future. Thus, the concrete "conflicts, contradictions, and undesirable aspects of reality" became completely relevant to social analysis and historical intervention (De Kadt, *JUC and AP* 210). He emphasized the inescapable necessity for clear comprehension of historical conditions in order to determine the most fruitful course of social action. Furthermore, critical reflection on the world and the unfolding historical process fosters an awareness of one's capacity to transform them in positive, "humanizing" ways. Echoing Teilhard, Lima Vaz argued that "historical consciousness" emerges when human beings realize that "history unfolds in an empirical time span, which is given substance by the action of man in the form of historical initiative, action, that is, which transforms the world" (qtd. in De Kadt, *JUC and AP* 210). For Popular Action as well as Freire, the concept of "historical consciousness" sanctioned and energized their option to struggle for a society constructed along Christian-Personalist and humanist-socialist lines (Sanders 96). Collective action to "humanize" the world, based on a clear understanding of the concrete historical conditions in concert with trans-historical ideals of justice, was now considered the central vocation of Christian life (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 88).

Moreover, Popular Action added a crucial dimension to the concept of "socialization" that was largely absent in the theologies of Teilhard and John XXIII: the conflictive nature of

human societies. They professed that historical change requires conflict and struggle. This was a reflection of Lima Vaz's background in Hegelian thought (De Kadt, *JUC and AP* 209). In the Brazilian Jesuit's formulation: "History, till today, has always been this: one man who dominated another, or human groups which dominated other groups, in the most varied ways possible" (qtd. in De Kadt, *JUC and AP* 210). For AP, "the central tool for the dissection of Brazilian reality became the conceptual pair *polo dominante* and *polo dominado* (dominant and dominated pole), obviously derived from the historical principle of the dialectics of domination (De Kadt, *JUC and AP* 214). This was a tremendous departure from the social harmony envisioned by Catholic activists in the not-so-distant past. In accordance with this radical new stance, AP's Base Document stated: "The dialectic of History presents a hard countenance of strife: it is the multiplication of forms of domination on all planes of human reality" (qtd. in De Kadt, *JUC and AP* 211).

Yet despite acknowledging the reality of societal dialectics, Lima Vaz denied that relationships of conflict and domination are the "final synthesis" or "ultimate meaning" of human history (qtd. in De Kadt, *JUC and AP* 210). Rather, historical conflict would very gradually give rise to social relationships characterized by "the synthesis in terms of recognition, reconciliation, acceptance of man by man...as a person" (qtd. in De Kadt, *JUC and AP* 210). Lima Vaz envisioned this motion towards ultimate "reconciliation" as unfolding over the entire span of human existence:

The problem of the advance of history is that of the permanent overcoming, in ever wider and more universal circles, of domination by reconciliation. This shows us history as a kind of asymmetric movement, tending toward final reconciliation. That moment, for the

Christian, is situated in a historical perspective; the eschatological hope of the final manifestation of God to man. (qtd. in De Kadt, *JUC and AP* 210)¹⁸⁰

Lima Vaz's teleological vision was in line with the cosmic narrative offered by Teilhard, with humanity evolving towards a "Point Omega," where the "Man-God" would bring about the full flourishing of human potential (Mackie 99). While Lima Vaz viewed history as saturated by domination, brutality, and exploitation, he also affirmed its development towards the triumph of love and justice. His profoundly hopeful view resonated deeply with the young Catholic activists. Thus, while the members of Popular Action affirmed that oppressive social structures could not be overcome without conflict, their Christian commitment also provided them with a profoundly optimistic interpretation of human destiny.

Popular Action's Existentialist commitment to authenticity and human agency also informed its populist orientation, which was characterized by an abhorrence of "any action curtailing the freedom of choice of the people or that forces them in directions that are not genuinely of their own" (De Kadt, *JUC and AP* 214). AP echoed Mounier's deep concern with "authenticity through free options" (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 93). As such, the group was deeply critical of political movements and leaders that "manipulated" the poor. Many Christian activists had come to view President Goulart as a traditionally paternalistic Brazilian politician who manipulated the poor for his own electoral interests. They also mistrusted Brazil's two main Marxist-Communist groups because of their perceived paternalism and opportunism.

¹⁸⁰ Lima Vaz believed that the final emergence of the "Kingdom of God" would occur "beyond" temporal history. While human beings could strive to approximate or bring it closer, it could never be achieved "inside" history. In this regard, he was in accordance with traditional Church teaching, which emphasized the limits of human action and humanity's ultimate dependence on God's gracious, redemptive action. Crucially, this orthodoxy was not meant to stultify social action or condemn human beings for trying to transform the world. Rather, it meant to emphasize the absolute sovereignty of God and to warn against human hubris.

However, this populist stance did not mean that AP rejected the need to “awaken” and mobilize the Brazilian poor, which required the initial intervention from outsiders.¹⁸¹ Similarly, Freire affirmed that revolutionary leaders “do bear the responsibility for coordination and, at times, direction” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 126). However, *all* of the Catholic activists, regardless of organizational affiliation, repeatedly stressed that revolutionary leadership must be always grounded in democratic methods and respect for the masses (Mainwaring 65). In the Base Document, AP dedicated itself to safeguarding “the freedom of the development of people, the possibility of their expression, and the expression of their will” (qtd. in Mainwaring 65).¹⁸²

Likewise, Freire emphasized the dialogic responsibilities of revolutionary leadership:

The leaders...do not own the people and have no right to steer the people blindly towards their salvation. Such a salvation would be a mere gift from the leaders to the people – a breaking of the dialogical bond between them, and a reducing of the people from co-authors of liberating action into the objects of this action. (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 168)

However, since the poor have been stultified and “dehumanized” by their brutal living conditions, and since they lack the theoretical knowledge to interpret the structural causes of their poverty, the purposeful intervention of an outside group remains necessary (Sanders 97). In this regard, the Catholic activists attempted to reconcile non-manipulation with directiveness. They

¹⁸¹ The role of activist elites vis-à-vis “the people” was a vexing issue for the Catholic populists, especially those directly involved with conscientizing education. In the Base Document, AP described its vocation as helping to organize the poor through a “policy of revolutionary preparation” (qtd. in Sanders 97).

¹⁸² Along these lines, AP criticized the Soviet Union for its “hypertrophy of political power,” its “mythical consecration of the party apparatus,” and its “ideological fetishism” (qtd. in Mainwaring 65).

participated vigorously in union work and peasant organizing from 1962 until the April 1964 coup. AP supported two massive strikes in Pernambuco in 1963, which drew over three hundred thousand farm workers. By the eve of the 1964 coup, AP had fully assumed the mission of fostering a revolutionary consciousness among the poor, in anticipation of the coming “Brazilian Revolution” (Mainwaring 65).

Unsurprisingly, Popular Action was largely decimated by the military dictatorship after April 1964. With many of its activists imprisoned or killed, the remnants of AP went underground. Its surviving members adopted Maoist positions, culminating in their endorsement of armed struggle. The remnants of AP let itself become absorbed by one of Brazil’s largest Communist groups in 1973. In its last decade, Popular Action rejected any remaining links to its Christian roots (Mainwaring 65). Despite this fate, AP had already made an indelible contribution to Catholic activism in Brazil: “At a time when the bishops had started to close other channels for radical Catholic participation in politics, Popular Action created a new possibility that was no longer dependent on the hierarchy” (Mainwaring 65).

IV. The Movement for Basic Education (MEB)

Much of the activist energy within progressive Catholic circles in the late 1950s and early 1960s poured into two primary channels that promoted conscientization: literacy programs (most notably Freire’s experiments and the Movement for Basic Education) and the more generalized Popular Culture Movement¹⁸³ (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 102). There was a great deal of

¹⁸³ The Popular Culture Movement (MCP) was an informal coalition of like-minded organizations throughout the country. Miguel Arraes, the dynamic leftist mayor of Recife, was a driving force behind MCP. The populist activists who formed the bulk of the movement saw “Brazilian culture in general and the existing popular culture in particular were seen as imposed and alienated culture” (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 105). They focused on stimulating the

“give and take” between Freire’s literacy campaign and the MEB in the Northeast from late 1962 onwards (Elias 6). This was hardly surprising, given their shared roots in the era’s activist Catholicism. The MEB was established in early 1961 by the CNBB, with funding from the Quadros administration. According to the terms of the agreement between the bishops and the national government, the hierarchy would organize and administer the MEB, which would spearhead the establishment of radio broadcast schools throughout the countryside. These radio schools would provide literacy instruction to groups of 10 to 15 peasant learners, mostly between the ages of 15 and 30. The “classes” would meet in the evening to listen to the lesson broadcasts.

development of an “authentic,” “de-alienated,” and non-authoritarian Brazilian culture. The work of MCP was fully aligned with the nationalist fervor of the period. MCP activists sought to reach the poor through plays, films, leaflets, mini-courses, and other cultural activities. Notably, these efforts focused on issues perceived to be of genuine concern to the masses. From the start, many of its most active members were Catholic students (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 104). Freire was a strong supporter of the MCP. “From the time of its foundation, [he] participated in the MCP and elaborated his literacy method as part of the movement” (Gadotti 163). He was convinced the Brazilian masses could learn social and political responsibility through participating in trade unions, associations, clubs, local councils, charitable societies. He also applauded the increasing “intervention” of the poor in “the life of their neighborhoods, churches, and rural communities” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 32). Like many of his intellectual peers, he considered Brazilian society in the midst of an epochal transition: “Brazil, in the 1950s and early 1960s, was precisely in this position of moving from one [historical] epoch to another...Brazil’s non-autonomous status had generated the theme of cultural alienation. Elite and masses alike lacked integration with the Brazilian reality. The elite lived “superimposed” upon that reality; the people, submerged within it” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 7). During this transitional period, the “silenced” and “submerged” poor were beginning to assert their right to “participate actively in the historical process” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 11). Conscientizing education would be crucial to supporting the emergence of the new society, since it would enable the poor to “reflect on themselves, their responsibilities, and their role in the new cultural climate,” and to reject irrational “sectarianism.” Critical awareness would ultimately enable the masses to participate with thoughtfulness, creativity, responsibility, and “authenticity” in this new epoch (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 13, 15). This kind of critical literacy project would also provide a much-needed corrective to the authoritarianism of Brazilian society: “Since our cultural history had not provided us even with habits of political and social solidarity appropriate to our democratic form of government, we had to appeal to education as a cultural action by means of which the Brazilian people could learn, in place of the old passivity, new attitudes and habits of participation and intervention” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 34).

“By radio people were taught to read and write, and on Sundays a worshipping community was formed to unite with the Mass being celebrated by the bishop” (Azevedo 27). Each literacy group was facilitated by a supervisor drawn from the local community. The supervisor, who always had at least a modicum of formal schooling, was responsible for “relaying the broadcast instructions to the students, checking their exercises, making them come to the blackboard, stimulating the slow ones, and leading discussions” (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 127). The supervisor, however, did not create the curriculum like Freire’s literacy coordinators, who were required to research local conditions and develop “generative themes” appropriate to the experience of the learners. In contrast, MEB’s curriculum design and distribution units were directed by a professional, centralized staff of teachers, radio announcers, technicians, and other supporting personnel who programmed and broadcasted the daily lessons. This reliance on an externally-prepared and uniformly-distributed curriculum constituted the most significant methodological difference between the MEB and Freire’s pedagogies. Like Freire’s literacy circles, the MEB employed visual prompts for lessons. These images depicted everyday objects and situations from peasant life, and they were used as a starting point for reflection on more abstract issues such as “the making of culture” and the structural roots of rural poverty. Like Freire’s literacy circles, the discussion groups in the radio schools addressed such politically volatile topics as “human labor and its history, labor and capital, organization and nobility of labor, occupational and class consciousness, and trade union organization” (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 152). However, while Freire’s literacy teams built their curriculum upon “generative themes” and words drawn from the local culture, the MEB educators relied on pre-prepared, centrally-designed materials.

One of the most famous educational tools created by the MEB was the textbook *Viver e Lutar* (To Live Means to Struggle), which was published in January 1964. Prepared by MEB representatives from throughout the country, the primer consisted of thirty lessons that were illustrated with photographs depicting familiar experiences from peasant life. *Viver e Lutar* aimed to stimulate reflection and discussion among the learners about matters of genuine interest and concern. However, the textbook generally declined to prescribe concrete courses of action, reflecting the MEB's populist commitment to non-manipulation (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 160). Despite the lack of prescriptions, the textbook often made definitive assertions about the living conditions of the poor. For example, Lesson 16 declared: "Some men have more than enough, while many have nothing at all. Some make too much. Many work and their work is exploited by others. A lot of things are wrong in Brazil. A complete change is needed in Brazil" (qtd. in De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 159). Similarly, Lesson 26 asserted: "The people of Brazil are an exploited people. Exploited not only by Brazilians. There are many foreigners exploiting us. How can we free Brazil from this situation?" (qtd. in De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 159). In contrast, while Freire's methodology posed problems also based on "existential" representations of the students' lived conditions, his literacy coordinators sought to avoid initiating discussion with such leading questions. Rather, they invited the learners to respond with their own verbal expressions, from which the subsequent discussion would develop. Thus, the MEB's method could be described as declarative and polemical in contrast to Freire's problem-posing approach. Moreover, Freirean educators proposed explicitly political issues (such as "the confrontation of wealth and poverty") only insofar as these subject matters fit organically into the generative themes drawn from the learners' concrete situations. In explaining his option for "generative" words and themes, Freire expressed his distrust of primers, "which set up a certain grouping of

graphic signs as a gift and cast the illiterate in the role of the *object* rather than the *Subject* of his learning. Primers, even when they try to avoid this pitfall, end by *donating* to the illiterate words and sentences which really should result from his own creative effort” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 43, emphasis in original). Thus, pre-prepared materials formulated at a distance from the learning site and prior to meeting the local students circumvented the dialogic and problem-posing processes that constituted the heart of Freire’s pedagogy.

The MEB’s use of teaching materials such as *Viver e Lutar* reflected the movement’s struggle to reconcile its ideological commitment to non-directiveness with its desire to organize militant mass movements for social change. Even in fertile periods of cultural and political upheaval like Brazil in the early 1960s, radical educators found the process of “awakening” the minds of the peasants exceedingly slow and difficult (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 112). Moreover, the turbulent period preceding the April 1964 coup constituted unfavorable conditions for a gradualist method of conscientizing education. As rural trade unions formed with unprecedented speed, the Catholic radicals found themselves faced with intense competition from secular leftist groups competing for the same constituencies. These “rival” organizations, most notably the Communist and Marxist parties, seemed to have no inhibitions with using “manipulative” (i.e. polemical and directive) tactics to win peasant support. As such, Catholic groups like the MEB felt pressured to choose between maintaining their “populist purity” or risk losing their already tenuous “grip on a social and political tool [the rural unions] which they regarded as being of the greatest importance” (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 268). They had come up against “circumstances which had to lead either to the abandonment of some of their principles and scruples, or of their hope of maintaining an effective grip on the course of events” (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 113). Moreover, in the heated atmosphere before the 1964 coup,

with the anticipated outbreak of the “Brazilian Revolution,” the revolutionary impulse outweighed the impetus towards non-directiveness (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 219). As a result, the MEB increasingly went “in the direction of the ‘opening of a revolutionary perspective’” (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 267). *Viver e Lutar* manifested the MEB’s conflicted perspective in 1963 and early 1964, reflecting the movement’s attempt to reconcile the tension “between the objective of contributing to a very specific social transformation...and the populist prescriptions of non-directiveness” (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 267).

Despite these difficulties, the MEB was genuinely committed to populism and non-manipulation. The Catholic activists believed that “basic” education should be geared towards helping peasants awaken to their potential to be transformative historical actors. Like Freire’s literacy project, which stressed the peasants’ already-existing ability to shape and reshape culture, the MEB rejected the deeply-ingrained belief among Brazilian elites that the masses lacked the ability (or the interest) to challenge their living conditions (Mainwaring 67). Both educational campaigns also stressed the need to respect the intelligence, culture, and values of the adult learners. They professed a non-manipulative view of education as a dialogue between all participants – even if carrying these ideals out in practice proved to be far more challenging.

Another similarity to Freire’s work was the MEB’s effort to enact its literacy work on an “integral” scale. Its educators were committed to viewing the peasants as “total human beings” with permanent potential for development (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 149). This reflected the shift in social thought within progressive elements of the Church over the last two decades, when “a whole new aspect of evangelization” began to circulate (Azevedo 26). According to this “integral” view of human existence, Christians were called to address the needs of “*the whole human being*...[of] a population marked by poverty, illness, ignorance, malnutrition, exploitation,

and injustice in the way the society was organized” (Azevedo 26, emphasis in original). Thus, MEB was following the theological path that had been worked out by its predecessors in the Catholic activist movement. Reflecting this newfound emphasis on “integral” education, the MEB dealt with subjects such as sanitary training, the cultivation of self-respect among the peasants, family and communal relationships, basic democratic principles and practices, and community organizing (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 151-152).

Like JUC and AP, the MEB eventually underwent a period of sharp ideological radicalization in the super-heated period leading up to April 1964. The watershed moment was the gathering of MEB leaders in December 1962. At this meeting, one speaker recounted Lima Vaz’s theology of social action, most notably his concepts of “historical consciousness,” the Christian meaning of history, and the religious vocation to transform the world – the same ideas which had powerfully energized the activists of Popular Action. At the same meeting, the consensus solidified that education must be viewed not just as the inculcation of literacy skills, but “as communication in the service of the *transformation* of the world” (De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 153, emphasis in original). Another speaker brought up the dialectical concepts of *polo dominante* and *polo dominando*, which had been anathema to the Church’s traditional social thought. By the conclusion of the December 1962 gathering, the MEB delegates affirmed their commitment

to contribute in a decisive mode to the integral development of the Brazilian people, taking into account the full dimensions of man and using all authentic processes of *conscientizacao*. This should...lead to a decisive transformation of mentalities and structures. That transformation seems to us, at the present moment, both necessary and urgent. (qtd. in De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 154)

The MEB leadership had articulated a revolutionary position, affirming the role of conscientization in this social struggle. Using language consistent with Freire's, the 1962 statement described conscientizing education as cultivating the development of "man's consciousness in the face of history," with the future being formed by "man developing himself, to the extent that he continually renews himself and continually transforms the world" (qtd. in De Kadt, *Catholic Radicals* 155).

By April 1964, MEB constituted one of the most highly-organized and active chapters of the Catholic activist movement. It played an especially prominent political role in the turbulent Brazilian Northeast, where it vigorously supported peasant mobilization. The radicalization of the MEB drew the ire of the bishops, who were concerned with reasserting hierarchical authority and alarmed by the movement's turn towards revolutionary politics. In the end, the relationship between the MEB and the hierarchy was following a similar pattern as the dynamic between JUC and the bishops. However, the MEB would actually survive the April 1964 coup – the only major experiment in popular education to do so, in contrast to the violent destruction of Freire's literacy campaign. This survival was largely due to the MEB's institutional ties to the Church, which lobbied strenuously on behalf of the group (Mainwaring 68). However, its days as a revolutionary presence on Brazil's political stage were over. In order to navigate an exceedingly dangerous post-coup political environment, the MEB retreated from its most radical positions and dramatically scaled down the scale of its operation. Exemplifying these developments, *Viver e Lutar* was replaced by a far more conciliatory primer which heavily emphasized harmony between peasants and landowners. However, the MEB constituted "the first major Catholic attempt to develop radical pastoral practices with [Brazil's] popular classes" (Mainwaring 68).

V. Conclusion

Despite its premature end, the Catholic Left movement was a remarkable political and theological phenomenon. It exemplified how an idealistic and committed cohort of leftist elites could have a socio-political impact that was far out of proportion with their numbers. Even though the April 1964 coup largely decimated its ranks, the Catholic youth groups had already made an indelible impact on the social and religious consciousness of an entire generation of young Brazilians. No longer would the laity be as passive and dependent on the hierarchy as in the past, and no longer could the hierarchy take for granted the unconditional obedience of its adherents. Brazil's Catholic radicals began to develop "one of the first uniquely Latin American theologies," and they constituted "one of the earliest reflections on the specificity of Catholic faith in the Third World" (Mainwaring 72). As discussed in the next chapter, the rise of Latin American liberation theology in the 1970s was indebted to the pioneering efforts of Brazil's Catholic activists. The Catholic lay movement's brief but intense period of activity also helped to make the Brazilian Church one of the most progressive in Latin America during its time (Mainwaring 73), and it paved the way for the emergence of the Brazil's celebrated Christian base community movement.¹⁸⁴ Most enduringly, the Catholic activists helped to introduce a new interpretation of the relationship between religious commitment and social action: "JUC's new vision of faith linked religion to radical social transformation; AP extended it into the first major expression of a synthesis of Christian humanism and socialism; and MEB and Paulo Freire made the vision concrete by educating the society's least fortunate members"

¹⁸⁴ See Marcello deC. Azevedo's *Basic Ecclesial Communities in Brazil: The Challenge of a New Way of Being Church* (1987).

(Mainwaring 72). While Freire would soon begin his rise to global prominence as a radical Marxist, his journey was rooted his generation's struggle to redefine what it meant to be a faithful Christian in the modern world.

Chapter Four:

Paulo Freire and the Theology of Liberation

Introduction

This chapter examines the fruitful relationship and extensive intersections between Freire's educational activism and Latin American liberation theology. These convergences include the practice of conscientizing education with the poor, the fruitful "encounter" with Marxist analysis, the emphasis on praxis, the conception of God as a partisan "liberator" of the disenfranchised and downtrodden, and the affirmation of the human "vocation" for creativity, social justice, dialogic (or "loving") interpersonal relationships, and historical agency.

By the late 1960s, many Latin American Christians had become aware of Freire's pioneering educational work. His radically democratic pedagogy resonated powerfully with the era's progressive Catholic thought, thus generating interest and excitement throughout leftist intellectual circles throughout the region (Torres 121). Many Latin American Catholics "came to see [Freire's pedagogy] as fitting very neatly into [their] emerging sense of how the church should opt for the poor" (Berryman 37). Tellingly, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was first published in 1968, the same year that over a hundred Latin American bishops gathered in Colombia for a landmark conference that constituted the major point of departure for liberation theology within the institutional Church. Similarly, Gustavo Gutierrez's monograph *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, liberation theology's most widely-read statement, was published in 1971, the same year that *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* first appeared in English. Liberation theologians considered Freire a "seminal precursor" to their movement, viewing him as an exemplar of the proper Catholic response to oppression (Blackwood 206). Gutierrez, a

brilliant Peruvian theologian and Dominican priest, lauded Freire’s literacy work as “one of the most creative and fruitful efforts implemented in Latin America” (57). As liberation theology developed, Freire’s pedagogy came to provide the “distinctive methodological principle” for its “evangelizing” work with the poor (McCann 157).¹⁸⁵

According to Phillip Berryman, a North American scholar and former Catholic priest, liberation theology is:

1. An interpretation of Christian faith out of the suffering, struggle, and hope of the poor.
 2. A critique of society and the ideologies sustaining it.
 3. A critique of the activity of the church and of Christians from the angle of the poor.
- (6)

Liberation theologians assert that they are not presenting a brand-new form of Christianity, but are recovering a “prophetic tradition present in the Bible itself”¹⁸⁶ (Berryman 6). They also profess that history, society, and religion itself are inevitably “stamped by social conflict” (Gutierrez 156). Gutierrez declares: “The history in which the Christian community, the church, plays a part today is marked by various kinds of oppositions among individuals, human groups,

¹⁸⁵ See *Vamos Caminando: A Peruvian Catechism* (Pastoral Team of Bambarca) for an excellent example of liberation theology derived from Freire’s pedagogy. The educational practice of liberation theology revolved around small-group discussion of the bible, where the learners sought to apply the lessons of scripture to their own concrete experiences, struggles, and social problems. Liberation theologian Juan Luis Segundo developed the concept of “conscientizing evangelization” wherein “the gospel is viewed as a liberating interpretation of history in which men and women are subjects rather than the objects of history” (Elias 146). Segundo saw an “intimate and necessary connection” between literacy training, evangelization, and political conscientization (qtd. in Elias 146). The similarities between the pedagogical dimension of liberation theology and the theological dimension of Freire’s pedagogy are explored in this chapter.

¹⁸⁶ As mentioned in Chapter One, a “prophet” is someone who speaks God’s judgment against the oppressive social, economic, political, and religious structures of the era. The prophetic dimension of Freire’s pedagogy and rhetoric are discussed at the end of this chapter.

social classes, racial groupings, and nations” (156). These tensions are “part of everyday life in Latin America” (Gutierrez 159). As such, he demands that Christians see the world “as it really is”:

Any real resolution [to Latin America’s social ills] requires...that we get to the causes that bring about these social conflicts and that we do away with the factors that produce a world divided into the privileged and the dispossessed, into superior and inferior...groupings. The creation of a fraternal society of equals, in which there are no oppressors and no oppressed, requires that we not mislead others or ourselves about the real state of affairs. (159)

Speaking in prophetic tones, he adds that “existence of poverty represents a sundering both of solidarity among persons and also of communion with God. Poverty is an expression of sin, that is, a negation of love...Poverty is an evil, a scandalous situation, which in our times has taken on enormous proportions” (168). Faced with these ugly realities, the Church must participate in dialectical social action, since the creation of a just society requires “the confrontation...between groups with different interests and opinions” (Gutierrez 31). For Gutierrez, the irrefutable existence of social conflict requires “taking a position opposing certain groups of persons, rejecting certain [oppressive] activities, and facing hostilities” (159). In short, the historical life of the Church “has an inescapable political dimension” (Gutierrez 32).

Liberation theology views God as a fierce partisan who fights on the side of the “losers of history” – the poor, the weak, the marginalized, and the oppressed. Liberation theologians point to numerous biblical texts to support their claims. One of the most celebrated of these passages is the “Magnificat” from the Gospel of Luke. Mary, a young and unwed peasant girl from a

brutally colonized outpost of the Roman Empire, offers a canticle (i.e., song of praise) to God for choosing her to bear the promised Messiah:

My soul magnifies the Lord,
 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
 Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him
 from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy,
 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants forever. (Luke 1:46-55)

Liberation theologians seize on the revolutionary import of Mary's song. They view her son Jesus as "a man who entered into a fearless confrontation with the corrupt political and religious authorities of his day and whose suffering [and execution] was the consequence not of

compliance but of resistance to evil” (Cox 148). In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus signals the “liberating” nature of his ministry with his first public speech:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
 because he has anointed me
 to bring good news to the poor.
 He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
 and recovery of sight to the blind,
 to let the oppressed go free,
 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. (4:18-19)

Aside from the story of Jesus of Nazareth, the other major biblical paradigm for liberation theology is the Exodus of Hebrew slaves from Egypt. The Latin American interpretation of this story focuses on God’s concern for his afflicted people and his dynamic role liberating them from Pharaoh’s tyranny. For liberation theologians, the Exodus narrative “is not simply an event but a pattern of deliverance that provides a key for interpreting the Scriptures and for interpreting present experience” (Berryman 50). The God of liberation theology is a warrior, a fierce partisan who fights within earthly history on the side of the oppressed. Moreover, since liberation theologians see the life situations of the Latin American poor as being “closer to the situation of the biblical writers than [those of the] rich,” they argue that the poor possess an “epistemological privilege” in interpreting Scripture (Brown 57). In other words, “the most reliable guide to [the Gospel’s] meaning is seen in what the text means to the poor (Cox 154). Thus, the oppressed and marginalized have a singular role in the God’s overarching plan for the development and salvation of humanity. They are the privileged protagonists of history, the ones chosen by God to “mediate the coming of the divine reign” (Cox 263). Liberation theology

shifts the locus of theological reflection onto the lives of the struggling poor. Its practitioners seek to enter into dialogue with those “non-persons” who have been sidelined to the “basements, kitchens, slums, and colonies” of history (Cox 208). Ultimately, liberation theology radically alters “the definition of *for whom* one constructs theology and *why* (Cox 179, emphasis in original). Liberation theologians view the poor as their primary interlocutors and as the Subject of historical change.

Finally, liberation theology challenges the institutional Church to “orient itself towards a new and radical service of people” rather than regard itself as the sole repository of grace and salvation (Gutierrez 144). It calls upon the Church to acknowledge its complicity in perpetuating unjust social arrangements. Liberation theologians insist that the institution can no longer pretend to be “above” worldly affairs, but has most often colluded with the dominant classes to protect the status quo:

In many places the Church contributes to creating ‘a Christian order’ and to giving a kind of sacred character to a situation which is not only alienating but is the worst kind of violence – a situation which pits the powerful against the weak. The protection which the Church receives from the social class which is the beneficiary and the defender of the prevailing capitalist society in Latin America has made the institutional Church into a part of the system and the Christian message into a part of the dominant ideology.

(Gutierrez 151)¹⁸⁷

Liberation theologians reject the Church’s traditional pretense to political impartiality or neutrality, arguing that its teachings and practices are inevitably “historically and socially

¹⁸⁷ For example, the “right to private property” is cast as a Christian principle, thereby delegitimizing calls for land redistribution (McGovern 44).

conditioned” (McGovern 44). They call on the Church to “opt” for the poor and the oppressed, unabashedly taking sides in the struggle to create “a new human being and a new society grounded on justice and love” (Azevedo 235)

Crucially for this chapter, Freire’s encounter with liberation theology spurred him to “more fully developed the bonds that exist between his theological and his educational theories” (Elias 111). In the early 1970s, he wrote a number of articles that explored the religious dimension of his pedagogy to a greater degree than in his previous works: “The Third World and Theology” (1970), “Letter to a Young Theology Student” (1970), “Conscientizing as a Way of Liberating,” and “The Educational Role of the Churches in Latin America” (1972). In these works, Freire described himself as “an onlooker intrigued by theology, which has indelibly marked what [his] pedagogy seems to be developing into” (“The Third World and Theology” 14). He aligned himself with “those who do not find theology an anachronism, but recognize that it has a vital function to perform” in the historical struggle against oppression (“Letter to a Young Theology Student” 11). The combative new generation of Latin American theologians, in his view, has extremely valuable things to say “to the dreams of a generation that sighs for a revolutionary transformation of their world, not some reconciliation of irreconcilables” (“The Educational Role of the Churches” 17-18). He lauded their radical thought, which “flows out of the desperation of the oppressed classes,” as “prophetic, utopian and hopeful” (“The Educational Role of the Churches” 27). This chapter explores the ways in which liberation theology provided Freire with a uniquely nourishing wellspring for his educational and religious thought.

I. The Rise of Liberation Theology: Context and Background

A. Integral Salvation

The vigorous Catholic activism in Brazil before April 1964 prefigured similar movements throughout the region. Branches of Catholic Action grew rapidly as country after country grappled with rapid socio-economic change and political turmoil (Berryman 12). Articulating the “central theologico-pastoral question” of progressive Latin American Catholics, Gustavo Gutierrez inquired: “What does it mean to be a Christian? What does it mean to be Church in the unknown circumstances of the future?” (32). In Brazil, many Catholic elites such as Freire responded by working to transform their nation in the direction of democracy and social justice. These young activists were opposed by other Catholics (largely from the older generation) who argued that overt political involvement was wholly inappropriate, and who advocated instead for the prayerful conversion of “hearts and minds.”

The development of radical Latin American theology was also spurred on by the Second Vatican Council. As discussed in previous chapters, Vatican II proved to be a watershed event for the global Church. Catholic activists such as Freire were galvanized by the Council’s legitimization of a far more positive attitude towards the modern world. Prior to these reforms, the Church’s social teaching had largely framed earthly life as a “transitory phase on a way to ‘heaven’” (Berryman 94).¹⁸⁸ This theological framework effectively rendered worldly affairs unimportant; indeed, participating in social activism was often viewed as an impediment to salvation. Vatican II began to reverse these positions. According to Jesuit historian Arthur McGovern, many of the Council’s most consequential and wide-ranging effects stemmed from its positive statements about “transforming the world” (5). Vatican II rejected the strict theological partition between heavenly and earthly existence (Berryman 94). According to the

¹⁸⁸ Accordingly, the main task for faithful Christians was to remain in a “state of grace” in hopes of attaining eternal life, with the Church presenting itself as the sole keeper of “the means of grace and truth” (Berryman 17).

new concept of “integral salvation,” God’s desire for human well-being was now understood to encompass *all* levels of existence, from the material to the spiritual. Exemplifying this theological change, Pope Paul VI in his 1967 encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (“On the Development of Peoples”) called for “the transition from less human conditions to those which are more human” (qtd. in Berryman 94).¹⁸⁹ He envisioned an uninterrupted continuity from “poverty and exploitation, through humanizing conditions... [to] being joined to God in faith and love” (Berryman 94). Worldly ills could no longer be deemed unimportant, and social structures that perpetuated poverty and inequality needed to be acknowledged and transformed.

Progressive Catholics throughout Latin America eagerly embraced the concept of integral salvation. Gutierrez affirmed: “Salvation embraces all persons and the whole person; the liberating action of Christ...is at the heart of the historical current of humanity; the struggle for a just society is in its own right very much a part of salvation history” (97). Declaring that “history is one” (86), he rejected the traditional opposition between the “sacred” and “profane” levels of existence.¹⁹⁰ Likewise, Brazilian liberation theologians Leonardo and Clodovis Boff asserted that faith is concerned with “all reality,” including “the economic, the political, and the social” spheres of existence (52). The Kingdom of God “is not simply a utopia situated on the

¹⁸⁹ In a homily marking the opening of the 1968 Medellín conference, Paul VI called attention to “literacy, basic education, continuing education, professional formation, formation of civic and political awareness, systematic organization of the material services which are essential for the normal development of individual and collective life in modern times” (Second General Conference 266).

¹⁹⁰ According to Gutierrez, there are three “reciprocally interpenetrating levels” in the process of liberation: liberation from poverty, liberation from historical fatalism, and liberation from sin (24-5). These levels will be discussed in this chapter’s section on “liberation.”

horizon of history. It is a utopia already present at the heart of history” (Boff 81).¹⁹¹ Similarly, Freire repudiated the “traditional” teaching that earthly life is primarily a transitory proving ground on the way to the afterlife: “We have to earn our heaven here and now, we ourselves. We have to build our heaven, to fashion it during our lifetime, right now” (qtd. in Collins 34). He criticized the “absurd dichotomy between worldliness and other-worldliness” (“The Third World and Theology” 13), rejecting the notion that earthly existence must be meekly and prayerfully endured. Freire viewed the human body as “the temple of God” rather than “the dwelling of sin” (*Pedagogy of the Heart* 103). He decried the quietest religion fostered by the dominant classes:

It is very easy for those who make money, eat, dress, enjoy music, travel, and have social prestige to ask for patience from those who are denied all that” (*Pedagogy of the Heart* 65). The wealthy and powerful “use God to their own ends” by declaring “any doubt about the legitimacy of that situation [of injustice] would mean a sin against the will of God. (*Pedagogy of the Heart* 103)¹⁹²

In addition, those who fail to confront social ills make themselves “an accomplice of injustice, of un-love, of the exploitation of the world” (“The Third World and Theology” (13). For Freire, a just and loving Creator can never condemn humanity to suffering (“Conscientizing as a Way of Liberating” 8). “This is how I have always understood God,” he declared, “as a presence in

¹⁹¹ However, most liberation theologians affirmed the traditional Catholic doctrine that the full manifestation of God’s Kingdom remains outside of human hands, but is a mysterious act of divine grace that will unfold “beyond history.” In other words, they avoided conflating human accomplishment with the ultimate and decisive arrival of the Kingdom.

¹⁹² Moreover, this process of theological exploitation is “supported by the historic anesthesia of the suffering and patient populations” (*Pedagogy of the Heart* 103) – hence the need for conscientizing education.

history that does not preclude me from making history, but rather pushes me toward world transformation, which makes it possible to restore the humanity of those who exploit and of the weak” (*Pedagogy of the Heart* 104) He rigorously opposed religious practices that did not foster historical self-insertion against oppression and injustice (“Conscientizing as a Way of Liberating” 5). He also refused to pray for the strength to endure oppression and unnecessary suffering: “The prayer that believers should engage in is one where they ask God for strength and courage to fight with dedication to overcome injustice (*Pedagogy of the Heart* 49).

B. The Medellin Conference

When Pope John XXIII convened Vatican II, he famously announced his desire to “throw open the windows of the Church” to the modern world. For Latin American Catholicism, the long-awaited *aggiornamento* fostered by the Council would rapidly develop into a theological hurricane (Nunez 90). The accumulating energies for sweeping reform within the Latin American Church crystallized in August 1968, when about 130 bishops came together in Medellin, Colombia for the second general gathering of the Latin American Bishops Conference (CELAM).¹⁹³ The gathering’s goal was the “search for new and more dynamic presence of the Church in the present transformation of Latin America, in light of the Second Vatican Council” (Second General Conference 50). In short, the bishops sought to discern how to apply the reforms of Vatican II to Latin America. Religious scholar Raymond McAfee Brown sums up the significance of this historic meeting:

Medellin was a landmark for both the Latin American and world church...Medellin is known as the conference at which the church opted positively for the oppressed, attacked

¹⁹³ This cohort represented almost one fourth of the bishops of the continent (Berryman 22).

the political and economic structures of Latin America as purveyors of injustice, pointed out the unjust dependency of Latin America on outside powers, and called for radical change across the continent. Medellín saw clearly that the present order of things guarantees that the rich will grow richer at the expense of the poor, with the inevitable result that the poor will grow poorer in relation to the rich. And the bishops refused any longer to bless such an order of things. (16-17)¹⁹⁴

At Medellín, the bishops committed themselves to confronting their continent's numerous social ills.¹⁹⁵ Their official statement, entitled "The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in Light of the Council," was permeated by a collective sense of excitement and possibility: "In these [current historical] signs we perceive the first indications of the painful birth of a new civilization. And we cannot fail to see in this gigantic effort towards a rapid transformation and development an obvious sign of the Spirit who leads the history of man and of peoples toward their vocation" (Second General Conference 48).

Freire's work profoundly influenced CELAM's vision of the Church's pedagogical mission. This imprint was apparent from the "Education" document's opening lines: "This Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops...pays very particular attention to

¹⁹⁴ Giving voice to the buoyant spirit of Medellín, Cardinal Eduardo Pironio, the presiding bishop at the gathering, announced that "God has flooded the Latin American continent with a great Light which shines on the rejuvenated face of the Church" (Second General Conference 14). He added that "Medellin...demands radical changes and an abandoning of certain privileged positions [for the Church]...The Medellín commitment demands courage...and the sincere search for new roads" (Second General Conference 9).

¹⁹⁵ Importantly, they did not just seek to adopt the reforms of Vatican II to Latin America; they also begin to ask specifically Latin American questions (Berryman 17). This new mode of inquiry reflected the rise of nationalism and anti-imperialism, as an outspoken cohort of Latin American thinkers declared "cultural and intellectual independence" from Western models (Berryman 20).

education as a basic and decisive factor in the continent's development" (Second General Conference 97).¹⁹⁶ The bishops assessed Latin America's educational landscape:

There exists the vast sector of men on the margin of culture, the illiterates, especially the indigenous illiterates, who are deprived at times even of the elemental benefits of communication through a common tongue. Their ignorance is a human servitude; their liberation, a responsibility of all the men of Latin America. They must be liberated from their prejudices and superstitions, their complexes and inhibitions, their fanaticism, their fatalistic attitude, their fearful incomprehension of the world in which they live, and their distrust and passivity. (Second General Conference 97)

This passage could hardly be more Freirean, especially the bishops' concern for the illiterate and silenced masses on the "margin of culture." The bishops' lament for the "superstitions," "fatalistic attitude," "passivity," and "fearful incomprehension of the world" of the poor mirrored Freire's conception of the "magical consciousness" that permeates peasant culture.¹⁹⁷ The bishops called for a vast, unmistakably Freirean educational campaign to redress these tragic conditions:

¹⁹⁶ Gustavo Gutierrez is the primary author of the "Education" document (Nickoloff 4). His emerging theology of liberation theology is clearly indebted to Freire's pedagogy.

¹⁹⁷ As mentioned in Chapter One, Freire believed that "magical consciousness" permeates societies where vast numbers of people are "submerged" within reality as spectators rather than working to shape their own destiny. A person with "magical" consciousness "apprehends facts and attributes them to a superior power [i.e., God or destiny]...to which [they] must therefore submit" (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 39). "Magical" consciousness is superstitious, trapped on the surface level of perception, and "resigned to the impossibility of resisting the power of facts" (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 39). Such people are credulous, "irrational," and adapt themselves unquestioningly to the status quo, no matter how oppressive or inhumane it might be.

The task of education of these our brothers does not properly consist in incorporating them into the cultural structures existing around them, which can also be oppressive, but in something much deeper. It consists in equipping them so that they themselves, as authors of their own progress, develop in a creative and original way a cultural world attuned to their own abundance and which is the fruit of their own efforts. (Second General Conference 97-8)

This statement mirrors Freire's conviction that conscientizing education enables illiterates to "begin to dynamize, to master, and to humanize reality" (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 4). The former illiterates "come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 83). They begin to realize that "they too, 'know things'" (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 63). Like Freire, the bishops rejected educational practices that support rather than transform the "dominant social and economic structures" of the status quo ("Second General Conference" 98). They criticized pedagogies devoted solely to "professional formation," since they sacrifice "human excellence on the altar of pragmatism and immediacy in order to adjust itself to the demands of the labor market" (Second General Conference 98). In contrast, conscientizing education "converts [learners] into the subject of [their] own development" (Second General Conference 99). This assertion mirrored Freire's insistence that *all* human beings, regardless of their socio-economic status or literacy level, must be invited to realize that they are already capable of shaping the world through shaping culture. Freire believed that through conscientizing education,

the illiterate would begin to effect a change in his former attitudes, by discovering himself to be a maker of the world of culture, by discovering that he, as well as the literate person, has a creative and re-creative impulse. He would discover that culture is

just as much a clay doll made by artists who are his peers as it is the work of a great sculptor, a great painter, a great mystic, or a great philosopher; that culture is the poetry of lettered poets and also the poetry of his own popular songs – that culture is all human creation. (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 47)

Similarly, the bishops affirmed their confidence in the capacity of the “awakened” masses to participate in the electoral process, especially through pressuring elected officials to embark upon much-needed social projects (Second General Conference 79). They affirmed their responsibility as Church leaders to “awaken in individuals and communities...a living awareness of justice, infusing in them a dynamic sense of responsibility and solidarity” (Second General Conference 81). In the end, “Justice, and therefore peace, conquer by means of a dynamic action of awakening [i.e., conscientization]... and organization of the popular sectors” (Second General Conference 79). Just as Freire advocated for pedagogies that enable learners to become critical historical Subjects rather than “adapted” persons (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 76), the bishops called for the Church to become “committed to basic education by which it strives not only to alphabetize, but to enable man to become a conscious agent of his own integral development” (Second General Conference 103). They confirmed that such education is “the key instrument for liberating the masses from all servitude and for causing them to ascend from ‘less human to more human conditions’” (Second General Conference 99, emphasis added).¹⁹⁸ These

¹⁹⁸ Moreover, “The lack of political consciousness in our countries makes the educational activity of the church absolutely essential, for the purpose of bringing Christians to consider their participation in the political life of the nation as a matter of conscience and as the practice of charity in its most noble and meaningful sense... We wish to affirm that it is indispensable to form a social conscience and a realistic perception of the problems of the community and of social structures. We must awaken the social conscience and communal customs in all strata of society and professional groups regarding such values and dialogue and community living... This task of ‘*conscientizacion*’ and social education ought to be integrated into joint Pastoral Action at various levels” (Second General Conference 65).

educational practices should aim for the “personalization of the new generations, deepening their consciousness of their human dignity, favoring their free self-determination and promoting their community spirit” (Second General Conference 100). They must also be non-paternalistic and non-authoritarian, since “man is responsible for and [is] ‘the principle author of his success or for his failure’” (Second General Conference 99).

The bishops’ extensive debt to Freire’s educational philosophy was also apparent in their appraisal of the Latin American school curriculum:

It seems to us that the course content is in general too abstract and too formalistic.

Didactic methods are more concerned with the transmission of knowledge than with the creation of a critical spirit... [This educational model] is passive when the hour has struck for our peoples to discover their proper being, superabundant in originality; it is oriented towards sustaining an economy based on the desire ‘to have more,’ when the Latin American youth demand ‘to be more,’ in the joy of their self-realization, through service and love. (“Second General Conference” 98)

This assessment of Latin American education closely paralleled Freire’s description of traditional Brazilian schooling as “disconnected from life, centered on words emptied of the reality they are meant to represent, lacking in concrete activity” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 33). According to Freire, this disconnection from “life” and “taste for verbosity” stems from a lack of a “theory of intervention in reality, the analytical contact with existence” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 33). Similarly, the Medellin bishops’ exhortation for Latin Americans to “discover their proper being” echoed Freire’s call for Brazilians to stop looking for Western models for “prefabricated solutions” to their nation’s social ills (*Education*

for Critical Consciousness 26).¹⁹⁹ In this vein, the bishops criticized Latin America's universities for "transplanting [curricular] blueprints of developed countries," for neglecting academic programs that are more "suitable to our socio-economic situation," and for not sufficiently responding to the peculiar problems of our continent" (Second General Conference 99). Like Freire, the bishops expressed profound concern with the issue of cultural alienation. They called for educational methods that are rooted in the lived conditions of the learners: "Education must...give its seal of approval to local and national idiosyncrasies and integrate them into the pluralistic unity of the continent and the world" (Second General Conference 100). This statement resonated with Freire's insistence that activist educators respect the integrity of the local culture, and that the "generative" themes and words for literacy lessons must be drawn from the unique socio-linguistic environment. Similarly, the bishops encouraged pastoral workers to engage in "a sincere and permanent dialogue with young people" (Second General Conference 114).²⁰⁰ Church-affiliated educators must exchange ideas with the youth rather than unilaterally impose pre-packaged "truths" upon them. In all, Freire's dialogic pedagogy deeply influenced the "humanizing" social vision affirmed at Medellin.²⁰¹ Through conscientizing and anti-authoritarian pedagogies, "large sectors" of the Latin American masses can gain a "personal

¹⁹⁹ Describing the democratic "opening" of Brazilian society in the first half of the 20th century, Freire wrote: "Culture, the arts, literature, and science showed new tendencies toward research, identification with Brazilian reality, and planning of solutions rather than their importation...The country had begun to find itself. The people emerged and began to participate in the historical process" (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 26).

²⁰⁰ The bishops also affirmed "a need to develop an organic pedagogy for youth, which will promote in them a strong human and Christian formation and the courage to for their own authentic personality" (Second General Conference 113-14).

²⁰¹ For example, the bishops called for pastoral outreach "characterized by service and exempt from authoritarianism" (Second General Conference 114).

awareness” of the structural, “neo-colonialist” roots of widespread suffering, thereby developing “attitudes of protest and the desire for liberation, development, and social justice” (Second General Conference 165). This “awakening” of the poor to the “complex historical conditions” of injustice and exploitation would force all Latin Americans “to face the challenge of a liberating and humanizing commitment” (165). Like Freire, the Medellin bishops linked education with human development and social action.²⁰² They stressed that the “proper role” of Christian laypersons consists in their “commitment in the world, understood as a framework of human solidarity, of significant accomplishments and facts, in a word, as history” (Second General Conference 167). Furthermore, the concrete forms of social action undertaken by committed Christians would be determined “by the circumstances peculiar to our actual historical present” (Second General Conference 167).

Reflecting the radicalization of Latin American theology, the Medellin bishops acknowledged the existence of systemic factors that create and perpetuate poverty:

[The true Christian] recognizes that in many instances Latin America finds itself faced with a situation of injustice that can be called *institutionalized violence*, when, because of a *structural deficiency* of industry and agriculture, of national and international economy, of cultural and political life, ‘whole towns lack necessities, live in such dependence as hinders all initiative and responsibility as well as every possibility for cultural promotion and participation in social and political life,’ thus violating fundamental rights. This

²⁰² Freire writes, “Democracy and democratic education are founded on faith in men, on the belief that they not only can but should discuss the problems of their country, of their continent, their world, their work, the problems of democracy itself. Education is an act of love, and thus an act of courage. It cannot fear the analysis of reality” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 38).

situation demands *all-embracing*, courageous, urgent and *profoundly renovating transformations*. (Second General Conference 78, emphasis added)²⁰³

Similarly, the bishops denounced poverty as “in itself evil” and “contrary to the will of the Lord and most of the time as the fruit of the injustice and sin of men” (Second General Conference 214). The widespread conditions of socio-economic deprivation and human suffering in Latin America are a “situation of sin” that could no longer be viewed as God’s will. Thus, the Medellin bishops broadened the theological definition of sin to encompass social structures that perpetuate injustice, foster inequality, and prevent human flourishing.²⁰⁴ They affirmed that creating a “just social order, without which peace is illusory, is an eminently Christian task” (Second General Conference 80). Since the present historical moment “has already become, and with dramatic urgency, the time for action” (Second General Conference 47), Latin American Christians must participate in the transformation of their continent in the direction of “full

²⁰³ Notably, the bishops explicitly condemned armed struggle. They argued that revolutionary violence inevitably “generates new injustices, introduces new imbalances and causes new disasters” (Medellin 80). For his part, Freire argued that revolutionary violence can be seen as a form of radical love whereby the oppressed fight to reclaim the lost humanity of the oppressors. In Chapter 4 of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire praised Latin American revolutionaries Che Guevara and Camilo Torres for taking up arms.

²⁰⁴ However, the bishops also insisted that sin remains ultimately rooted in the human heart. They affirm that the “uniqueness of the Christian message” consists of “the insistence on the conversion of men which will in turn bring about this change” (Second General Conference 58). Thus, while “new and reformed [social] structures” are necessary and laudable goals, “there will be no new continent without new men, who know how to be truly free and responsible according to the light of the Gospel” (Second General Conference 58). In this regard, the Medellin bishops adhered to doctrinal orthodoxy. Freire vehemently disagreed with this sentiment, declaring: “Only the innocent [i.e., naive]...are deluded enough to believe that exhortations or humanitarian works, or a brilliant syllogizing all in mid-air, can actually change the world by changing men’s hearts. The astute ones know perfectly well that the process works the other way around, and that such mental games only distract us from the radical transformation of social structures—which they may (but may not, too!) lead to a change of hearts” (“The Educational Role of the Churches” 15).

emancipation, of liberation from all servitude” (Second General Conference 48).²⁰⁵ In short, the Medellin bishops avowed that “liberating” social action lies at the very heart of biblical faith. The true religious calling for followers of Jesus Christ is to help build a “new civilization” characterized by “a more profound personalization and fraternal union” that reflects “the image of God in man” (Second General Conference 48).

The Medellin conference proved crucial in the development of both liberation theology and Freire’s educational and religious thought. For Gustavo Gutierrez, the 1968 gathering marked the moment when the Latin American Church began to “take the reins of its own destiny” (73). He even favorably contrasted the theological innovations of Medellin with those of the Second Vatican Council:

Vatican II speaks of the underdevelopment of peoples, of the developed countries and what they can and should do about this underdevelopment; Medellin tries to deal with the problem from the standpoint of the poor countries, characterizing them as subjected to a new kind of colonialism. Vatican II talks about a Church in the world and describes the relationship in a way which tends to neutralize the conflicts; Medellin demonstrates that the world in which the Latin American Church ought to be present is in full revolution.

Vatican II sketches a general outline for Church renewal; Medellin provides guidelines

²⁰⁵ Yet while the Medellin bishops agreed upon the centrality of “liberation” to the Church’s mission, they disagreed on the definition of this term. For example, the Colombian bishop Alfonso Lopez Trujillo, who would later become an outspoken critic of liberation theology, asserted that the “liberating pastoral option demands a spirit of *true reconciliation*” that “opposes a form of class struggle” (qtd. in Nunez 99, emphasis in original). In contrast, Argentinian-Mexican liberation theologian Enrique Dussel insisted that Medellin “opens the door for a clear class commitment, and it allows the taking of positions in defense of the interests of workers, peasants, and those who have no voice in society” (qtd. in Nunez 100). As discussed in this section on the Marxist-Christian “encounter” below, Freire aligned himself firmly with the dialectical position.

for a transformation of the Church in terms of its presence on a continent of misery and injustice. (73)

Along these lines, there are telling parallels between Vatican II and *Education for Critical Consciousness* on the one hand, and between Medellin and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* on the other hand. *Education for Critical Consciousness*, which was drawn from Freire's 1959 dissertation and Brazilian fieldwork, is liberal-democratic and reformist-humanist, reflecting Freire's pre-coup thought. In comparison, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is far more radical. In this later work, Freire declared his commitment to fight alongside the "oppressed," having decided that revolutionary struggle was necessary to overturn injustice and cruelty. He focused on unequal socio-economic relations to a far greater degree than in the earlier text, and he explicitly acknowledged the existence of class conflict for the first time. In all, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* reflected Freire's radicalization since the Brazilian coup. Similarly, the Medellin conference produced documents that were far more pointed and dialectical than the "carefully modulated" pronouncements of Vatican II (Brown 16). As such, radical Latin American clergy and lay activists "eagerly seized the Medellin documents as a Magna Carta justifying a whole new pastoral approach" (Berryman 24). Medellin provided a powerful theological platform for the emergence of liberation theology over the next decade.

III. Liberation Theology and Freirean Pedagogy

Liberation theology and Freire's educational work both emerged from a civilization where "the basic tenets of Christianity are a part of the cultural fabric" (Cox 155). For centuries, Latin Americans accepted Christianity as the normative framework for interpreting day-to-day reality. While the twentieth century was marked by declining religious attendance in the industrial West,

well-educated Latin American Christians like Freire were barely preoccupied with issues of belief and unbelief. Instead, they “focused more on the *misuse* of Christianity than on skepticism” (Cox 155, emphasis added). As Latin America underwent rapid socio-economic change after World War II, many Catholic intellectuals sought out more “scientific” forms of social analysis.²⁰⁶ These trends were strengthened by a growing disillusionment with “open-door” economic policies which had enriched the elites but failed to alleviate poverty. Reflecting this sentiment, Gutierrez attacked “developmentalist” strategies as “ineffective in the long run and counterproductive to achieving a real transformation” because they fail to address the “roots of the evil” (17). Gutierrez identified these “roots” as the relationship of “domination” and “dependency” between wealthy and poor countries (17), as well as between the elites and the oppressed *within* each society. In addition, he attacked the “developmentalist” worldview for providing a “false picture” of reality, since it obscures the existence of social conflict and class struggle (Gutierrez 24). Rejecting the path of reform and “development,” radical Catholics like Gutierrez began to call for “liberation” from structures of domination and dependency. At Medellin, the bishops described their nations as “countries of dependence on a center of economic power, around which they gravitate” (Second General Conference 73). According to this analysis, intrinsically exploitative international economic relationships had resulted in the enrichment of industrialized countries at the expense of poorer countries, the flight of invaluable economic and human resources, the explosion of Latin American debt to foreign entities, and the loss of revenue due to tax evasion and remission of profits by foreign companies (Second General Conference 73-74). Accordingly, the Medellin bishops declared that “the principal guilt for economic dependence of our countries rests with powers, inspired by uncontrolled desire for

²⁰⁶ See Chapters Two and Three.

gain, which leads to economic dictatorship and the ‘international imperialism of money’” (Second General Conference 74). They asserted that that the “present historical moment” is characterized by “Neo-Colonialism,” where millions of suffering Latin Americans endured brutal conditions of “marginality, alienation and poverty” that were “largely influenced, in the last analysis, by economic, political and cultural structures dependent upon the industrialized metropolises which monopolize technology and science” (Second General Conference 165). The bishops were powerfully influenced by “dependence theory,” which had begun to circulate among leftist Latin American intellectual circles. They questioned whether genuine development was truly possible within the existing international economic order, and they challenged the assumption that the “backwardness” of their countries was due to Latin America’s intrinsic inferiority or weakness (Berryman 19). These reflections gave rise to the provocative new theory that the region’s chronic underdevelopment was the result of relentless exploitation by foreign interests. Accordingly, leftists throughout Latin American decided that most appropriate terms for analyzing international economic structures were “dominant” and “dependent,” not “advanced” and “backwards.” As such, seeking to “catch up” with the West would be in vain (Berryman 20); the continent’s best hope would be decisive *liberation* from the chains of dependence and exploitation.

A. Liberation from Capitalism: The Christian-Marxist Encounter

From the late 1950s onwards, many progressive Latin American Catholics sought out ways to enact the biblical imperatives of love and social justice within their historical contexts.

According to liberation theologian Hugo Assmann, Latin American theology needed to adopt “the most appropriate scientific instrument the secular sciences can provide” (qtd. in McGovern

134-5). Similarly, Gutierrez emphasized that theology had to be informed by “studies of the most rigorous scientific exactitude” (qtd. in McGovern 135). Argentinean liberation theologian Jose Miguez Bonino declared that Christian love must be made “historically concrete and engaged” (106).²⁰⁷ These pronouncements mirrored the earlier work of Brazilian theologians Almerly Bezerra and Henrique de Lima Vaz, who sought to synthesize the “eternal” values of Christianity with “scientific” historical analysis when discerning the appropriate course of Catholic social action in any particular context. For their part, the Medellin bishops denounced the severe levels of poverty and inequality of their continent. In their statement, they highlighted “the tremendous social injustices existent in Latin America, which keep the majority of our peoples in dismal poverty, which in many cases becomes inhuman wretchedness” (Second General Conference 213). Using explicitly biblical rhetoric, they described these sociological conditions as an “injustice which cries to the heavens” (Second General Conference 57).²⁰⁸ The bishops also lamented “the compounding of hunger and misery, of illness and of a massive nature and infant mortality, of illiteracy and marginality, of profound inequality of income, and tensions between the social classes, of outbreaks of violence and rare participation of the people in decisions affecting the common good” (Second General Conference 38). Such social ills have created “conditions of life that are less human” (Second General Conference 49). Accordingly,

²⁰⁷ Speaking from within the African-American theological context, James Cone asserted: “Love demands justice—that is, the creation of a space in the world so that love can realize itself in human relations. To love the neighbor requires more than a pious feeling in my heart. *It requires social and political analysis* so that piety will not become a substitute for justice” (47, emphasis added).

²⁰⁸ This language echoed the biblical account of the deliverance of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt: “The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. *Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God.* God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.” (Exodus 2:23-25, emphasis added). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the Exodus narrative is a cornerstone of liberation theology.

the Church cannot shirk its responsibility to “defend the rights of the poor and oppressed...To favor integration, energetically denouncing the abuses and unjust consequences of the excessive inequalities between poor and rich, weak and powerful” (Second General Conference 81).

As liberation theology entered its most radical phase in the 1970s, many of its leading practitioners were drawn towards Marxist analysis because it provided a powerful instrument for critiquing capitalism (McGovern 230). For liberation theologians, Marxism presented the much-sought-after “scientific, verifiable and efficacious way to articulate love historically” (Bonino 115). Viewing capitalism and “neo-imperialism” as the primary sources of the region’s chronic socio-economic problems, they turned to Marxist philosophy to help “unmask” the inner workings of these oppressive systems (McGovern 161).²⁰⁹ Bonino situated Karl Marx within the Christian tradition, praising him for his “uncompromising rejection of the ‘mystifications’ of the products of man’s activity” (70). Marx’s philosophy, he argued, is animated by an ethos of human solidarity and an opposition to inhuman and oppressive organizations of society and human life (Bonino 119). Bonino saw a genuine concern for the one’s fellow human beings as the primary point of intersection between Christianity and Marxism (Bonino 103).²¹⁰ In the same vein, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff declared that capitalism “can be more or less *immoral*; it can never be more or less *moral*. You do not eliminate the ferocity of a wolf by filing down its teeth” (qtd. in McGovern 139, emphasis in original). They memorably added, “It is just as

²⁰⁹ Moreover, liberation theologians could not afford to ignore Marxism, given its pervasiveness among Latin Americans oriented towards social change. As Berryman notes, Marxist thought was as deeply woven into the Latin American intellectual milieu “as are psychological and therapeutic concepts in the U.S. middle class” (139).

²¹⁰ The oft-stated emphasis on the absolute value of human beings resonates with Mounier’s Christian Personalist philosophy. As discussed in Chapter 2, Mounier criticized capitalism for treating the human person as an “apparatus” (i.e., the means to an end) rather than a “summit” in itself (113-4).

impossible to create a moral market system as it is to build a Christian brothel” (qtd. in McGovern 139).²¹¹ In *Marx and the Bible: A Critique of the Philosophy of Oppression*, liberation theologian Jose Porfirio Miranda argued that private property is inherently anti-biblical, and that capitalism is the apotheosis of the historical evil encountered throughout the scripture. One of the most outspoken theological critics of capitalism was German-born Franz Hinkelammert. In his major work *The Ideological Weapons of Death*, Hinkelammert drew upon the Marxist critique of commodity fetishism to denounce the “idolatrous” worship of money and commercial goods within capitalism (Berryman 149). For Hinkelammert, capitalism is an irredeemably unethical system that “exercises the right to decide over the worker’s life or death,” and which “has committed mass murder among the working classes” (qtd. in McGovern 139). Echoing Hinkelammert’s critique, a cohort of Brazilian bishops from the Amazon region condemned capitalism as “the greatest evil, the rotten root, the tree that produces those fruits we all know: poverty, hunger, sickness, and death of the majority” (qtd. in McGovern 138-9).²¹²

²¹¹ Similarly, Bonino condemned capitalism for its exclusive preoccupation with “the maximizing of economic gain, the raising of man’s grasping impulse, the idolizing of the strong, [and] the subordination of man to the economic production” (115). This economic system is alienating and dehumanizing because it treats human beings as means to an end, rather than as ends in themselves. Thus, “the basic ethos of capitalism is definitely anti-Christian” (Bonino 115).

²¹² However, while the use of Marxist analysis by radical Catholics has received a great deal of attention, it is important to not to overstate its importance to liberation theology as a whole. For example, the theme of “integral salvation” occurs far more frequently in liberation theology than any Marxist concept (Berryman 95). Bonino, one of the most pro-Marxist of the liberation theologians, insisted that the Christian encounter with Marxist thought must be permanently tense and challenging (119), characterized by “constant questioning in the realm of practice” (116). Christians should always be critical and discerning when holding a dialogue with other belief systems, always taking care to maintain the integrity and autonomy of their faith (Bonino 119). Liberation theologians also uniformly reject classical Marxism’s explicit atheism, its “one-sided critique of religion,” and its economic determinism (McGovern 159). Dussel reflected the position of many liberation theologians in “opting” for socialism over orthodox Marxism: “Socialism is very much a possibility for Christians on our continent, but it need not be Marxist”

Mirroring these anti-capitalist sentiments, Freire fused Marxist and theological language in his writings from the 1970s onwards. As discussed in Chapter One, the decisive moment in Freire's journey towards Marxist thought occurred when he was arrested, tried, imprisoned, stripped of his citizenship, and sent into exile in 1964. These wrenching experiences marked a permanent radicalization in his worldview (*Pedagogy for Liberation* 32). Reflecting upon the defeat of liberal-democratic measures in Brazil, he began to investigate Marxism, which was an area of inquiry he had mostly ignored prior to the coup. In Marxist thought, he discovered theoretical tools to interpret recent historical events throughout Latin America. Like many leftist Catholics, he began to use conflictive terms like "oppression," "class struggle," and "domination" to describe existing social structures. He also began professing the necessity for revolutionary struggle to achieve the goals of democracy, socio-economic justice, and the "humanization" of society. Freire's radicalization is writ large in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,

(137). Today, most liberation theologians view socialism as a more humane and democratic system than both Marxism and capitalism (Bonino 115). Moreover, while liberation theology often draws upon Marxist concepts, it also infuses them with new meanings. As discussed in the next section, "praxis" is redefined from "Marxist tactics of change" to the committed "living out" of the Christian faith within history (McGovern 230). Similarly, when liberation theologians speak of "the poor" as the agents of their own emancipation, they are not singling out the industrial proletariat (McGovern 230). According to Berryman, liberation theologians are "centered on those who are poor for no other reason than that they are poor," and not because they have identified this social group with Marx's revolutionary proletariat (33). By the late 1980s, liberation theologians had largely abandoned overtly revolutionary language. They spoke instead about "working within the openings permitted by legal democracy to build and occupy 'spaces' so that base communities and popular movements can organize and gain experience in effecting change" (McGovern 224). Despite its reputation as the "poor man's Marxism," liberation theology has made "eclectic use of elements from [Marxism], with little concern for a coherent total system" (Berryman 194).

which he wrote in the aftermath of the 1964 Brazilian coup.²¹³ As a result of the popularity of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire was introduced to Western readers as a revolutionary Marxist.

However, Freire's absorption of Marxist analysis did not signal his abandonment of radical Catholicism. Rather, his educational activism was deeply enriched and invigorated by synthesizing these systems. Freire recounted:

During the 1970s, in an interview in Australia, I told some greatly surprised reporters that it was in the woods in Recife, refuge of slaves, and the ravines where the oppressed of Brazil live, coupled with my love for Christ and hope that He is the light, that led me to Marx. The tragic reality of the ravines, woods, and marshes led me to Marx. [Yet] my relationship with Marx never suggested that I abandon Christ (*Letters to Cristina* 87).²¹⁴

Thus, Freire's denunciation of capitalism combined Christian and Marxist discourses. For example, he declared capitalism irredeemably evil (*Pedagogy of Freedom* 114) and condemned its "intrinsic perversity, its antisolidarity nature" (*Pedagogy of the Heart* 88). The "dictatorship of the marketplace" (*Pedagogy of Freedom* 115) has demonstrated "absolute insensitivity to the ethical dimension of existence" (*Pedagogy of the Heart* 88). Capitalism "sleeps in peace while numberless men and women make their home in the street, and says it is their own fault that they

²¹³ Tellingly, Freire's *Education for Critical Consciousness*, does not mention Marx at all (Elias 34). Nor does it touch in any substantial way upon the role of the Brazilian Church in preserving the socio-economic status quo (Elias 78), particularly in maintaining the "culture of silence" that fostered fatalism and passivity among the poor. (Freire's theological critique of the Church developed later, as he read and assimilated liberation theology.) As mentioned in Chapter One, *Education for Critical Consciousness* reflects the liberal-reformist thrust of Freire's theory and practice before the Brazilian coup.

²¹⁴ Elsewhere, he professed: "God led me to the people and the people led me to Marx...But when I met Marx, I continued to meet Christ on the corners of the street..." (qtd. in Walker 126). John Elias notes that "the more Marxist [Freire] has become, the closer he has moved to liberation theology" – and vice versa (79).

are on the street” (*Pedagogy of Hope* 80). Vividly describing his native Brazilian Northeast, Freire declared that capitalism has brought about “a degree of misery that could only have been thought a piece of fiction: little boys and girls, women and men, vying with starving pups, tragically, like animals, for the garbage of the great trash heaps outlying the cities, to eat” (*Pedagogy of Hope* 81).²¹⁵ Capitalism stresses “maximum efficacy” rather than human development; it lacks “the universal ethics of the human person” (*Pedagogy of Freedom* 114). Moreover, neoliberalism fosters a “cynical” and fatalistic discourse of callous globalization which “tends to convince that the problem [of poverty and inequality] lies in destiny or fate, rather than severely criticize a system that, in spite of lack of scarcity, condemns a large part of humanity to hunger and death” (*Pedagogy of the Heart* 88). The “scourge” of neoliberalism, he asserted, fosters “cynical fatalism” and an “inflexible negation of the right to dream differently, to dream of utopia” (*Pedagogy of Freedom* 22).

B. Liberation from Fatalism

From the start, radical Catholic theology and Freire’s experimental pedagogy both placed human agency at the center of their discourses. For instance, Gutierrez insisted that liberation occurs not just from material deprivation and oppression, but from political passivity and historical fatalism as well. In this “level” of liberation, human beings assume “conscious responsibility for

²¹⁵ He continued: “What excellence is this, that seems blind to little children with distended bellies, eaten up by worms, toothless women looking like old crones at thirty, wasted men, skinny, stooped populations? Fifty-two percent of the population of Recife live in slums, in bad weather, an easy prey for diseases that effortlessly crush their enfeebled bodies. What excellence is this, that strikes a pact with the cold-blooded [sic], cowardly murder of landless men and women of the countryside simply because they fight for their right to their world and their labor, while they remain bound to the land and despoiled of their fields by the dominant classes?” (*Pedagogy of Hope* 81).

[their] own destiny,” thus growing into their full stature as “persons who make themselves through their life and throughout history” (Gutierrez 24).²¹⁶ As demonstrated throughout this dissertation, Freire’s faith in the capacity of human beings for free choice and historical agency lies at the core of his educational thought. “Wherever there are men and women,” Freire wrote, “there is always and inevitably something to be done, to be completed, to be taught, and to be learned” (*Pedagogy of Freedom* 79). Growing into one’s full human stature means praxis – the conscious struggle to create a more just and “human” world. Educational scholar Peter Roberts notes that “praxis is the pivotal concept in Freire's ethical ideal. We humanize ourselves, Freire argues, to the extent that we engage in praxis. To prevent others from pursuing praxis is to dehumanize them” (187). Thus, becoming “fully human” is impossible without taking part in historical praxis. Roberts adds that conscientization and praxis are “necessarily intertwined” in that the former occurs in “the transforming moment where critical reflection is synthesized with action” (188). Freire declared, “Men and women are human beings *because* they are historically constituted as beings of praxis, and in the process they have become capable of transforming the world” (“A Conversation” 155, emphasis added). He affirmed: “Only human beings *are* praxis – the praxis, which, as the reflection and action which truly transform reality, is the source of knowledge and creation” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 100-101, emphasis in original). As underscored throughout this dissertation, Freire’s literacy work rejected the mere acquisition of

²¹⁶ The third level is liberation from the bondage of sin. Thus, “Christ the Savior liberates from sin, which is the ultimate root of all disruption of friendship and of all injustice and oppression” (Gutierrez 25). Without this third (and ultimate) level of liberation, human beings can never live fully in communion with God or in fellowship with one another (25). These three levels of liberation do not unfold chronologically. Rather, they are “three levels of meaning of a single, complex process” (25). For Gutierrez, “salvation embraces all persons and the whole person” (97). As such, the “liberating action of Christ,” which occurred *within* history, lies at the heart of human existence (97).

instrumental skills and the “transfer of neatly wrapped knowledge” (“Conscientizing as a Way of Liberating” 7). Such “banking” pedagogy inculcates habits of mind that cultivate uncritical accommodation to the status quo. For Freire, the emergence of literacy means far more than “memorizing sentences, words, or syllables—lifeless objects unconnected to an existential universe”; rather, it is the cultivation of “an attitude of creation and re-creation, a self-transformation producing a stance of intervention in one's context” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 48). He envisioned a conscientizing pedagogy that gives rise to human beings who embrace their intrinsic capability for “critical self-insertion into reality” (“The Adult Literacy Process” 493). His literacy circles aimed to help the adult learner “to overcome his magic or naïve understanding and to develop an increasingly critical understanding... [of] the role of man as Subject in the world and with the world” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 46). The truly literate person would begin to see “himself” as capable of shaping (and re-shaping) culture, apprehending the underpinnings of “reality,” and transforming “his” oppressive living conditions. Upon “awakening” from the stultifying “culture of silence,” the former illiterates would grow into their “ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 66).

In accordance with this deeply optimistic vision of human potential, Freire fiercely criticized religious teachings that seem to foster resignation to earthly suffering: “As a child, I knew many priests who went out to the peasants saying: ‘Be patient. This is God’s will. And anyway, it will earn heaven for you’...This latter sort of theology is a very passive one I cannot stomach” (qtd. in Collins 34). For Freire, a Creator that could abandon human beings “to constant victimization and constant destitution” would be “a God such as Marx described” (qtd. in Collins 34). He avowed that the relationship between human beings and their Creator “can

never be a relationship of domination or domestication, but is always a relationship of liberation” (qtd. in Elias, *Pedagogue* 38). God is never a harsh overlord or vengeful judge, but rather is a loving “presence” that “does not preclude [one] from making history, but rather pushes [one] toward world transformation” (*Pedagogy of the Heart* 103). Reiterating his critique of “banking” education in theological terms, he asserted:

My attitude cannot be the attitude of an empty being waiting to be filled by the word of God. I think that in order to listen to it, it is necessary for me to be engaged in the process of the liberation of humanity. Because of this I think that theology...should be connected with education for liberation – and education for liberation with theology (qtd. in Davis 68).

Similarly, Freire denounced *secular* systems that cultivate political passivity and defeatism. Speaking towards the end of his life, amidst the apparent triumph of globalization policy in the 1990s, he declared:

There is a lot of fatalism around us. An immobilizing ideology of fatalism, with its flighty postmodern pragmatism, which insists that we can do nothing to change the march of social-historical and cultural reality because that is how the world is anyway. The most dominant contemporary version of such fatalism is neoliberalism. With it, we are led to believe that mass unemployment on a global scale is an end-of-the-century inevitability. From the standpoint of such an ideology, only one road is open as far as educational practice is concerned: adapt the student to what is inevitable, to what cannot be changed. (*Pedagogy of Freedom* 27)

Rejecting the seemingly inevitable triumph of neoliberalism, Freire proclaimed his “decisive NO to an ideology that humiliates and denies our humanity” (*Pedagogy of Freedom* 27, emphasis in original).

C. The Primacy of Love

Gutierrez famously defined liberation theology as “a critical reflection on Christian praxis in light of the Word” in *A Theology of Liberation* (qtd. in McGovern 32). He provided eight philosophical sources for his interpretation of “praxis.” These include: the innovative theologies of John XXIII and Vatican II (7), the Christian “rediscovery” of the importance of loving service to one’s fellow human beings (6), the shifting locus of modern spirituality from monastic withdrawal to active engagement with the world (6), and the insistence of contemporary French philosopher Maurice Blondel that concrete action must be the “point of departure for all reflection” (7).²¹⁷ For his part, Bonino argued that Christians have the responsibility to make love “historically operative for the total human society” (115).²¹⁸ Likewise, Freire highlighted the importance of love to his conscientizing pedagogy (Welton 119). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire emphasized that activists must practice “profound love for the world and for people” (89). Moreover, authentic dialogue is impossible without love, since non-loving relationships easily degenerate into manipulation and objectification. “Love is at the same time the foundation of dialogue and dialogue itself” (89). In this vein, Freire approvingly quoted Che

²¹⁷ Notably, Marxist philosophy is only one of Gutierrez’s eight sources (McGovern 32).

²¹⁸ The central role of love in social action is one of the most distinctive contributions of liberation theology to revolutionary thought. Bonino suggested that in the Christian-Marxist encounter, “the Marxist is forced to lay bare and open for discussion the source and power of his love” (115). Conversely, the Christian “is forced to acknowledge his lack of a scientific historical mediation” (115).

Guevara's description of the "true revolutionary" as being "guided by strong feelings of love" (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 89). For Freire, of the most striking manifestations of radical love is the loving rebellion of the oppressed, which starts to reverse the sadistic and life-denying "lovelessness which lies at the heart of the oppressors' violence" (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 45). Interestingly, he professed that the "weakness" of the oppressed is the "only power" that is "sufficiently strong" to liberate *both* the oppressed and the oppressors, since the oppressors have already been utterly dehumanized by their oppressive acts (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 44). This formulation resonates with the Christian teaching that God uses the "weak" to humble the "strong," most notably in the Exodus of Hebrew slaves from Egypt and the triumphant resurrection of Jesus Christ. Freire also argued that dialogue requires three pivotal virtues: *humility* ("Self-sufficiency is incompatible with dialogue"), *faith* ("Dialogue requires an intense faith in humankind, faith in their power to make and remake, to create and recreate"), and *hope* ("Hope is rooted in men's incompleteness, from which they move out in constant search") (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 90-1). With these assertions, Freire affirmed the primary virtues in the Christian tradition.²¹⁹ Freire's educational activism is ultimately animated by radical love for human beings.²²⁰

D. A New Way of Practicing Theology

²¹⁹ See *1 Corinthians* 13:13.

²²⁰ According to the philosopher Eliseu Cintra, Freire's "loving sense for the Other" is manifested in three ways throughout his educational theory and practice: 1) the ethical decision to recognize the absolute value of the Other as a unique person, 2) the commitment to honor the Other as "someone who gives meaning to me myself, completing me as a human being," and 3) dialogue, which signifies opening oneself up to the Other (Gadotti 73).

Both Freire's pedagogy and liberation theology foregrounded the experiences and living conditions of the poor. For example, the Medellin bishops grounded their deliberations upon concrete descriptions and "scientific" analyses of present-day conditions. They insisted that present-day realities must constitute the primary location for the Church's reflection and action:

Evangelization must direct itself toward the formation of a... faith that is operative and constantly confronting the challenges of present-day living in this era of transition. This evangelization needs to be in harmony with the 'signs of the times.' It cannot be outside time and history. In fact, 'the signs of the times,' which on our continent are expressed above all else in the social order, constitute a 'theological situation' and a mandate from God. (Second General Conference 132)²²¹

Similarly, liberation theology professes that authentic religious faith is not the mere "simple affirmation – almost memorization – of [doctrinal] truths, but a commitment, an overall attitude, a particular posture toward life" (Gutierrez 6). Thus, theological practice "which has as its points of reference only 'truths' which have been established once and for all...can only be static and, in the long run, sterile" (Gutierrez 10). Gutierrez called for Christians to open themselves

²²¹ Illustrating this new theological practice, all of the sixteen chapters of the Final Documents began with factual descriptions and "scientific" analyses of societal conditions. These were followed by religious commentary and concluded with pastoral recommendations. In addition, the first group of chapters was composed of secular topics: "Justice," "Peace," "Family and Demography," "Education," and "Youth." This cluster is followed by chapters on explicitly religious topics: "Pastoral Care of the Masses," "Pastoral Concern for the Elites," "Catechesis," and "Liturgy." The last group of chapters tackled concerns of implementation: "Lay Movements," "Priests," "Religious," "Formation of the Clergy," "Poverty of the Church," "Joint Pastoral Planning," and "Mass Media." Throughout their statement, the Latin American bishops emphasized the importance of "living out" the goals generated by their theological deliberations: "It is certainly not enough to reflect, to be more discerning and to speak. *Action is required*" (Second General Conference 47, emphasis added).

to the “*anthropological aspects of revelation*” (6, emphasis in original). For liberation theologian Enrique Dussel, “Day to day history is the one and only place where God reveals himself to us...God reveals himself before our eyes – in our neighbor and in history” (139). In the most radical forms of liberation theology, “truth” is never finished once and for all; it is only gained and verified through historical engagement. Without acute concern for the plight of the poor and oppressed, theological reflection will only degenerate into mere academic expertise (Brown 34-5). Biblical scholarship and doctrinal reflection are the “second step” of theology; the “first step” is “real charity, action, and commitment to the service of others” (Gutierrez 9).

Likewise, Freire dismissed all educational and theological systems that fail to make the conditions of society the starting point for reflection and action. Thus, he rejected the “theology of ‘bla bla bla’” (qtd. in Davis 68), a statement referring to the liberal theologies that circulated among upper-middle class circles in North America and Western Europe in the mid-twentieth century.²²² Freire considered these theological discourses irrelevant to the developing world, since they pointed to “an uncritical willingness to generalize from...[the conditions of] opulent societies” (“The Educational Role of the Churches” 27).²²³ Freire aligned himself with those who recognize that theology still “has a vital function to perform” in the struggle against dehumanization and exploitation (“Letter to a Theology Student” 12). Closely echoing Gutierrez,

²²² Such theologies were developed by figures like Paul Tillich and Karl Barth. These were largely directed at making Christianity more plausible to skeptical members of the Western middle-class (Cox 242). In contrast, liberation theologians see people “not as believers or nonbelievers but as exploiters and exploited, a category they contend is far more biblical” (Cox 159).

²²³ In the same vein, James Cone brushed aside such “white theological textbook” concerns (11) for failing to relate the Gospel to the real-life social and economic concerns of oppressed peoples. Moreover, any theological system that “does not elicit the hope for change” is ultimately incorrect, since “the constituent definition of humanity is that people are agents of history, capable of changing the world” (49).

he insisted that theology must be “part of *anthropology*” and “engaged historically in order to discuss...our relations with the very word of God” (qtd. in Davis 68, emphasis added). Referring to the incarnation of Jesus, he professed: “Just as the Word became flesh, so the Word can be approached only through man...The theologian should take, as the starting point of his reflections, the history of man” (“Letter to a Young Theology Student” 12).

E. The Unity of Thought and Action

Gutierrez declared that all the “theologies of hope, of revolution, and of liberation, are not worth one act of genuine solidarity with exploited social classes” (174).²²⁴ According to Harvey Cox, liberation theology is “first and foremost a ‘theology of praxis’...based on the conviction that all human thought is a form of action. It grows out of the continuing interaction between reflection and engagement, theorizing and doing” (136). All liberation theologians insist on the “dialectical relation between faith and the practice of social justice” (Cone 36).²²⁵ As Gutierrez contended, “Theology does not produce pastoral activity; rather it reflects upon it” (9).²²⁶ In other words, commitment to the Other and loving social action *precede* theory and reflection.

²²⁴ Similarly, Cone asserted: “Praxis is the social theory used to analyze the structures of injustice so that we will know what must be done for the historical realization of freedom. To sing about freedom and to pray for its coming is not enough” (46).

²²⁵ The incarnation of Christ provides the theological basis for the linkage of faith and action: “By becoming human in Jesus, God connects faith with the social, political, and economic conditions of people” (Cone 47).

²²⁶ In this vein, Gutierrez echoed Marx’s famous assertion that the point of philosophy is not just to understand the world, but to transform it: “...contemporary theology does in fact find itself in direct and fruitful confrontation with Marxism, and it is to a large extent due to Marxism’s influence that theological thought, searching for its own sources, has begun to reflect on the meaning of the transformation of this world and human action in history” (8). However, Gutierrez insisted that Marxist ideas must be adapted to fit the unique conditions of Latin America (56). Thus, Latin American socialism must be distinctly Latin American, “not to satisfy a desire for originality, but for the sake of elementary historical realism” (56).

Moreover, such transformative activity must be closely guided by theory and goals (McGovern 32). For Christians, the message of the Gospel is “read, prayed over, and reflected upon...*in direct relation to life*...Bible and life shed light on each other for those whose faith looks to them for meaning and significance” (Azevedo 224, emphasis in original). Liberation theology is arguably less concerned with the specific content than with “the role and purpose theology should play in the world” (Cox 266).

Likewise, the dialectical unity of thought and action is central to Freire’s educational system. “When a word is deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers as well; and the word is changed into idle chatter, into *verbalism*, into an alienated and alienating ‘blah’ (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 87, emphasis in original). Freire viewed traditional religious teachings that urge “a waiting but not a searching” (i.e., hope without action) as “profoundly alienating” because they presume “that the average man abdicates his praxis in this world” (“The Third World and Theology” 13). He insisted that “there is no hope in passivity, in accommodation, in making compromises, but rather in the dialectic of restlessness-peace” (“The Third World and Theology” 13). On the other hand, “if action is emphasized exclusively, to the detriment of reflection,” the result is mere “*activism*,” which “negates true praxis” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 87, emphasis in original). Freire was deeply critical of social action that fails to challenge existing structures.²²⁷ He also rejected political changes that have been granted “from above” rather than won through grassroots action. These measures are “an especially pernicious method of trying to vitiate popular participation in the historical process,” thereby perpetuating dependence upon the supposed benevolence of the powerful (*Education for Critical*

²²⁷ This was how he came to view his “palliative” work at SESI throughout the 1940s and early 1950s, which led him to abandon his directorship in favor of setting up his experimental literacy project at the University of Recife.

Consciousness 12-13).²²⁸ According to Freire, the rich seek to anesthetize their class guilt through such “assistencialist” activities: “We will sleep on blithely, perhaps after having taken our little nip of Scotch whisky” (“Letter to a Young Theology Student” 11).²²⁹ Rejecting these “aspirin pills,” he called upon fellow Christians to “get rid of any illusory dream of trying to change man without touching the world he lives in” (“Letter to a Young Theology Student” 11).²³⁰ However, he also warned that radical activism will inevitably trigger public condemnation; Christians who “turn to less assistencial, more constructive, more constructive forms of action... soon come to be regarded as ‘diabolical’ individuals, members of some international plot that endangers ‘our Western and Christian civilization’” (“The Educational Role of the Churches” 16). The “power elites” condemn such actions, accusing activists of being “false Christians” who are endangering the faith of the “helpless, unlettered” masses (“The

²²⁸ Likewise, Gutierrez differentiated between “subversive” and “superversive” forms of social action (Brown 31). “Superversive” action is imposed from above, while “subversive” action comes from the bottom of society. For Gutierrez, “superversive” action is intrinsically paternalistic because it fosters further dependency upon the wealthy and powerful. It also negates the intrinsic capacity of the poor for historical agency. Instead, Gutierrez called for “subversive” social action, wherein poor and disempowered persons take charge of their own destiny. In so doing, they become protagonists of their own destiny.

²²⁹ According to Freire, much philanthropy on the part of Catholic elites is a way to assuage their gnawing guilt: “I seek compensation by almsgiving, I send a check to build a church, I make contributions: land for a chapel or a monastery for nuns, hoping in that way to buy peace” (“Conscientizing as a Way of Liberating” 9). However, inner peace cannot be bought; it can only be earned through working “shoulder to shoulder with my fellow men” to transform dehumanizing social structures – i.e., praxis (“Conscientizing as a Way of Liberating”9).

²³⁰ In this vein, he stated that his youthful efforts to “change hearts” within Brazilian Catholic Action were doomed to failure: “Only the innocent...are deluded enough to believe that exhortations or humanitarian works, or a brilliant syllogizing all in mid-air, can actually change the world by changing men’s hearts” (“The Educational Role of the Churches” 15).

Educational Role of the Churches”17).²³¹ These remarks are grounded in bitter experience; at Freire’s military trial, he was charged with being an “international subversive” and the practitioner of a “Bolshevizing” pedagogy that was “similar to that of Stalin, Hitler, Peron, and Mussolini” (Gadotti 35). He was also called a “traitor to Christ” (Gadotti 35), a label which revealed the degree of alignment between the military junta and the conservative elements of the Brazilian Church.

F. Theology of Human Nature

The ontology of human beings is pivotal to Freire’s educational framework. As educational scholar Gillian Cooper notes, “At the heart of [Freire’s] work is a vision of what it means to be human, and a vision for humanization which is the ultimate goal of radical education” (68). In *Pedagogy of Freedom*, Freire’s last completed work, he affirmed:

I have never abandoned my first preoccupation, one that has been with me since my early experiences in education. Namely my preoccupation with human nature. It is in this preoccupation that I continue to proclaim my loyalty....There is no theory of sociopolitical transformation that moves me if it is not grounded in an understanding of the human person as a maker of history and as one made by history. (115)

This intense curiosity about human nature permeated Freire’s lifelong work. As Richard Shaull notes, Freire operated on “one basic assumption: that man’s ontological vocation...is to be a Subject who acts upon and transforms the world, and in so doing moves toward ever new possibilities of fuller and richer life individually and collectively” (32). Freire’s repudiation of

²³¹ Dom Helder Camara, the radical archbishop of Recife and a lifelong friend of Freire’s, famously declared: “If I may give food to the poor, they call me a saint...If I ask why the poor do not have food, they call me a communist” (qtd. in McLaren, *Che Guevarra* 143).

“banking” pedagogy largely stemmed from its negation of the “ontological and historical vocation of becoming more human” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 83). In this regard, Cooper situates Freire within the tradition of Christian thinkers who “have seen salvation as a process by which human beings become more fully human” (69-70). In this theological lineage, humanity is “created by God for relationship with God and with one another...Human beings have a destiny which is bound up with God's purposes for the world, and they have responsibility not only for their relationship to God, but for one another and for the world” (Cooper 70). Human beings are not self-sufficient but are fulfilled in dialogic relationship with other persons, with the material world, and ultimately, with the loving Creator and Source of life and being (Elias 140). As “unfinished” beings with the divinely-endowed capacity for development, human beings find completion and transcendence in God (Elias 50). The concept of relationship is pivotal to Freire’s thought, and to the Judeo-Christian tradition as a whole:

From the biblical point of view, relationship is essential to life...To be alive is to be connected to God, and the loss of that unity, imaged in the scriptures as separation, is death. Further, connection to God also leads to connection to other human beings and with all of creation. Relationship, therefore, is essential to being. (Clark 21-22)

Authentic faith is not primarily about intellectually assenting to a set of religious beliefs, but about cultivating a relationship with a transcendent Creator (Clark 23). For Freire, human beings “are best understood as beings of relationships. Growing through these relationships, they become the persons they are destined to be” (Elias 50). Human existence implies “eternal dialogue between man and man, between man and the world, between man and his Creator. It is this dialogue which makes of man an historical being” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 17-18). Freire elaborated:

God's relationship over us is based on the fact of our finitude and our knowledge of this finitude. For we are incomplete beings, and the completion of our incompleteness is encountered in our relationships with our Creator, a relationship which by its very nature, can never be a relationship of domination or domestication, but is always a relationship of liberation... Precisely because humans are finite and indigent beings, in this transcendence through love, humans have their return to their source [i.e., God], who liberates them.”(qtd. in Elias, *Pedagogue* 38)

This Christian vision of human existence “enables Freire to consider the relationship between humans and a transcendental Being as the norm for judging the relationship that should exist among persons” (Elias 47). As such, he rejected egotism, individualism, domination, and self-seeking. Only through authentic relationships, which are characterized by freedom and loving dialogue, can we grow into our full human stature as children of God (Elias 139).²³² As Freire asserted, “I cannot be the author of your salvation...I have to live as a man among men and women...discussing, acting, transforming, creating...and in all the dimensions of my life, my existence, I can find the presence of God” (qtd. in Davis 68-9). Freire clearly denied the possibility of learning, reflecting, and acting in isolation. Roberts notes Freire's conviction that persons “cannot think, speak, read, write, learn, or *be* alone. To be *human* is to be a social being. Humans are beings of relationships: beings whose very existence cannot be comprehended without reference to others” (192, emphasis in original). As Freire maintained, “I cannot exist without a *non-I*. In turn, the *not-I* depends on that existence” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 82,

²³² “Education as the practice of freedom – as opposed to education as the practice of domination – denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 81).

emphasis in original).²³³ In plainer language, he declared: “Nobody gives freedom to anyone else, no one frees another, nobody can even free himself all alone; men free themselves only in concert... collaborating on something wrong that they want to correct” (“Conscientizing as a Way of Liberating” 10).²³⁴ For Freire, a “hierarchical relationship between educator and educatee would perpetuate the divisions and separations within the ‘body of Christ’ ... conscientization is shaped consciously in opposition of ideologies of liberation ‘for the people,’ be they Marxist or Christian...a pedagogy of the oppressed affirms the people...as subjects before the educators arrive” (Welton 119-20, emphasis in original).

Importantly, Freire drew parallels between conscientization and spiritual salvation: “No one saves another, no one saves himself all alone, because only in communion can we save ourselves...You can’t save me, because my soul, my being, my conscious body is not something that A or B can save. *We work out our salvation in communion*” (“Conscientizing as a Way of Liberating” 10, emphasis added). For Freire, praxis and conscientization are not just intellectual or political activities; they manifest humanity’s “vocation” to work with the Creator in shaping the world (Jarvis 36). God lovingly limits “Himself by seeing some value in men – limited, unfinished and incompleted as they are – as beings that choose, as sharers in His creative work” (“The Third World and Theology” 13). Unlike animals, who merely adapt to “reality” in order

²³³ Similarly, “I am not, I do not be, unless you are, unless you be. Above all, I am not if I forbid you to be” (*Pedagogy of Hope* 85). Freire’s language is drawn from Martin Buber’s concept of the I-Thou relationship, which he views as the template for authentic and loving dialogue. As Freire declared, “Dialogue is an I-Thou relationship, and thus necessarily a relationship between two Subjects. Each time the ‘thou’ is changed into an object, an ‘it,’ dialogue is subverted and education is changed to deformation” (*Education for Critical Consciousness* 52). Notably, Buber considered God the ultimate “Thou.” The mystical, intimate relationship between each human being and the transcendent interlocutor orients all rightful relationships.

²³⁴ Likewise, the Medellin bishops affirmed that “men are to sanctify and save themselves not as individuals but constituted in community” (Second General Conference 125).

to survive, human beings are meant to intervene consciously in the world to transform it (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 101). In acting consciously to shape history, human beings grow ever closer to the image of their loving Creator.²³⁵ Thus, God works through the “cooperation of human beings to bring about the completion of a just world” (Elias 139).²³⁶ Through freely choosing praxis, all persons “fulfill their human destiny and act as co-creators with the Divine” (Jarvis 38). Freire viewed the process of conscientization in ontological and theological terms:

All of us are involved in a permanent process of conscientization, as thinking beings in a dialectical relation with an objective reality upon which we act. What varies in time and space are the contents, methods, and objectives of conscientization. Its original source is that point far off in time that Teilhard de Chardin calls ‘humanisation,’ when human beings made themselves capable of revealing their active reality, knowing it and understanding what they know. (“An Invitation” 172)

Grafting his educational philosophy onto the cosmic narrative of Teilhard, Freire speculated that the phenomenon of conscientization emerged at a mysterious point in humanity’s evolutionary past.²³⁷ With this seminal transformation, human beings gained the capacity to see themselves as creative beings, thus potentially differentiating themselves from animals. However, conscientization is not guaranteed; it must be cultivated by each person within his or her unique

²³⁵ “Drawing upon the Western philosophical emphasis of *logos* (the word) and upon the Genesis myth in which Adam’s dominion over the universe was signified by his activity of naming the animals, Freire says that men become fully human when they are capable of uttering their own *logos*, of speaking authentically as subjects” (Collins 51).

²³⁶ This is a central tenet of Process Theology. See especially the work of Alfred North Whitehead.

²³⁷ According to Gadotti, Freire viewed this as the “the evolutionary stage of the world when man and woman appeared; in other words, when the capacity to reflect and act on reality in order to transform it appeared” (166).

historical circumstances (Davis 58-9). Elsewhere, Freire used similar imagery to depict human development:

A being in the womb of history but in the process of coming to be bears in itself some fundamental archetypes without which it would be impossible to recognize our human presence in the world as something singular and original. In other words, our being in the world is far more than just 'being.' It is a 'presence,' a 'presence' that is relational to the world and to others. A 'presence' that, in recognizing another presence as 'not I,' recognizes its own self. (*Pedagogy of Freedom* 25-6)

In this statement, Freire seemed to posit that all persons possess absolute, intrinsic templates (“fundamental archetypes”) that transcend the particularities of history and biography. This formulation resonated with the theological concept of *Imago Dei*, which asserts that all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, and thus are creative beings of “infinite worth, capable of choice, and utterly unique” (Ganz 18). In addition, Freire’s use of the term “presence” to depict human potentiality reflected his lifelong understanding of God as a “*presence* in history that...pushes me toward world transformation” (*Pedagogy of the Heart* 103, emphasis added).²³⁸ This sacred and transcendent relationship with a loving Creator endows human beings with the capacity for free will, critical reflection, further development, and historical agency.

G. Death and Rebirth

²³⁸ Similarly: “God is a presence [in history] — nevertheless, this presence does not prevent myself from making history, that is the history of the liberation of humanity” (qtd. in Davis 68-9).

Freire and liberation theologians both used the symbolic language of death and rebirth to describe the profound transformation required of activists who wish to participate in the cause of “liberation.” For example, Gutierrez insisted that practicing liberation theology requires the self-sacrifice of the “intelligence of the intelligent” and of the “theologian as an intellectual” (qtd. in Brown 72). Liberation theologians must “die” to their socio-cultural privilege and intellectual pride. Unsurprisingly, this sacrifice did not come naturally, especially in the early stages of the movement. Many liberation theologians were openly dismissive of folk religion, reflecting their academic formation in leading European universities and seminaries (Cox 243).²³⁹ After engaging in dialogue with the poor and painstakingly grappling with their own theological background, many liberation theologians began to reinterpret popular religious practices as logical responses to conditions of oppression and extreme poverty (Berryman 70).²⁴⁰ This process of “re-education” was a painful process. For many, “it required shedding some of the values most dear to modern academic theology. It required a rediscovery of the smells of Latin America and of the inner meaning of the rites and customs of the poor” (Cox 243). Liberation theologians underwent their own process of conscientization, “dying” as bearers of privileged ideas. Through this “detoxification,” they sought to reject the “dominating theological discourses of a pervasively Eurocentric cultural experience of religion, spirituality, and even church” (Oldenski 79). Only after this intellectual, political, and spiritual “rebirth” could they fully participate alongside the poor in the historical struggle against oppression.

²³⁹ For example, Juan Luis Segundo echoed Marx’s view of popular religion as an opiate of the masses (Cox 243).

²⁴⁰ For example, the view of baptism as a supernatural inoculation against illness and death stemmed from a context of extreme medical deprivation. Similarly, peasants with no access to social influence might appeal to heavenly saints and patrons for earthly intercession on their behalf (Berryman 70).

Similarly, the religious metaphors of death and rebirth are central to Freire's pedagogical theory and practice. As Cooper notes:

The key to Freire's educational philosophy is transformation – of the relationship to knowledge, of the relationship between educator and educates, ultimately of the world. In speaking of this transformation, Freire uses the theological language of Easter. At the heart of the Christian message is death and resurrection, but says Freire, that message does nothing if it is left at a spiritual level alone. It must issue in praxis if it is to be truly liberating. (67)

Freire described the commitment to the liberation struggle in all-encompassing, theological terms: "Every Christian must make his Easter...dying in order to be reborn" ("Conscientizing as a Way of Liberating" 10). He used the metaphor of "Passover" in the same capacity: "This Passover...has to be done, not inside one's mind, but in history. Nobody makes a Passover merely by thinking about it" ("The Educational Role of the Churches" 18). In the same vein, Freire described conscientizing education as resulting in the "painful birth" of new human beings:

Conscientization...involves an excruciating moment, a tremendously upsetting one, in anyone who begins to conscientize himself, the moment when he starts to be reborn. *Because conscientization demands an Easter.* That is, it demands that we die to be born again...That is why Christianity is, for me, such a marvelous doctrine. ("Conscientizing as a Way of Liberating" 10, emphasis added)

Depicting to his own ideological "awakening" following the traumatic events of 1964, he recounted: "After the coup, I was really *born again* with a new consciousness of politics" (*Pedagogy for Liberation* 32, emphasis added). Elsewhere, Freire described this process in terms reminiscent of biblical accounts of exorcism: "Literacy circles introduced in poor areas

only make sense in the context of the humanizing process...whereby the sense of self blame that has been falsely interjected *can be cast out*. This expulsion of self-blame corresponds to the expulsion of the invasive shadow of the oppressor that inhabits the psyche of the oppressed” (*Pedagogy of Freedom* 78-9, emphasis added). This language echoes Gospel accounts of Jesus’ confrontation with demons as a sign of the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God.²⁴¹ As such, Freire’s vivid description of conscientization as “expelling” the “invasive shadow of the oppressor” strongly recalls the biblical description of Jesus’ “liberating” ministry.²⁴²

Crucially, Freire called on *both* educators and learners to undergo their own particular “Easter” experiences (Cooper 73). On the one hand, the oppressed must “die” to their historical fatalism and be “reborn” as the protagonists of their own liberation (“The Educational Role of the Churches” 18). On the other hand, revolutionary leaders must renounce the class of their origin “in an act of true solidarity” with the oppressed (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 163). This radical “conversion” to the poor (or “class suicide”) requires “a profound rebirth” into “a new form of existence” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 61).²⁴³ Cooper notes that within religious

²⁴¹ In one of the most famous of these encounters, Jesus casts out an especially vicious pack of demons from a madman on the outskirts of Galilee (Luke 8:26-39). When Jesus asks the demons for their name, they respond “Legion.” Since “legion” was the widely-known term for the basic unit of the Roman army, some biblical commentators have interpreted this incident as a symbolic confrontation between Jesus and the imperial authorities of his day.

²⁴² This language also recalls the liberation theologians’ view of Jesus as a fearless warrior on behalf of the suffering.

²⁴³ Marxist scholar Jim Walker criticizes Freire’s vision of a “class suicide” for conscientizing educators (136). According to Walker, the total abrogation of class privilege is not possible through noble intentions or sheer acts of will alone. Rather, it can only come about *after* concrete material conditions have changed (141). Walker writes, “Even supposing that it is realistic to preach such a gospel, supposing that the ‘sacrificial’ class will respond, or even that it is possible for them to respond, it is a further question whether the response will have the political results expected of it, namely that *sui generis* moral will can cancel out class conflict. There is no evidence that it ever has or ever could” (136). For Walker, Freire’s concept of “class

discourse, “conversion” (which means “turning around”) can be used to describe one’s decision to begin a radically new life (73). In Cooper’s view, the Freirean educator’s “conversion” to the oppressed “is a life-changing event. It is...a commitment of the educator's *whole life* to the cause” (73, emphasis added). For his part, Freire pointed to Che Guevara as a revolutionary leader who was born into socio-economic privilege but embraced “death” to his class background to be “reborn” to fight in loving “communion” with the poor (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 171). Conversely, Freire lambasted those “bourgeois” churches that refuse to “live the Easter [they are] always talking about” (“The Educational Role of Churches” 17). For

suicide” results from the unresolved conflict between his Christian and Marxist philosophies. Walker’s critique is echoed by John Elias. While Elias admires Freire’s activism and emancipatory politics, he is critical of what he sees as Freire’s “faulty view of human nature” (53). He argues that Freire greatly exaggerates the extent of human freedom (Elias 53). Freire, he believes, is guilty of being too “optimistic” and “simplistic” regarding the human capacity for agency, as well as Freire’s faith in the possibility of dramatic social change (53). Mirroring Walker’s critique, Elias criticizes Freire for (allegedly) asserting that “humans are capable of being totally different from what they have been in the past” (58). He contrasts Freire’s utopianism with the “chastened realism” of established Catholic teaching, which characterizes human nature as tragically disfigured by Original Sin (56). Elias believes that Freire’s view of human nature is dangerously naive because it does not recognize the capacity for the oppressed to become oppressors in turn. Rejecting Freire’s “false utopianism” about personal or societal perfectibility, Elias proposes an acceptance of the fallibility and corruptibility of human beings. Human beings can—and *should*—struggle to improve social conditions in this world. However, the over-valuation of human and social perfectibility can lead to absolutist tyrannies like the Catholic Inquisition or the French Revolution. Elias asserts that “what [utopian society] Freire has presented as a present or earthly possibility for humans, Catholicism proffers in terms of some future existence” (57). For his part, Freire acknowledged that radical conversion to the poor is extremely unlikely for entire *groups* of social elites, but it remains a possibility for *individuals*. Thus, “Even the most progressive and democratic businessperson will always be limited by the interests of his or her social class...It is possible that some businessperson may venture into such ‘conversion’; that is not the case with the class as a whole. History has yet to record any case of class suicide” (*Pedagogy of the Heart* 47). Moreover, he advised revolutionaries who “authentically commit themselves to the people” to “re-examine themselves constantly,” since their “conversion is so radical as not to allow of ambiguous behavior” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 60). This statement reflected his pragmatic awareness that “conversion” to the oppressed is difficult and tenuous and thus must be laboriously safe-guarded and reinforced.

Freire, these “traditional” churches decay spiritually because they refuse to be reborn as “prophetic” churches (“The Educational Role of Churches” 24).²⁴⁴ In a similar vein, Freire called upon the “First World” to die to its imperial might and be reborn as the “Third World” in order to “hear the Word of God” (“Letter to a Young Theology Student” 12).²⁴⁵ In the end, Freire’s theme of conscientization transposed explicitly biblical themes into his “liberating” educational theory and practice (Welton qtd. in Cooper 74). As such, it manifested the theological framework for his radical pedagogy.

H. Education, Utopia, and the Church

Sharing Freire’s concern with the role of education in broad societal change, the Latin American bishops at Medellin closely examine the pedagogical role of the socioeconomic elites in the struggle for social justice. Tellingly, numerous ideas from the bishops’ joint statement on this issue (entitled “Pastoral Concern for the Elites”) were adapted by Freire in his 1972 essay, “The Educational Role of the Churches in Latin America.” In his work, Freire explored the pedagogical linkages between the evangelizing mission of the church and the conscientizing tasks of the radical educator (Cooper 67).

At Medellin, the Latin American bishops defined the “elites” as “the high level leaders in areas of culture, the professions, business and industry, and government,” particularly those “few who exercise actual or potential influence on decision-making in the cultural, professional,

²⁴⁴ See the next section for Freire’s distinction between “prophetic” and “traditional” churches.

²⁴⁵ On the other hand, the oppressed of the “Third World” must “die as an oppressed class, in order to be reborn as a class that liberates itself” (“The Educational Role of the Churches” 18).

educational, social and political levels” (Second General Conference 129).²⁴⁶ They identify three categories of elites: “traditionalists,” “evolutionists,” and “revolutionaries” (Second General Conference 130). According to the bishops, the traditionalist elites “show little or no social conscience, have a middle-class orientation, and...do not question the social structures” (Second General Conference 130). These elites are “primarily concerned with preserving their privileges, which they identify with the ‘established order.’ Their community action takes the character of paternalism and alms-giving, with no concern for changing the status quo” (Second General Conference 130). The traditionalist mindset is “often found in the professional circles, in the socio-economic sectors, and within the established governing bodies,” as well as in the military sectors, which “tend to support these [conservative] structures in various areas and often intervene to reinforce them” (Second General Conference 130). The dichotomy between religious faith and civic responsibility is most frequently encountered among these elites, for whom “membership in the Church is a matter of tradition and self-interest” (Second General Conference 131). This portrait of traditionalist elites was followed by the bishops’ description of the “evolutionist” group. These elites “concern themselves preferably with the means of production which they believe must be improved in quantity and quality” (Second General Conference 130-31). The evolutionist mentality, which is most commonly found among

²⁴⁶ McCann points out an unresolved tension between two strategies for conscientization affirmed at Medellin (165). On one hand, the bishops put forward the overtly Freirean tactic of “awakening...and organizing the popular sectors” in order to pressure “public officials who are often impotent in their social projects without popular support” (Second General Conference 79). On the other hand, the bishops seem to “identify conscientization with...media campaigns” that are directed not just to the masses, but also to the “key men” (i.e., elites) who possess disproportionate amounts of power and influence (McCann 165). McCann argues that by placing this second tactic on equal footing with the first, the bishops ignore Freire’s dialectical view of society (165). However, McCann overlooks Freire’s emphasis on the necessity for “class suicide” among the economic elites who aspire to join the revolutionary struggle.

“technologists and the various development agencies,” attaches tremendous importance to “technology and the planning of society” (Second General Conference 131). The evolutionist worldview asserts that the poor need to be “integrated into the mainstream of society as producers and consumers,” and it places “greater emphasis on economic progress than on the social betterment of the common people” (Second General Conference 131). Thus, evolutionists want to build upon and expand the existing socio-economic structures, rather than abolishing the capitalist system. They tend to be paternalistic in their interactions with the poor (Second General Conference 131). The Latin American bishops expressed dissatisfaction with the evolutionists’ gradualist approach to social justice and economic development. Finally, the third category of elites – the “revolutionists” – received the bishops’ most favorable assessment. These elites have a “vivid sense of service for neighbor” which leads them to “question the socio-economic structure...[and] desire a radical change in [societal] goals as well as in implementation” (Second General Conference 131). In addition, revolutionist elites believe that “the people are and must be the subject of this change in such manner that they take an active part in decision-making for the reordering of the entire social process” (Second General Conference 131). The “revolutionist” mentality is most common found “among intellectuals, scientific researchers, and university people” (Second General Conference 131).

Freire closely took up the bishops’ ideas in his essay “The Educational Role of the Churches in Latin America.” He argued that Latin American churches have taken shape in three distinct forms: “traditionalist,” “modernizing,” and “prophetic.” In his view, only the prophetic church has remained true to the Gospel message. According to Freire, the traditionalist church is “missionary in the worse sense of that word, a ‘conqueror’ of souls, and obsessed with death” (20). This is a “necrophilic” church, one that “finds a masochistic pleasure in constantly harping

on sin, on eternal fire, on damnation without hope of redemption” (20). The traditionalist church cultivates “cringing, fatalistic impotence” among the poor by teaching that “the more they suffer, the more they are purified for heaven and an eternal repose” (20). In terms of its teaching practice, the “traditionalist” church inevitably promotes “quietistic” and “alienating” pedagogies (21). It instructs the masses to “despise the world as a place for sin and impurity” (20), thus enervating their drive to transform temporal social arrangements. Freire and the bishops agree upon key characteristics of the traditionalist mindset: unquestioningly accepting the socioeconomic status quo, professing political neutrality while strongly defending the established order, having little interest in social justice, and viewing religious practice primarily as a matter of tradition and self-interest.²⁴⁷

After this unremittingly harsh portrayal of the traditionalist church, Freire turned to the “modernizing” church. In his view, the modernizing church had spread rapidly throughout Latin America in recent years, stimulated by the continent’s rapid socio-economic changes (21). Unfortunately, the modernizing churches are primarily concerned with streamlining their bureaucracies, adapting more efficient technologies, and upgrading their methods for delivering charity (23). “Like the traditionalist Church, of which it is a new version, it is loyal, not to the dominated social classes, but to the power elites. It wants structural reforms, but not a radical transformation of structures. It talks of humanizing capitalism, but not of throwing it out

²⁴⁷ These criticisms were clearly drawn from the concept of integral salvation, which rejects the theological dichotomy between material (i.e., economic) and spiritual well-being of all persons. Accordingly, the Latin American bishops called upon Christians to “acknowledge the presence of God, who desires to save the whole man, body and soul” (48). They also affirmed the “profound unity that exists between God’s plan of salvation realized in Christ, and the aspirations of man; between the history of salvation and human history” (140).

altogether” (23). The modernizing church is palliative rather than transformative, paternalistic rather than dialogic; it is ultimately a church “of half-way measures” (23). It is therefore as deeply invested in the unjust status quo as its traditionalist counterpart; it “freezes into immobility, while giving the impression that it is ‘progressing’” (24). Modernizing churches envision changing individual hearts instead of promoting broad structural transformation (25). They view educational innovation as revolving around “liberating pupils from their blackboard, from passive classes and bookish curricula; it means just providing slide projectors and other visual aids, dynamic class plans and technico-professional instruction” (25). Freire’s portrait of the modernizing church clearly paralleled the Medellin document’s depiction of the evolutionist elites. Both categories are primarily concerned with technological innovation and socio-economic “developmentalism.” Both promote top-down reforms rather than dialogic, grassroots activism. Both are committed to preserving capitalism rather than pushing for radical socio-economic transformation.

Finally, Freire turned to the “prophetic” church. This church is “as old as Christianity without being traditionalist and as ever-new...without being modernizing” (25). Freire was adamant that the “prophetic” church is the only form that has remained faithful to the original teachings of Jesus Christ. It “rejects assistential palliatives and soothing reformisms, commits itself to the dominated classes and seeks to transform society radically” (25). It does not “divorce this-worldliness from transcendence, or salvation from liberation” (25) but acknowledges the need for revolutionary action (26). It is committed to loving dialogue, professing: “There is no ‘I am,’ nor ‘I know,’ nor ‘I liberate you,’ nor ‘I save you’ – but rather a ‘we are,’ a ‘we know,’ a ‘we liberate one another,’ and a ‘we save one another’” (25). Through social science and dialectical analysis, the prophetic church understands that reality is a “fluid

process and not something fixed,” and that social conflicts “are the historical outcomes of the clash of real contradictions” (26).²⁴⁸ Having recognized the conflictive nature of history, the prophetic church rejects a stance of false neutrality (25).²⁴⁹ It refuses to offer soothing sermons or smooth over injustice. Rather, it invites the oppressed to embark on “a new Exodus” (26). In its evangelizing practice, this church is uncompromisingly committed to “a mode of action to change things, a political action for the permanent liberation of man” (28). It professes that education must “always [be] an effort to understand better something that is concrete,” so that the teachers and learners “will be joined in a creative, active presence, in a clarifying praxis that, as it unveils the reality of awareness, will help to unveil the awareness of reality too” (28). Notably, Freire’s depiction of the prophetic church was more unambiguously positive than the Latin American bishops’ praise for the revolutionary elites. At Medellin, the bishops chided the “revolutionists” for being excessively humanistic.²⁵⁰ They insisted that Christian activists must cultivate their sense of the divine more assiduously, especially through regular participation in the liturgical life of the Church (Second General Conference 132-33). Freire presented no such reservations. Similarly, the bishops offered some kind words for evolutionist elites, acknowledging their capacity for “deep personal commitment with regards to social justice” (Second General Conference 131). For his part, Freire had no positive words for the

²⁴⁸ In support of this point, Freire reaffirmed his long-standing rejection of “subjective idealism” – the notion that “it is somehow enough to change men’s and women’s hearts” without first transforming underlying social structures (15).

²⁴⁹ “The Churches are not timeless abstractions, but institutions inserted into history...the Church’s educational efforts are [therefore] always conditioned by the concrete, historical reality into which the Churches are plunged” (15).

²⁵⁰ That is, for tending to “identify the faith exclusively with social responsibility,” thus making it difficult to maintain “a personal relationship with a transcendent God” (“Second General Conference” 132).

“modernizing” church. His pronouncements were decidedly more forceful than the bishops’ statement – a difference that exemplifies the radicalization that occurred between the 1968 conference and the full flowering of liberation theology over the next decade.²⁵¹

Ultimately, Freire envisioned a church that is “utopian and hopeful” (“The Educational Role of the Churches” 26). In Freire’s discourse, “utopian” does not refer to something unattainable, naive, or other-worldly. Instead, it is linked to the dialectical acts of “denouncing the dehumanizing structure and announcing the structure that will humanize” (“Conscientizing as a Way of Liberating” 5). For Freire, “denunciation” is the rhetorical practice of naming and confronting oppressive ideologies and social structures, while “annunciation” is the rhetorical practice of articulating an energizing and hope-filled alternative vision to replace the existing order.²⁵² Crucially, he insisted that historical transformation requires *both* processes; denunciation without annunciation can degenerate into aimlessness, paralysis, and despair, while annunciation without denunciation implies a crippling lack of critical reflection and social analysis.²⁵³ Freire’s utopian vision is ultimately inseparable from historical praxis: “Only those who announce and denounce, who are permanently committed to a radical process of transforming the world so that men can *be* more, only they are prophetic” (“Conscientizing as a

²⁵¹ Freire’s rhetoric also reflected his own tendency to “take on the pose and language of a prophet” (Elias 111). As Elias notes, Freire “often tends to see issues in black and white terms; his writings often deal in setting up dichotomies. Often his style of writing becomes sermonistic and exhortatory. At times he exudes an air of certainty in his condemnations that reminds one of his biblical forerunners” (111-12).

²⁵² “Annunciation” is an overtly Christian term. It refers to the moment when the archangel Gabriel tells Mary that she has been chosen to be the mother of the promised Messiah. Thus, “annunciation” is a long-standing metaphor for hope, expectation, and divine goodness within the Christianity tradition.

²⁵³ “I cannot denounce the dehumanizing structure unless I get at it and know it. Nor can I announce, either, unless I know” (“Conscientizing as a Way of Liberating” 5)

Way of Liberating” 6, emphasis in original).²⁵⁴ According to Freire, the utopian posture for Christians is to refuse to accommodate to the status quo, “not to spend 90 per cent of their time making concessions” to the powers-that-be (“Conscientizing as a Way of Liberating” 6). As always, he eschewed fatalism, irrationality, false hope, or magical thinking. His utopianism embraced the historical necessity for a “liberating praxis which is prepared to struggle for the transformation of the world, from a position of optimism” (Cooper 73). In this vein, he declared:

I feel passionately, corporately, physically, with all my being, that my stance is a Christian one because it is 100 percent revolutionary and human and liberating, and hence committed and utopian. And that, as I see it, must be our position, the position of a Church that must not forget it is called by its origins to die shivering in the cold (“Conscientizing as a Way of Liberating” 10).

In the end, Freire’s social vision – indeed, his lifelong educational activism – was animated by his unflinching faith in the capacity of all human beings to transform history in the direction of greater justice, peace, and beauty, reflecting their ultimate source in a loving Creator.

²⁵⁴ Elaborating upon Freire’s concept of utopia, Gutierrez explained that “between the denunciation and the annunciation is the time for building, the historical *praxis*. Moreover, denunciation and annunciation can be achieved only *in praxis*...If utopia does not lead to action in the present, it is an evasion of reality” (136, emphasis in original). Gutierrez echoed Freire’s emphasis on the privileged role of the poor in the liberatory struggle: “Freire is right when he says that in today’s world only the oppressed person, only the oppressed class, only oppressed peoples, can denounce and announce” (137).

Conclusion

This dissertation has examined the theological framework underlying Paulo Freire’s radical-democratic pedagogy. In particular, it has traced the extensive impact of progressive Catholicism on his evolving educational philosophy, from his youthful participation in Brazilian Catholic Action to his later status as a widely-recognized predecessor and interlocutor of Latin American liberation theology. It has explored the religious dimension of such pivotal Freirean concepts as conscientization, political agency, social justice, historical possibility, and the nature of human persons, thus demonstrating that Freire’s faith lies at the heart of his pedagogical and political project. As he asserted towards the end of his life, “All arguments in favor of the legitimacy of my struggle for a more *people-oriented* society have their deepest roots in my faith. It sustains me, motivates me, challenges me, and it has never allowed me to say, ‘Stop, settle down, things are as they are because they cannot be any other way’” (*Pedagogy of the Heart* 104, emphasis in original).

Given the prominence of religion in contemporary U.S. civic life, Freire’s lifelong “border-crossing” between theological and secular discourses raises intriguing questions and possibilities. Formidable alliances between secular and religious activists have occurred throughout U.S. history. Two of the most recent manifestations are the Social Gospel movement of the late 19th and early 20th century, and Civil Rights struggle of the 1950s and 60s. However, Christianity in the contemporary U.S. has become largely identified in the public consciousness with harshly moralistic “family values” and apocalyptic millenarianism over the last few

decades.²⁵⁵ The secular Left, justifiably anxious to maintain the eroding separation of church and state, and often reflexively skeptical of “foundationalist” philosophical systems, has too often surrendered the vital discourses of religion and “moral values” to the so-called Religious Right, effectively “forfeiting the game” to their conservative counterparts (Maley 158). These conditions have fostered a disastrous estrangement between religious and secular progressives – a tragic missed opportunity, given numerous shared values regarding socio-economic justice, environmental protection, marriage equality for gay and lesbian couples, immigrants’ rights, anti-militarism and anti-corporatism, and universal access to health care.

Freire would have found the non-alliance between religious and secular progressives appalling. From his early work at SESI and the University of Recife, to his international projects for the World Council of Churches, and in his latter years as a world-famous elder statesman in educational philosophy and activism, he never insisted upon a religious litmus test in selecting his collaborators. He was thoroughly at ease working with religious and secular activists for social justice. For Freire, the fundamental political dichotomy was not between “persons of faith” and “non-believers,” but between the Right and the Left. Throughout his life, he wholeheartedly supported the freedom to choose one’s religious affiliation – or no such affiliation at

²⁵⁵ In *The Party Faithful: How and Why Democrats are Closing the God Gap*, journalist Amy Sullivan points out that this is a recent historical development. Franklin Delano Roosevelt couched much of the rationale for the New Deal in overtly biblical rhetoric, and the Democratic Party was the party of choice for Catholics and evangelicals as recently as the election of Jimmy Carter. In contrast, John Kerry’s defeat in the 2004 presidential election has been widely attributed to George W. Bush’s overwhelming support among religiously-motivated voters (Bush garnered 78 percent of this bloc).

all.²⁵⁶ He affirmed a “unity within diversity” among “those who live their liberating faith and those who do not have it,” proclaiming:

I cannot see how those who so live their faith could negate those who do not live with it, and vice versa. If our utopia is the constant changing of the world and the overcoming of injustice, I cannot refuse the contribution of progressives who have no faith, nor can I be rejected for having it. (*Pedagogy of the Heart* 103).

Freire was eager to work with secular activists to achieve common goals and values, and he insisted that his faith should never disqualify him from working with them in return. As mentioned above, such coalitions have been formed to powerful effect on the U.S. political Right in recent decades, while the Left has not seen such an alliance since the Civil Rights struggle.²⁵⁷

However, any collaboration between progressive “believers” and secular activists must always be grounded in honesty, transparency, and mutual respect. Freire’s religious faith, with its profound and indelible influence upon his lifelong educational project, must be acknowledged and debated on its own terms. It should not be misrepresented, downplayed, or ignored. Yet this is exactly what some of Freire’s most prominent (and otherwise insightful) secular advocates such as Peter McLaren, Donaldo Macedo, and Stanley Aronowitz have done when assessing his work. These leading figures of the U.S. educational Left have made invaluable contributions to their scholarly fields, often working directly with Freire himself. However, they have also made some problematic assertions regarding the religious elements of his pedagogy. For example,

²⁵⁶ For Freire, his faith “demands a stand for freedom, which implies respect for the freedom of others” (*Pedagogy of the Heart* 105). In this stance of openness, he may be reflecting the enduring influence of his father Joaquim Themistocles, a devoted Spiritist who respected his son’s decision to embrace Roman Catholicism.

²⁵⁷ The Reverend Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou has described the Civil Rights Movement as “the last serious invocation of the prophetic god on American soil” (73).

Henry Giroux asserts that Freire's educational philosophy makes "no appeal to universal laws" (xxiii) – a bold overstatement that completely overlooks the prevalence of Catholicism throughout his body of work. Similarly, Peter McLaren goes too far when he claims that Freire "understands full well that a pedagogy of liberation...[has] no transcendental justification" ("Postmodernism" 209). It is difficult to reconcile such a statement with Freire's own acknowledgement of the "fundamental importance" of his faith in his lifelong "struggle for overcoming an oppressive reality and for building a less ugly society" (*Pedagogy of the Heart* 104). For his part, Stanley Aronowitz describes Freire's pedagogy as "a *secular* liberation theology" (12, emphasis added). It is as if Aronowitz cannot bring himself to acknowledge even the slightest religious dimension to Freire's praxis. Finally, Donaldo Macedo completes this erasure by remarkably failing to make a single mention of the impact of Catholicism upon Freire's life and work in his introduction to the 30th anniversary edition of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

Perhaps the most influential philosophical factor for the tendency to bypass the religious dimension of Freire's work has been the dominance in of postmodernist and "anti-foundationalist" thought in the final decades of the twentieth century. During this period, the secular Left became increasingly hostile towards "totalizing" philosophical systems and "grand narratives." Such "universalizing" systems of thought, which purported to present absolute and objective truth, were "interrogated" and "deconstructed" by skeptical critics who denied the possibility of epistemological certainty. As such, postmodern thought embraces fragmentation, indeterminacy, diversity, contingency, and multiplicity. It denies the existence of "deep structures" to history or human existence, affirming that there are only localized, socially-constructed "micro-narratives," situated truths, and culturally-determined values. In light of

such beliefs, Freire's indelibly Catholic worldview might indeed seem to some academics like a regrettable "birthmark that disfigured and obscured his theories" (Perkins 590).

Unfortunately, seeking to convert Freire into a secular postmodernist severely distorts his thought. As shown throughout this dissertation, the influence of Christianity on Freire's pedagogy is so extensive and powerful that overlooking it suppresses an integral part of his life experience and shortchanges the richness of his educational philosophy. Since Freire's thought *does* abound with "transcendental" and "universalizing" concepts, discounting this dimension falsifies the spirit and substance of his work. (To present an analogy, we might imagine a Catholic interpretation of Freire's thought that downplays – or even denies – the impact of Marxist analysis.) Of course, one hardly needs to start attending Mass before engaging with Freire's thought, and one can certainly reject the religious beliefs underlying his work. However, any authentic dialogue with his philosophy requires an honest recognition of its roots in Catholicism, and not the imposition of a false narrative upon it.

To be sure, Freire himself muddied the philosophical waters regarding the existence of "transcendental" elements of his thought. This confusion may have stemmed from his determination to reach out to potential secular allies on the Left, which led him to soft-pedal his religious beliefs depending on his anticipated audience. It may also have grown out of his late encounter with postmodernist thought, and his struggle to reconcile it with his lifelong Catholicism. Exploring this thorny issue in Freire's thought lies beyond the scope of this dissertation, but a specific example might suffice to illustrate this unresolved tension. In *Pedagogy of Hope*, one of his final works, he asserted that the human "vocation" for further development and historical agency, as well as human nature itself, "rather than being anything a priori in history, on the contrary *is something constituted in history*" (84, emphasis added). Such

statements reflected the “progressive postmodernism” he often professed in the final decade of his life. In this stage of his career, he declared his philosophical commitment to historical and epistemological uncertainty, indeterminacy, and contingency. Accordingly, he declared that the way to “defeat” authoritarian political and intellectual practices “is the difficult exercise of the virtues of humility, of consistency, of tolerance, on the part of the progressive intellectual” (*Pedagogy of Hope* 80).²⁵⁸ Freire’s declaration that human nature is constituted *within* history situated him firmly in the secular, postmodernist camp. Such statements may have formed the basis McLaren’s insistence that there is “no transcendental justification” in his radical pedagogy (“Postmodernism” 209). Yet Freire’s position on this philosophical question is inconsistent at best. As mentioned in Chapter Four, he also envisioned human development in decidedly transcendental terms, positing that all persons, having been made in the image of a benevolent Creator, possess intrinsic templates (“fundamental archetypes”) that surpass the particularities of history and biography.²⁵⁹ More generally, Freire’s worldview is deeply grounded in Catholic

²⁵⁸ Along these lines, he insisted that “one of the necessary requirements for correct thinking is a capacity for not being overly convinced of one’s own certitudes” (*Pedagogy of Freedom* 34). He lauded the “correct posture...of permanent openness” held by people who do not consider themselves the sole possessors of the truth (*Pedagogy of Freedom* 119). Since human knowledge and existence are open-ended and “incomplete,” he is adamant that “I [must] open myself to knowledge and refuse to isolate myself within the circle of my own truth or reject all that is different from it or from me. Tolerance is the open, postmodernly progressive way for me, while living with the different, to learn from it and better fight the antagonistic” (*Pedagogy of the Heart* 50-1).

²⁵⁹ The passage reads: “A being in the womb of history but in the process of coming to be bears in itself some fundamental archetypes without which it would be impossible to recognize our human presence in the world as something singular and original. In other words, our being in the world is far more than just ‘being.’ It is a ‘presence,’ a ‘presence’ that is relational to the world and to others. A ‘presence’ that, in recognizing another presence as ‘not I,’ recognizes its own self” (*Pedagogy of Freedom* 25-6).

theology – a philosophical system which hardly rejects “grand narratives” and “universalizing” truth claims.²⁶⁰

In the end, Freire was unable to seamlessly reconcile the religious and secular elements of his thought. However, this failure to fashion a fully coherent system is not something that caused him regret or anxiety. Freire spent decades ranging broadly over various branches of knowledge, all the while engaging vigorously in educational activism throughout the world. His emphasis was on praxis, not on producing systematic philosophy, sociology, psychology, or economic analysis (Mathews 82-3).²⁶¹ Indeed, even his admirers have admitted that his discursive style could be “highly frustrating” in its “assertive generality” (McLaren, *Che Guevarra* 164). Elias notes that Freire’s language is “charismatic and prophetic,” full of “dramatic assertions,” “black and white” terminology, absolute “condemnations of good and evil,” and “idealized visions of a [possible] future” (83). He adds that Freire “very often...takes on the pose and language of a prophet...At times he exudes an air of certainty in his

²⁶⁰ John Elias identifies the source for the contradictory impulses in Freire’s philosophy, astutely arguing that his “view of the fixity of persons, nature, and the world conflicts with his statements about the human fashioning of history and making of culture. We may have here an example of the difficulty experienced by many Christian thinkers in assimilating some of the dynamic concepts of Marxist thought into the often static notions of religious thought about humans and reality” (131). Likewise, Marxist scholar Jim Walker argues that Freire’s educational philosophy reveals “deep contradictions” between his Christian and Marxist commitments (121). As mentioned in Chapter Four, Walker singles out Freire’s (supposed) notion of a “self-sacrificial missionary role for [middle-class] educator-leaders” (136). According to Walker, Freire’s account of social change is too idealist (rather than materialist)—a phenomenon he attributes to Freire’s Christianity, which Walker believes provides the primary framework for Freire’s theory of social action (138-40). Walker criticizes Freire for trading “on hope...and love rather than political realism” (136).

²⁶¹ Freire’s elevation of concrete action over philosophical coherence is a central tenet of his lifelong work. As such, he probably would have argued that effectively fostering “conscientization” was far more important than creating a perfectly harmonious educational philosophy.

condemnations that reminds one of his biblical predecessors” (111-12).²⁶² Elias touches upon the most vital rhetorical sources for the enduring power of Freire’s work—its emotional urgency, its moral clarity, and its indomitable sense of hope. These distinctive features have been noted by others. Paying tribute to Freire’s legacy, the Maltese adult educator and critical theorist Peter Mayo, writes:

The spirit of this remarkable figure...lives on. It is constantly felt by those, like myself, who often seek refuge and solace in his works, to recuperate that sense of hope and agency which can easily be lost as we are constantly assailed by the dominant hegemonic discourse of technical rationality and marketability. This sense of hope is communicated to us through the constant fusion of reason and emotion which I consider to be one of the distinctive features of Paulo Freire’s style as writer and speaker. (qtd. in McLaren, *Che Guevarra* 161-2).

For his part, McLaren has called Freire a “great teacher who has managed to replace the melancholic and despairing discourse of the ludic postmodernism with possibility and human compassion and to instill a passion for freedom” (“Postmodernism” 212).²⁶³ Echoing McLaren’s description, Henry Giroux famously lauded Freire for combining “the language of critique with

²⁶² However, this palpable “air of certainty,” which suffuses all of Freire’s writings contrasts with his “postmodernist” insistence on intellectual modesty, indeterminacy, and contingency. This is one of the most persistent contradictions in Freire’s work.

²⁶³ McLaren adds that unlike politically enervating strands of postmodern theory, Freire never reduces human subjectivity “to a hypothetical or abstract bundle of signs. Consequently, social agents never lose their capacity for suffering or their resoluteness for effecting social transformation” (“Postmodernism” 200). Here, McLaren acknowledges the insufficiency of postmodern thought in the struggle for social justice.

the language of possibility” (xii).²⁶⁴ According to Giroux, Freire’s “permanent prophetic vision” provides a “powerful theoretical antidote to the cynicism and despair of many left radical critics” (xvii).

As demonstrated by such effusive praise, many of the central characteristics that secular theorists, activists, and educators find most compelling in Freire’s work are religious in source and substance, if not necessarily in form. As such, Freirean thought has enabled them to appropriate the “prophetic” energies of the biblical tradition while allowing them to distance themselves from explicitly religious proclamations. Yet as this dissertation has sought to demonstrate, a tremendous amount of Freire’s philosophy emanated from his faith. As such, secular allies who seek to build on his work should recognize the potential – and distinctive – contributions that theology can make to the Left’s critical and educational discourses.²⁶⁵ Just as Latin American Catholics turned to Marxist analysis after recognizing the limits of biblical thought in analyzing the social ills of their time, the contemporary secular Left might engage in conversation with “prophetic” theology in order to infuse its work with energy, possibility, and hope. Liberation theologian Jose Miguez Bonino has described the pre-conditions for a healthy

²⁶⁴ Giroux’s formulation is clearly based on Freire’s dialectical (and biblically-derived) rhetoric of “annunciation” and “denunciation.” See Chapter Four.

²⁶⁵ Future scholarship might consider discussing and evaluating these contributions. However, several of them have been touched upon in this dissertation. These include: 1) a “sacred” sense of the absolute worth of the human person, which constitutes a powerful call to arms against “dehumanizing” ideologies, socioeconomic structures, and pedagogies; 2) a utopian (or “prophetic”) engine of hope which rejects fatalism, nihilism, and despair, denounces the injustices of the status quo, and announces the permanent possibility of building a more peaceful, equitable, democratic, and humane global community; 3) an unabashed moral ground upon which to exercise judgment; 4) an ennobling vision of education as a “humanizing,” love-filled, and ethically-charged endeavor, which rejects merely instrumental, neoliberal, and “adaptive” forms of pedagogical practice, and which orients teachers and learners towards critically analyzing and transforming the world.

and mutually-enriching partnership between Christian and Marxist activists: “In such an alliance...the Christian is forced to acknowledge his lack of a scientific historical mediation and to receive it, critically but not ungratefully” (115). However, “the Marxist... [must] lay bare and open for discussion the source and power of his love” (115). Likewise, secular theorists who draw upon Freire’s work should acknowledge and respect its theological dimension “critically but not ungratefully.” Such an honest and intellectually humble dialogue between respectful interlocutors would truly honor Freire’s legacy.

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