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ABSTRACT

The essence of the politics of language is the choice of audience. This paper analyzes politics of language and choice of audience in the work of two liberatory educators, Myles Horton and Paulo Freire. Horton and Freire had much in common, each working to create educational processes to benefit the poor and each focusing on liberation for the systematically oppressed, Freire at first in Brazil, Horton in rural Appalachia. However, Myles Horton is little known among academics, while Freire is a virtual icon in the field of education. Four reasons for this relate to choice of language and audience. First, Horton saw his work as part of a collective project, typically using "we" rather than "I," while Freire was willing to be a leader and expert. Second, Horton chose primarily to speak, rather than write, while Freire wrote many academic books and articles. Third, Horton avoided involvement with the academic world, having learned that the language of the academy was ineffective in accomplishing the goals of Highlander Folk School in Appalachia, while Freire wrote and spoke often in academic language. Last, Horton defied and had contempt for governments, while Freire regularly worked with governmental institutions in several countries. Horton's success in creating a school that functioned outside the control of government and the influence of academia was based in his unwavering conviction that collectivism, localism, the lived experience of poor and working people, and the rejection of theory were the essence of truly progressive education. This approach to education could prove more fruitful than Freire's has been. (Contains 33 references.) (SV)

Liberatory Education: Myles Horton's "American" Model

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The essence of the politics of language is the choice of audience. When speakers and writers make decisions about what lexicon, what syntax should be used, they are choosing an audience. When meanings are chosen for key concepts, they are not chosen neutrally, but in terms of a desired audience. When particular types of talk are called for -- whether plain talk (Scheurich, 1998), scholarly talk, or the talk of a particular culture, what is really being called for is a particular audience. Sometimes the choice of audience is made explicit -- "I'm not talking to *them*." Sometimes it is only implied by choices of idiom that exclude certain listeners. This paper is an analysis of the politics of language, the politics of audience, in the work of two liberatory educators, Myles Horton and Paulo Freire.

I have framed this paper as a critique of Paulo Freire and as a laudatory description of Myles Horton, but it becomes apparent to me as I write that critique and praise both reflect less on the two men than on the language choices they made. I argue that Freire and Horton's differing language choices were what made them different from one another, and call for increased attention to Horton's choices as a potential model for liberatory education.

Myles Horton and Paulo Freire certainly had much in common. Both considered a preferential option for the poor to be central to the work of education -- an idea that came from each man's religious background. Drawn to create educational processes for the benefit of the poor, each focused his work on liberation for the systemically oppressed, Freire at first in the *favelas* of Brazil, Horton in the mountains of rural Appalachia. In the later years of their lives, the two became friends, and produced a joint book based on transcriptions of their conversations, *We Make the Road by Walking* (Horton & Freire, 1990). In their face-to-face interactions with poor people, both used a clear and respectful style that was appreciated by their audience, as is apparent in this anecdote:

> Once when Freire was at Highlander, Maxine Waller [an Appalachian activist] came up to Horton and Freire and asked, "How come when you and Paulo say a word, even Paulo who speaks another language, I can understand every word you say? And the academics that were here tonight who are teaching people about education, I never understand a damn word they said." (Waller, 1991, *65*)

It seems certain that Horton and Freire were equally able to choose the poor, across the boundaries of language and nation, as their audience.

Horton maintained this choice of audience through every aspect of his life. When he left his southern college to study at the Union Theological Seminary in New York and the University of Chicago, he had to -- and did -- learn to use the language of the academic world. When he returned to the southern mountains, he and the other Highlander staff had to learn "a nonverbal [language] the people spoke...had to learn to observe people: to watch the way they related to each other, how they took care of their kids, and to be sensitive to their reactions to their experience.... We had to learn to watch people's eyes." (Horton, with Kohl & Kohl, 1990, *69*) They had to learn to speak in a way that embodied their respect for the people of the mountain Highlands.

When I began the study of Myles Horton I have been making over the last three years, I asked, Why is it that Myles Horton is little known among academics, while Paulo Freire is a virtual icon in the field of education -- read, cited, and quoted everywhere? My answer to this question is fourfold, and each part is related to Horton's and Freire's choice of language and audience.

- First, Horton saw his work as part of a collective project. He used "we" rather than "I" in his speaking and writing unless he was describing a specifically personal experience. People who attended the Highlander Folk School regularly refer to him as its leader, but he rarely refers to himself in that vein. He wrote:

  > I've always kind of shied away from an autobiography because I always

thought of myself as working much more closely with other people than doing an individualistic sort of thing....If I tell how it looked [from my perspective], it gives the impression that there were no other perspectives. (Horton & Freire, 1991, *9-10*)

Freire, on the other hand, was willing to see himself as a leader and an expert.

- Second, Horton chose primarily to speak, rather than to write. As far as I can tell, there are three book chapters by Horton (1938, 1963, and 1983]. In addition, his name is attached to many grant applications and reports (Tjerandsen, 1980), but it is not clear whether he actually wrote any or all of those, or was only the signatory. Otherwise, Horton was a speaker, and most of the books and articles about him (Adams with Horton, 1975; Bledsoe, 1969; Conti & Fellenz, 1986; Glen, 1988; A. Horton, 1988; Horton & Freire, 1990; Horton with Kohl & Kohl, 1990; Kennedy, 1991; Peters & Bell, 1987, Wigginton, 1991) are based on either interviews or an explicit oral-history approach. Although Freire also produced a number of books through the interview process, he also wrote a series of books and articles intended for an academic audience.
- Third, Horton deliberately avoided involvement with the academic world. As a student in New York City, he learned that the language he was mastering in order to participate in Reinhold Niebuhr's seminars separated him from friends outside the academy (Adams, 1975). As a beginning teacher in an Appalachian village, he learned that the teaching methods he had acquired in college and graduate school were politely rejected by his neighbors. According to Aimee Horton (1988), the first classes offered at the Highlander School failed as the students explained that they were sick, or just too tired to attend. And he learned that when he brought academic experts to Highlander to provide information that was not locally available, he had to be ready to politely escort them from the room when they tried to dominate the discussion after they had told the students what they wanted to know. (Horton with Kohl & Kohl, 1990) His experience taught him that the language of the academy was not effective in accomplishing the educational goals he had

set for himself and for the Highlander Folk School. Freire, of course, wrote and spoke often in that language.

- Fourth, Horton avoided choosing governments as audiences for his work. Working as a radical and integrationist in a deeply conservative and racist part of the South, he could not have made alliances with local governments, and he never sought or accepted support from the national government. In one of his few recorded interactions with Congress, he was testifying before a committee headed by Senator James Eastland. The senator threatened him with contempt of congress. He replied that he certainly did hold the committee in contempt, and Eastland responded by having him physically removed from the hearing room (Schulz, 1989). This story reflects not only Horton's defiance, but also his actual contempt for governments. Freire, on the other hand, regularly worked with governmental institutions in several countries.

The result of these language choices has made Horton sufficiently unknown to academics that I want to take a few minutes to be sure that you, an academic audience, know who he was. Myles Horton was born in Tennessee in 1905. His family was poor, but not desperately so, and he attended a small religious college. His first experience working with a mountain community was in a summer program, where he began to help people find answers to their own questions. He traveled to New York City to study with Reinhold Niebuhr, who was originating the idea of the Social Gospel at Union Theological Seminary. Moving on to Chicago, he studied sociology at the University of Chicago, and learned about urban settlement houses from Jane Addams. Interested in the Folk High Schools that had been established in Denmark, he crossed the ocean, looking for a model for the kind of school that was growing in his mind.

Horton returned with the idea for the Highlander Folk School, and enlisted Niebuhr's help to find some funding to begin it. Returning to the mountains, he located Lillian Johnston, who had been teaching her neighbors in Monteagle, Tennessee, and who was willing to lend her home as a base for his school. Horton gathered a number of idealistic friends and opened

Highlander. At first, the school's focus was on its immediate neighbors. Their efforts to organize as workers led Horton to a strong connection with the labor movement in the South, and during the 30's and 40's Highlander served as an educational site for the leaders of several unions. This period ended as Horton began to press harder for racial integration both at the school and in the unions, and as conservative, anticommunist leadership took over the CIO and other unions.

It was a natural move to focus directly on segregation and civil rights, and Highlander began to receive grant funding to develop leadership in the southern black community. Many who would lead the Civil Rights Movement participated in Highlander workshops, including Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Andrew Young, and Septima Clark. One such workshop led to the development of the first literacy programs on Johns Island, near Charleston, South Carolina. These would later become the Citizenship Education Program of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Freedom Schools of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Intense opposition to Highlander's civil rights work led to the forced closing of the school in 1961, soon followed by its reopening as the Highlander Research and Education Center, first in Knoxville and then in New Market, Tennessee.

Horton retired as director of the Center but continued to be closely affiliated with it until his death in 1991. During this period, he traveled extensively and lectured with both Saul Alinsky and Paulo Freire. Highlander's focus shifted in the mid-1970's to working with Appalachian communities on environmental and related labor issues. John Gaventa, currently the director, introduced the concept of participatory research, which has become a major focus for the Center.

After the School's first few years, Horton developed a clear and consistent vision for the Highlander Folk School, often referred to by him and others as "the Highlander idea." This was, in short, that people could "figure out for themselves how they would solve the problems they had identified" (Tjerandsen, 1980, *205).* The purpose of the school was to provide an

environment in which people could identify their problems, and to offer sources of information they might need in the process of figuring out how to solve them.

Horton was not convinced that books were the source of the knowledge that people needed to solve their problems, and therefore did not assume that learning to read was essential. "No textbooks were used -- how could they be if some of the people present had Ph.D.s and some couldn't read?" (Brown, 1978, *11*) It is true that the Citizenship Education Schools were focused on literacy learning, but that was because the problem identified by the participants was that they were not permitted to register to vote, and to do so they needed to learn to read. One of the earliest students said, "I'd like to be somebody. I'd like to hold up my head with other people; I'd like to vote" (Clark, 1962, *136*). Students extended their use of their new literacy skills in many directions, solving a variety of problems, but the initial impetus came directly from the white power structure's decision to require literacy as a prerequisite for voting -- not from any belief on Horton's part in the centrality of literacy education.

Authors studying Highlander from the 1950's though the 1990's have painted a clear and consistent picture of what education meant to Horton.

- Frank Adams (1975, *42*] quotes Horton as saying: "Insofar as I have learned to listen to people and to honor and respect them as individuals, I have been a good teacher."
- Preskill (1991, *17*) said Horton believed that "education is a process...that can only take hold when people are fully responsible for their own learning and when their teachers have confidence in [their] ability to find their own way."
- Toivannen (1995, *12*) wrote, "the students choose the school to be their place of learning if they believe it will answer their needs."
- Kermit Eby (1953, *97*) of the CIO said, "Horton emphasizes what he calls 'the percolator' rather than the 'drip' system of education."
- Tjerandsen (1983, *202-204*), writing for the Emil Schwarzhaupt Foundation, a major funder of the Highlander Folk School during the Civil Rights years, described the philosopy of the Highlander Folk School as focusing on
  - the dignity and worth of the individual
  - the integrity or consistency of practice with stated beliefs
  - the centrality of education, rather than organizing
  - working with informal rather than elected leadership
  - providing services at peoples' request
- David Bean Kennedy (1981, *105*) quotes Horton as saying, "We learned the people don't know how to state what they want in educational terms but they <u>know</u> what they want."
- Conti & Fellenz (1986, *11*) sum up Horton's approach to learners when they write, " "Success is if [the students] want you to come back."

It is obvious that this "Highlander idea" is consistent with Horton's choice not to be an academic, and not to speak or write in academic language. Horton was consistently opposed to elitism in any form, since respect for learners was essential to his educational philosophy. Freire, on the other hand, was never completely clear about this issue. Certainly he valued and respected the learning capacity of the poor (see, for example, his story about a group of Spanish workers who made use of the traditional weekend card games participated in by those they wanted to teach. Freire admires the cleverness of these educators, and writes, "...authoritarian educators...regard themselves as proprietors of knowledge, which they need only extend to the ignorant educands" (Freire, 1994, *129*). But he himself, in other writings, was unwilling to give up an attachment to the world of academic theory. In his book with Antonio Faundez, Freire stated that, as much as he opposed elitism, he also feared "basism," which he defined as a kind of anti-intellectualism.

> The other risk you run [other than elitism]...is the risk of what I call 'basism,' which we are also very familiar with. This view...regards everything scientific as of no use. Academic life is looked down on, all rigorous thought is abstract theory and of little use — it is pure intellectual blather. ...what is reckoned as of worth is action, only action, only actual involvement with the people. (Freire & Faundez, 1992, *47*)

Despite the friendly relationship between Horton and Freire, and what appears in their book together, *We Make the Road by Walking* (1990], to be a mutual agreement to avoid areas in which they disagreed, this is a profound difference in the thinking of the two men.

An analysis of Horton's response to the words of the preceding quotation from Freire shows the depth of the contrast.

Freire (describing "basism")	Horton
"regards everything scientific as of no use"	sees the "scientific" as useful only if it contributes to solving identified problems
"academic life is looked down on"	refuses to engage in academic life

"abstract theory [is] of little use"	"theory" refers to practical concepts, e.g. "our theory of who it was important to work with" (Horton & Freire, 1990, *100*)
"...what is reckoned as of worth is action, only action, only actual involvement with people"	"You might say, "Well, I'll tell you what's wrong with Charleston. This is what's the wrong with Charleston. This is what we ought to do." He'd say, "No, that isn't what you ought to do. Better take it to the people first. Find out what they see the problems as being." (B. Robinson, quoted in Clark, 1986, *134*)

There appears to be a connection between this contrast between language choices, between Freire's concern about "basism" and Horton's whole-hearted embrace of it, and between their responses to bureaucracy. Freire was consistently willing to be involved with bureaucratic institutions, not only colleges and universities (witness his extended connection with Harvard University], but also government agencies in several countries. His well-known difficulties in Guinea-Bissau seem to have stemmed from his uncritical acceptance of a government-sponsored literacy program, and at the end of his life he became Secretary of Education for Sao Paulo.

As discussed earlier, Horton did not seek involvement or help from the government. His radical work for economic equality and racial integration were unacceptable to local and state governments and of little interest to the national government. When a group of workers from Highlander chose to go to Washington D.C. to bring their concerns to Frances Perkins, then Secretary of Labor, he was unsurprised that she let them wait, hungry, in her office for three days before refusing to meet with them. Horton commented that he had known this was not the way to solve the problem, but respected the need of the workers to make the attempt. (Horton with Kohl & Kohl, 1990). In one of his few efforts to involve government in what he was doing, Horton several times wrote to governors of Tennessee to inform them that he was breaking Jim Crow laws at Highlander. He hoped that the governors would take legal steps against the school and make possible a trial that would make the country more aware of the nature of life in the South. (Horton with Kohl & Kohl, 1990).

Later, when Horton began supporting the development of the Freedom School on Johns Island, he was confronted with the question of who should be involved in the leadership workshops and who should be seen as having Highlander's support. He chose to support those who had informal, rather than formal, leadership roles in the community. This reflected his "renewed mistrust of bureaucracy's atrophying effect on social movements," and his "belief that leaders of formal organizations tended to instill deference to and dependence on themselves." (Ling, 1995, *402*) His conceptualization of the Highlander Folk School as a collective enterprise was part of this resistance; he would not become the leader of a formal organization himself, or allow the school to become a bureaucracy. It was apparently in part for this reason that the school transferred responsibility for the Citizenship Education Program to the SCLC, rather than retaining control of what Highlander's efforts had created. Also, in planning the first Freedom School, "the first practical decision was to use a non-teacher" (Morris, 1984, *152*). Instead, Horton and Septima Clark found a Charleston beautician, Bernice Robinson, to serve as a teacher. Horton appreciated the leadership role that such a woman, financially supported by the African-American community and offering a natural meeting place for her peers, could play.

Horton's choices were consistent with his educational philosophy, and therefore essential to the integrity of the Highlander Folk School and the "Highlander idea." However, they had a profound effect on the degree to which his work has been accepted and supported within the academic community, as well as its national reputation. Here are some comments that participants in the Civil Rights Movement have made about the influence of Highlander in those critical years:

- "Andrew Young thought the [citizenship training] program was the base on which the whole civil rights movement was built." (Langston, 1993, *157*)
- "People across the south said that their lives were changed by a weekend at the school." (Larson, 1980, *192*)
- "Many of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Council staff had participated in Myles Horton's Highlander Folk School Workshops." (Chilcoat and Ligon, 1998, *11*)
- "And from one end of the South to the other, if you look at the black elected officials and the people who are the political leaders across the South now, the list is full of people who had their first involvement in civil rights at those Citizenship Training Programs." (Andrew Young, quoted in Wigginton, 1991, *282*)

- "When Rosa Parks was asked by...Studs Terkel what Highlander [Folk School] had to do with the fact that she chose not to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama, on that fateful day in early December, 1955, she answered quite simply, 'Everything.'" (Hurst, 1995, *1*)
- "Being together there at Highlander and talking about long range goals and strategies" led to that "core group of people who were committed to something like the Freedom Riders." (Andrew Young, quoted in Wigginton, 1991, *281*)

Horton was an enormously influential figure in the development of the Civil Rights Movement, yet his role and that of Highlander are minimized in both popular and academic circles. Meanwhile Freire, whose actual accomplishments in action amount to far less, is seen as the authority on liberatory education. My contention is that this difference stems from the language choices made by the two men. Horton's decision was to embrace the "basism" that Freire feared. Freire's decision was to write and speak in ways that made him and his ideas acceptable to the elite, in government and the academy.

Contrary to the points made by Scheurich (1998), the language Freire chose to use was accessible neither to the people he sought to liberate nor to the power elites that oppressed them. Instead, he regularly used a complex and difficult language that linked him through his extensive writing to other philosophers around the world. Horton, on the other hand, flatly refused to use such language, although knew how to use it successfully.

The language choices Freire and Horton made reflect key difference in their thinking. For Freire, the educational task was to create a process that would permit students to understand what he already understood, the oppressive nature of the social and economic structure in which they lived (Freire, 1993, *74*). Educators must understand "the genesis of knowledge," he wrote, and "how the discovery process takes place." They must "teach how to think correctly" (*112*). He believed that people knew the details of their problems, but lacked a larger, more theoretical understanding of what was happening to them. The task of the educator, for him, was to create a consciousness of the patterns and institutions that oppress (Freire, 1973). Horton, on the other hand, believed that understanding of the particulars of people's own problems was enough to lead to solutions that could reduce oppression. For him, ideas were great only when they arose from problems

identified by working people, and not by intellectuals. He saw Highlander as a place where people – first neighbors, then unionists, then civil rights workers, then environmentalists – could gather for the kind of talk that would lead to change. Resources, including Horton and other staff members as well as consultants, were made available if people wanted their help; otherwise, resource people were expected to listen to the views of participants.

Most progressive educators would agree that Freire's work has had a strong and significant influence on their thinking. Perhaps today he stands with Dewey in the pantheon of progressive education. Freire has given us the ideas that liberatory pedagogy can be central to our work, that there should be a preferential option for the poor in education, and that literacy education can flourish in a framework of political conscientization. There is less recognition that Freire's influence has also had the effect of promoting his anti-basist and centralist beliefs as well. Freire's writings promote the idea that the proper task of intellectuals is to inform the people of what they do not know and to enlist government in the process of improving their lives. Horton, on the contrary, held that educators should act as facilitators for the people's education and resist the force of government.

Progressive American educators at the end of the century are actively involved in writing and theorizing about the world of the people in ways that are often inaccessible to them. And they are typically seeking to work as change agents in such government-supported institutions as schools and universities, perpetually disappointed that those institutions do not change to meet the needs of non-elite groups. It took years of work for Myles Horton to understand how to create a school that would function outside the control of government and the influence of the academic world. His eventual success in doing so was based on his unwavering conviction that collectivism, localism, the lived experience of poor and working people and the rejection of theory were the essence of truly progressive education. It is possible that this approach to progressive education could prove more fruitful than Freire's has been.

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