



CHARLES DORN AND KRISTEN GHODSEE

The Cold War Politicization of Literacy: Communism, UNESCO, and the World Bank*

In 1947, officials at the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) announced the establishment of an unprecedented, worldwide literacy program entitled “Fundamental Education.”¹ Responding to a new and growing international concern about the poverty and economic well-being of people around the world, UNESCO member states promoted Fundamental Education as a necessary precondition for the maintenance of international peace and the growth of economic prosperity in the postwar era.² Simultaneously, however, officials at the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (a UN specialized agency more commonly referred to as the World Bank) refused to support educational programming, arguing that education-related projects, including the rebuilding of schools, could not guarantee a return on the bank’s investment. Indeed, from the end of World War II until 1962, while UNESCO stressed the importance of education as a mechanism for social, political, and economic development, the World Bank did not lend to a single dollar to education-related projects.³

In 1962, World Bank lending policies began to shift. Bank officials issued loans, first to programs involving secondary education and then, beginning in 1970, to projects supporting the improvement and expansion of primary education. As a result, World Bank lending for primary education increased from zero to 14 percent between 1963 and 1978 and overall bank spending on education rose dramatically. During this same period, however, critics

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1. John Bowers, “Fundamental Education,” *UNESCO Courier* 1, no. 1 (1948): 4.

2. Preparatory Commission UNESCO, “Instrument Establishing a Preparatory Commission,” *Conference for the Establishment of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization: Held at the Institute of Civil Engineers, London, from the 1st to the 16th November, 1945*, ECO/CONF/29 (London: June 1946). 94; “Panel of Experts Maps Strategy,” *UNESCO Courier* 1, no. 4 (1948): 1, 7.

3. Admittedly, the World Bank was not concerned with the economic development of the so-called Third World until the late 1950s. Mark Gersovitz, ed., *Selected Economic Writings of W. Arthur Lewis* (New York, 1983), 343.

increasingly questioned the central principles upon which UNESCO officials established their organization's educational programming. Coming under intense political scrutiny as a result of heightened Cold War anxiety, UNESCO began withdrawing from commitments in the field of multilateral education, eventually phasing out its flagship literacy program entirely.⁴

How were the educational programs developed by these two UN specialized agencies informed by the broader ideological struggles between communism and capitalism during the Cold War era? And how did such seemingly innocuous goals as basic literacy and universal primary education become politicized during this period?⁵ This article contributes to the growing scholarly literature that reexamines the evolving priorities of UN organizations in the context of the Cold War and the politicization of economic development as well as critical reassessments of the role of the World Bank and UNESCO in negotiating the ideological conflict between capitalism and communism.⁶ Specifically, we investigate the Cold War politicization of literacy as well as the ways in which the dynamics of *realpolitik* significantly influenced UNESCO and the World Bank's international aims with regard to educational programming.⁷ Although scholars have previously explored the rise and fall of social and economic development programs as a Cold War strategy to fight communism, this article examines education as a development tool, in particular by investigating how UN organizations instrumentalized literacy instruction between the end of WWII and the mid-1970s.

4. On UNESCO's Fundamental Education program, specifically, see Mulugeta Wodajo, "An Analysis of Unesco's Concept and Program of Fundamental Education: A Report of a Type C Project" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1963).

5. The term "literacy" became politicized over time just as other seemingly innocuous terms such as "peace." See, for instance, Petra Goedde, "The World Peace Council and Visions of Global Community on the Political Left" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, San Diego, California, January 8, 2010).

6. See, for instance, Matthew Connelly, *Fatal Misconception: The Struggle to Control World Population* (Cambridge, MA, 2008); Amy Staples, *The Birth of Development: How the World Bank, Food And Agriculture Organization, And World Health Organization Have Changed the World 1945-1965* (Kent, OH, 2006); Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore, MD, 2003); Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, 2007); Darlene Rivas, "United States-Latin American Relations, 1942-1960," in Robert D. Schulzinger, ed., *A Companion to American Foreign Relations* (Malden, MA, 2003); Katherine Marshall, *The World Bank: From Reconstruction to Development to Equity* (New York, 2008); Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development* (Princeton, NJ, 1994); David C. Engerman and Corinna R. Unger, "Introduction: Towards a Global History of Modernization," *Diplomatic History*, 33, no. 3, (2009): 375-85; David C. Engerman, ed. *Staging Growth: Modernization, Development, and the Global Cold War* (Amherst, MA, 2003); Jochen Kraske, *Bankers with a Mission: The Presidents of the World Bank, 1946-91* (Washington, DC, 1996); Edward S. Mason and Robert E. Asher, *The World Bank Since Bretton Woods* (Washington DC, 1973); Deborah Shapley, *Promise and Power: The Life and Times of Robert McNamara* (Boston, 1993).

7. On the role of *realpolitik* in cultural diplomacy, see Richard T. Arndt, *The First Resort of Kings: American Cultural Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century* (Washington, D.C., 2005), esp. chap. 5.

Throughout the Cold War era, UNESCO director generals struggled to both develop a clear strategy for eliminating illiteracy and obtain the funding necessary to fully implement their literacy projects. Moreover, as with other UN agencies, such as the World Health Organization, Cold War tensions exposed UNESCO to U.S. criticism that it had come under Communist influence and that the goals of Fundamental Education were “contrary to American ideals and traditions.”⁸ Furthermore, after the widely recognized success of Cuba’s “mass” literacy campaign in 1961, UNESCO faced increasing pressure from the Johnson administration to redefine its literacy programs as “functional” (the term used to refer to vocationally oriented literacy) rather than “mass” (the term used to refer to literacy that was meant to achieve a political or social goal such as consciousness raising), the latter having become associated with Cuba and communism.

While questions about UNESCO’s ideological commitments compromised its efforts, World Bank President George Woods slowly became convinced of the potential economic returns associated with investments in education. Combined with developments in the field of human capital theory, previous UNESCO literacy projects were influential in shaping the World Bank’s initial investments in the education sector. Indeed, Woods was an open advocate of the capitalist path to development, and the communists’ success in mounting mass literacy campaigns (especially in Cuba) meant that there were political as well as economic incentives to increase World Bank lending to education, so that the bank could counter the success of mass literacy campaigns with literacy campaigns of its own. Teaching poor people to read and write was an increasingly politicized endeavor, and the World Bank under Woods was willing to coordinate with UNESCO in expanding its efforts to support basic education.

With Robert McNamara’s appointment as World Bank president in 1968, however, the bank began to question whether the promotion of mass literacy was the most effective approach to challenging communism’s ever-growing appeal in the developing world. Employing a new paradigm known as “redistribution with growth,” McNamara led the bank into an era during which it invested heavily in “occupational education” (a form of training designed to increase worker productivity) rather than basic literacy instruction. In response, UNESCO, although previously influenced by both U.S. foreign policy and the World Bank through its sponsorship of the Experimental World Literacy Program (EWLP), rejected McNamara’s approach. Aligning itself with developing nations demanding the establishment of a New International Economic Order through the UN General Assembly, UNESCO broke with

8. “An Appraisal of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization by the Delegation of the United States of America to the Second Extraordinary Session of the General Conference of UNESCO, July 1–4, 1953,” *U.S. Department of State Publication 5209*, International Organization and Conference Series IV, UNESCO 22, October 1953.

the United States, leading, in part, to President Ronald Reagan's eventual withdrawal of the United States from the organization.

UNESCO AND FUNDAMENTAL EDUCATION

In November 1942, with the Allies in their third year of fighting against German aggression in Europe, British Board of Education President Richard Butler called together representatives from Belgium, Czechoslovakia, France, Greece, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, and Yugoslavia to discuss "educational questions affecting the Allied countries of Europe and the United Kingdom."⁹ The delegates—all residing in England after being exiled from their home countries by Nazi forces—moved quickly from what one scholar has described as an "almost club-like gathering" of government officials to establishing Europe's central forum for discussing educational and cultural reconstruction following World War II.¹⁰ Over the next several months, as the group expanded to include representatives from Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, and the Republic of South Africa, participants agreed to form the Conference of the Allied Ministers of Education (CAME) and began planning to establish an international education organization.¹¹

During this period, the Roosevelt and Truman administrations also developed plans for a multilateral effort to reconstruct European educational systems. As private citizens, such as Stanford University School of Education Dean Grayson Kefauver, began lobbying for international cooperation in the field of postwar education, the U.S. State Department assigned Ralph Turner of its Division of Cultural Relations to support such efforts.¹² In April 1944, Kefauver and Turner's work resulted in the State Department accepting an invitation from CAME representatives to attend a London meeting for the purpose of establishing a "United Nations Organization for Educational and Cultural Reconstruction." A year and a half later, delegates from around the world met in London to discuss the central goals of this body as well as its relationship to a larger UN organization. In November 1945, they reached agreement on a constitution for the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, and formed a Preparatory Commission to begin the

9. "Letter from Malcolm Robertson, Chairman of British Council, to Ministers of Education on behalf of Richard Butler, dated October 28, 1942," Archive Group 2, Conference of the Allied Ministers of Education, London, 1942–1945, box: CAME Files I, folder: CAME/CORR./I, UNESCO Archives, Paris, France (hereafter UNESCO Archives).

10. H. H. Krill De Capello, "The Creation of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization," *International Organization* 24 (1970): 4. Also see James P. Sewell, *Unesco and World Politics: Engaging in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ, 1975), 2–70.

11. China and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics assumed observer status in 1943. In 1945, the USSR withdrew from CAME. Conference of the Allied Ministers of Education, London, 1942–1945, Volume I, Records of Plenary Meetings, Open Meetings, Executive Bureau, Finance and Establishment Committee, Archive Group 2, UNESCO Archives.

12. Charles Dorn, "'The World's Schoolmaster': Educational Reconstruction, Grayson Kefauver, and the Founding of Unesco," *History of Education* 35, no. 3 (2006): 301–09.

work the organization would undertake once twenty member states ratified its constitution.¹³

The oft-quoted preamble to UNESCO's constitution, which states "That since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed," reflects the faith that the organization's founding delegates had in education's capacity to promote international understanding in the postwar world. UNESCO's actual programming, however, was frequently anchored in a more pragmatic conception of education's role in social, political, and economic development.¹⁴ Immediately following UNESCO's establishment, for instance, Preparatory Commission members seized on the idea that eradicating illiteracy would assist in eliminating poverty. "If we could decide here and now to take this [effort to eradicate illiteracy] up," declared Preparatory Commission Executive Secretary Sir Alfred Zimmern in 1945, "it would give our National Commissions in the various countries something immediate to work on and make them feel our sense of urgency . . . and that we were really going to turn into action the provisions that we have made about removing poverty and ignorance and helping the poorer sections of the world community."¹⁵

Leon Blum, the president of UNESCO's First General Conference, sought to justify the Preparatory Commission's focus on literacy when he asked, rhetorically, in 1946, "How can Unesco hope to operate satisfactorily in a world *more than half* of whose inhabitants cannot even read or write, and are without the basis of ideas upon which there can be built healthy living or prosperous agriculture, and in general any rational applications of science? . . . How can people lead the good life, and how can we expect them to bother about education, if they are undernourished and diseased?"¹⁶ Conference delegates responded by adopting Fundamental Education as a central part of the 1947 UNESCO program. Initially defining this new program as "a long-term, world-scale 'attack upon ignorance'," conference delegates ultimately resolved,

13. "Participation of United States in the Conference of Allied Ministers of Education, London, April 5-19, 1944, and the Proposed Establishment of a United Nations Organization for Educational and Cultural Reconstruction," U.S. Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Diplomatic Papers, 1944, Volume I: General* (Washington, DC, 1966), 800.42/322; Telegram, "The Secretary of State to the Ambassador in the United Kingdom (Winant), Washington, March 21, 1944," *Department of State Publication 8138* (Washington, DC 1966), 967-68; U.S. Department of State, *Bulletin* 10, no. 248 (1944): 293.

14. Michel Conil Lacoste, *The Story of A Grand Design: UNESCO, 1946-1993* (Paris, 1994); Fernando Valderrama, *A History of UNESCO* (Paris, 1995); Roger-Pol Droit, *Humanity in the Making: Overview of the Intellectual History of UNESCO, 1945-2000* (Paris, 2005); Sagarika Dutt, *UNESCO and a Just World Order* (New York, 2002), esp. chap. 1.

15. Quoted in *Fundamental Education: Common Ground for All Peoples, Report of a Special Committee to the Preparatory Commission of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*, ed. H. W. Holmes (New York, 1947), 1-2.

16. (*Records of the*) *General Conference, First Session, Held at UNESCO House, Paris from 20 November to 10 December 1946 (including Resolutions)*, General Conference, 1st, 1946, 23-24, UNESCO Archives.

“It is a many-sided undertaking ranging from primary education to work with adult illiterates. It includes education for better health and agriculture, for economic improvement, for artistic and cultural development, for citizenship and for international understanding.”¹⁷

Among the conceptions of literacy that member states embraced early in UNESCO’s history, then, one involved a direct link between literacy rates and economic development.¹⁸ Whether this stance conflicted with UNESCO officials’ belief in the relationship between illiteracy and “ignorance” was, at the time, less important than the organization’s stated intention to use education as a mechanism to eliminate poverty in the developing world.¹⁹ How to accomplish this tremendously ambitious goal on a worldwide scale with limited financial resources, however, posed an obvious challenge. Delegates to UNESCO’s First General Conference decided that among their first efforts to address this problem would be a pilot literacy project.²⁰ By April 1947, UNESCO officials had accepted an invitation from the government of Haiti to cooperate in implementing a project in that nation’s Marbial Valley.²¹

A number of scholars have examined UNESCO’s efforts in Haiti. Interpretations of the project range from Walter Laves and Charles Thomson’s more optimistic appraisal that UNESCO officials “may have learned more from it than from other activities judged more successful” to Phillip Jones’s description of the project as “doomed to failure from the very start.”²² What seems clear, however, is that UNESCO had neither a clearly defined strategy for its work in the region nor the financial resources necessary to bring the project to fruition. Defining the broad purpose of the pilot as helping “men and women to live fuller and happier lives in adjustment with their changing environment, to develop the best elements in their own culture, and to achieve the social and

17. *Ibid.*, 270.

18. The “Commission on Fundamental Education” strengthened this perception through its edited volume entitled *Fundamental Education* (see note 15 above). Including individual contributions by well-known educators and scholars, such as Thomas Jesse Jones (Educational Director, Phelps-Stokes Fund), Isaac Kandel (Professor of Education, Teachers College), Frank Laubach (Director, Maranaw Folk Schools), and Margaret Mead (Anthropologist and Associate Curator of the American Museum of Natural History), the document consistently linked rates of literacy to stages of economic and social development throughout the world.

19. Phillip W. Jones, “Unesco and the Politics of Global Literacy,” *Comparative Education Review* 34, no. 1 (1990): 50.

20. (*Records of the General Conference, First Session, Held at UNESCO House, Paris from 20 November to 10 December 1946 (including Resolutions)*), General Conference, 1st, 1946, 271, UNESCO Archives.

21. *Report of the Secretariat on the First Meeting of Experts on Fundamental Education Held on Thursday, 17th, Friday, 18th, Saturday 19th, April 1947, at Unesco House, 19 Ave. Kleber, Paris 16e.* UNESCO/Educ/28/1947, 12–13, UNESCO Archives.

22. Walter H. C. Laves and Charles A. Thomson, *Unesco: Purpose, Progress, Prospects* (Bloomington, IN, 1957), 144; Phillip W. Jones, *International Policies for Third World Education: Unesco, Literacy and Development* (London, 1988), 70.

economic progress which will enable them to take their place in the modern world," UNESCO planned to provide residents of the Marbial Valley with a long list of new programs, which included, among other things, primary school education; adult education; language instruction; health education; medical services; veterinary education; agricultural training; new libraries, museums, and art centers; small industries; and consumer cooperatives.²³

UNESCO's "Working Plan" for the project is a purely prescriptive document, however, and reveals the organization's failure to anticipate the challenges staff members might confront in providing services to the region.²⁴ With no clearly delineated development strategy to follow, the project faltered from its inception. Miscommunication with Haitian government officials, conflicts with the local Marbial parish priest (whom Haiti's Secretary for National Education proposed should direct the project given his previous experience with relief and rehabilitation efforts in the region), and an overreliance on the efficacy of a "Center of Teacher Training and Community Fundamental Education" (which was intended to serve as a primary school, a rural clinic and health training center, a demonstration farm and agricultural training center, a community library, a museum and arts center, a dormitory, and a classroom facility for Haitian trainees) almost immediately undermined the program's effectiveness.²⁵ An even greater problem, however, involved the limited financial resources dedicated to the project. Estimating the project's cost at \$66,000, UNESCO ultimately contributed 20 percent of the total, requested that the Haitian government contribute an equal share, and expected to raise the balance from private sources.²⁶ The organization received less than \$20,000 in private contributions, however, delaying the project's implementation and severely limiting its effectiveness.²⁷

Although UNESCO officials acknowledged significant difficulties in launching the project and canceled two additional pilot projects planned for China and British East Africa, they nevertheless remained convinced of Fundamental Education's capacity to eliminate illiteracy, eradicate poverty, and improve health conditions in economically underdeveloped regions of the world.²⁸ Indeed, UNESCO's efforts fit well within a new international climate comprised of developed nations taking an interest, for the first time, in the poverty and

23. *Fundamental Education Pilot Project in Haiti Working Plan*, Paris, February 26, 1948, UNESCO/Educ/59, 3-4, UNESCO Archives.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*, 6.

26. *Records of the General Conference of UNESCO*, General Conference, 2nd, Mexico City, 1947, vol. 2: Resolutions, 19, UNESCO Archives.

27. For a full description of the project as well as its strengths and failings, see Wodajo, "An Analysis of UNESCO's Concept and Program of Fundamental Education," esp. chap. 4.

28. See, for instance, "The Re-Birth of a Valley," *UNESCO Courier* 2, no. 5 (1949); "The Lesson of the Marbial Valley," *UNESCO Courier* 3, no. 12 (1951); Tibor Mende, "Things Are Looking Up in the 'Forgotten Valley,'" *UNESCO Courier* 5, no. 1 (1952).

economic well-being of the rest of the world. This changing climate allowed UNESCO to pursue what were in retrospect overly ambitious goals. In 1948, for instance, John Bowers, head of UNESCO's Fundamental Education division, declared, "There had been a tendency, when the term 'Fundamental Education' was first coined, to regard it as no more and no less than a campaign against illiteracy, but it soon became clear that the skills of reading and writing were only of value as means to a wider end. . . . Fundamental Education will be concentrated first on the most pressing problems of each particular community. More often than not, these will be—disease and poverty."²⁹ Despite the challenges they faced in Haiti and the elimination of the China and British East Africa planned pilot projects, UNESCO delegates, at their Fourth General Conference held in late 1949, agreed to move forward with the organization's plan to establish a worldwide network of regional centers for Fundamental Education, beginning in Latin America.³⁰

UNESCO's regional centers, the first of which opened in cooperation with the Organization of American States in Patzcuaro, Mexico, in 1951, were to serve as sites for teacher training and curricular resource development.³¹ As with the Marbial Valley project, however, UNESCO's reach exceeded its grasp. Although describing their intentions in a fairly detailed twelve-year plan (1951–63), UNESCO officials once again failed to articulate a feasible strategy for establishing the network. Moreover, they disregarded their Marbial Valley experience by anticipating that significant voluntary contributions would provide financing for the centers. Estimating the twelve-year cost at \$20 million, UNESCO officials committed only \$1.6 million from their regular budget, appropriated another \$4 million through the UN's Expanded Program of Technical Assistance, and expected member states to allocate an additional \$6.4 million. In turn, the organization relied on private donations for the largest share of the project's financial resources—\$8 million.³² It is hardly surprising, then, that by 1962 (the project's ninth year) UNESCO had succeeded in opening only one of the additional five anticipated centers—the Arab States Fundamental Education Center—while the total number of center graduates failed to reach even half of the 3,500 students UNESCO officials had estimated.³³

Still, at the time, the launching of the first regional center bolstered UNESCO officials' expectations that the network would lead to the worldwide expansion of Fundamental Education. Having adopted the elimination of

29. John Bowers, "Fundamental Education," *UNESCO Courier* 1, no. 1 (1948): 4.

30. *Records of the General Conference of UNESCO*, General Conference; 4th, Paris, 1949, Resolution no. 2.415, 15, UNESCO Archives.

31. *Fundamental Education Regional Training and Production Centre for Latin America: Explanatory Note*, Paris, March 14, 1950, UNESCO/ED/75, UNESCO Archives.

32. *Declaration Adopted by the Executive Board during its Twenty-Fourth Session, concerning the Establishment of a World Network of Regional Centres for Fundamental Education*, Paris, November 16, 1950, UNESCO/ED/86, UNESCO Archives.

33. Figures cited in Wodajo, "An Analysis of Unesco's Concept and Program of Fundamental Education," 100.

illiteracy, poverty, and curable diseases as Fundamental Education's central goal, UNESCO moved towards an explicit linkage of its programming to specific forms of economic development. The organization's second monograph on Fundamental Education, for instance, entitled *Cooperatives and Fundamental Education*, stressed what its author claimed were the mutually reinforcing values associated with education and economic cooperatives. "To work, purchase, sell and create together is to think together, and to think together is to form communicable ideas, that is to say rational ideas. . . . The co-operative movement frees its members not only from usurers and profiteers, but also from themselves and their own bad habits."³⁴ Thus, UNESCO moved beyond its specific mandate as an educational organization to grapple with larger political and economic questions as well as to advocate for progressive social change including birth control and interracial marriage.

UNESCO's advocacy of cooperative economic arrangements provided critics with what they believed was evidence that the organization had come under communist influence, since UNESCO was taking a principled stand against usury.³⁵ Although the United Nations had, even prior to its establishment, been subjected to conservative claims that it would erode the authority of the nation-state, the climate of optimism and cooperation pervading diplomatic relations in the immediate postwar period had allowed the organization to flourish. Only several years later, however, the United Nations became the target of an increasing number of American critics who decried what they claimed were the organization's efforts to serve as a "world government" and that it could become a tool in promoting a kind of socialist internationalism. As the UN specialized agency providing educational programming for children as well as adults, UNESCO was particularly vulnerable to this criticism. Combined with a growing emphasis on community development projects within other UN agencies (as well as UNESCO's limited record of achievement in the developing world), the decline of U.S. support resulting from Cold War fears of socialist ideologies in part undermined the organization's capacity to sustain Fundamental Education programming.

COLD WAR FEARS AND HUMAN CAPITAL

In the summer of 1953, following the conclusion of the Second Extraordinary Session of UNESCO's General Conference, U.S. delegates remained in Paris to interview UNESCO executive board members as well as delegates of other member states. Their objective was to determine the truth behind claims circulating in the United States that UNESCO was under communist control, that it acted to undermine Americans' loyalty to their nation, that its staff members sought to indoctrinate schoolchildren, that the organization was

34. Maurice Colombain, *Co-Operatives and Fundamental Education* (Paris, 1950), 13.

35. Also see "Economics and Education Go Hand-in-Hand," *UNESCO Courier* 3, no. 2 (1950): 3.

atheistic, and that it received one-third of its budget from the United States but contributed little or nothing in return.³⁶

Although the U.S. delegation's report to Secretary of State John Foster Dulles gave UNESCO a "clean bill of health," it reveals the extent to which the organization had come under increasing suspicion by the Eisenhower administration.³⁷ As early as 1947, for instance, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency had begun secretly investigating UNESCO activities. In a top secret document dated February 7, 1947, the CIA reported that British UNESCO official Professor John Needham, whom CIA agents linked to a Cambridge University Communist group, was working to establish "listening posts" to record classified discussions "with respect to developments in nuclear science."³⁸ By 1951, fears such as these had become the topic of public accusation. Delivering an address to Congress entitled "The Greatest Subversive Plot in History—Report to the American People on UNESCO," Idaho Representative John T. Wood declared, "there has grown up within this country in the past 4 or 5 years one of the greatest subversive plots of all history, to take our constitutional Republic and merge it within a one-world body, which has been formed without the slightest authorization, within the body of the United Nations."³⁹

Wood's rhetoric was not unusual among Americans who frequently accused UNESCO of threatening the American family by promoting birth control and interracial marriage as well as publishing documents advocating the establishment of a world government.⁴⁰ Indeed, UNESCO's occasional missteps provided critics with the evidence they believed justified their claims. Wood's insistence, for instance, that "a treasonable plot is well-nigh completed to seize this government and turn it over into a hybrid, mongrel world state, 51 percent of which is even now Communist," later gained some credibility in the United States when a Soviet-authored, UNESCO-sponsored booklet contrasted the fair treatment of minority groups in the Soviet Union with the unjust treatment of minorities in America.⁴¹

36. "An Appraisal of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization by the Delegation of the United States to the Second Extraordinary Session of the General Conference of UNESCO, July 1-4, 1953," *U.S. Department of State Publication 5209* (Washington, DC, 1953).

37. U.S. Department of State, Letter to U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles from Irving Salmon, Chairman of the U.S. Delegation to the Second Extraordinary Session of the General Conference of UNESCO, August 31, 1953.

38. "Evaluation of Communist Infiltration of UNESCO. Report. Central Intelligence Agency. Top Secret," February 7, 1947. Declassified Documents Reference System (Woodbridge, CT, 2009), <http://gdc.gale.com/products/declassified-documents-reference-system/> (hereafter DDRS).

39. *Congressional Record—House*, 13475 (October 18, 1951).

40. Jonathan Zimmerman, *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools* (Cambridge, MA, 2002), 87.

41. Franklin Parker, "Unesco in Perspective," *International Review of Education* 10, no. 3 (1964): 327. As historian Jonathan Zimmerman notes, Wood also railed against UNESCO's nine-volume textbook series entitled *Toward World Understanding*, claiming that the books

During this same period, UNESCO underwent an organizational identity crisis that resulted from changes in its leadership. As Vincenzo Pavone has written, UNESCO's first two director generals, Julian Huxley of the United Kingdom and Jaime Torres Bodet of Mexico, shared a conception of UNESCO's role in the world that was "globally oriented and humanist." Labeling this approach "Global UNESCO," Pavone writes that it "aimed at the establishment of a peaceful universal community of humankind, with a system of global governance, a common morality and a shared philosophy based on scientific knowledge and humanism."⁴² Beginning in 1953, however, the American Luther Evans, who served as director general for five years, sought a more limited, technical role for the organization, what Pavone has labeled "Intergovernmental UNESCO." "Evans's ideological position," according to Pavone, "was largely coincident with the US conception of UNESCO . . . Whilst Julian Huxley had claimed that UNESCO had to pursue '*the advance of world civilization*,' Evans argued that 'UNESCO, as a technical agency, shall advance peace without taking any ideological or philosophical positions'.⁴³

Yet adopting a short-term, technical approach to worldwide literacy, poverty elimination, and the improvement of health conditions in underdeveloped areas of the world quickly led UNESCO into conflict with other UN agencies and programs. Indeed, as the UN expanded its Program of Technical Assistance and adopted community development as the focal point of its work, agencies such as the UN Bureau for Social Affairs sought to incorporate UNESCO's Fundamental Education programming into its own work.⁴⁴ As a result of Evans's leadership, then, as well as the inevitable duplication of effort that a technical approach to UNESCO's work created in the context of the development of other UN programs, UNESCO member states began to question the efficacy, and even the necessity, of Fundamental Education programming.⁴⁵ At UNESCO's Tenth General Conference in 1958, therefore, delegates voted to eliminate the use of the term "Fundamental Education," a decision that Phillip Jones has described as UNESCO "unceremoniously" dumping its "flagship concept and program."⁴⁶

By the beginning of 1960 the organization stood at a crossroads. UNESCO had clearly been in the forefront of establishing a link between educational and economic development, a concept that delegates to the Eleventh General Conference affirmed when they resolved,

served as evidence of UNESCO's efforts to indoctrinate children. Zimmerman, *Whose America?*, 286, n. 13.

42. Vincenzo Pavone, "From Intergovernmental to Global: UNESCO's Response to Globalization," *Review of International Organizations* 2, no. 1 (2007): 81.

43. *Ibid.*

44. Jones, *International Policies for Third World Education*, 91.

45. Wodajo, "An Analysis of Unesco's Concept and Program of Fundamental Education," esp. chap. 5.

46. *Records of the General Conference of UNESCO*, General Conference, 10th, Paris, 1958, Resolution no. 1.51, 18, UNESCO Archives; Phillip W. Jones, *The United Nations and Education: Multilateralism, Development and Globalisation* (London, 2005), 59.

Recognizing that assistance in development and efforts in favour of economic development must often be ineffective if they are not matched by the development of primary, secondary, technical and higher education, and also of the out-of-school education of young people and adults . . .

Being further of the opinion that, in addition to the direct social and economic advantages of educational progress, aid given through education advances the mutual knowledge and understanding of peoples,

Instructs the Executive Board and the Director-General to continue to give priority to education in the preparation of future programmes.⁴⁷

Yet general confusion over UNESCO's role in worldwide community development efforts, an ongoing lack of financial resources, and continuing Cold War criticism resulted in the absence of a clear organizational direction. Unable to chart its own course, UNESCO's future was, to a great extent, determined by forces outside of its control.

In 1964, Columbia University professor of economics (and later Nobel laureate) Gary S. Becker published his seminal work in human capital theory, entitled *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education*. The study, according to Becker, examined the "tremendous amount of circumstantial evidence testifying to the economic importance of human capital, especially education" and concluded that "human capital is going to be an important part of the thinking about development, income distribution, labor turnover, and many other problems for a long time to come."⁴⁸ Although *Human Capital* was a groundbreaking work, throughout the 1950s UNESCO's work had attracted the attention of many scholars and policymakers who accepted a causal relationship between education and development.⁴⁹ Moreover, the 1957 launch of the Soviet Sputnik satellite catalyzed Western economic and sociological research on the nature of this relationship. Within a year, academic journals began publishing articles conceiving of education as an investment in human skills. In 1960, Theodore Schultz popularized the term "human capital theory" through his presidential address to the American Economic Association.⁵⁰

In relation to his own research, Schultz argued directly to George Woods that educational investments were a necessary complement to investments in industry, infrastructure and agriculture. At that point, although the World Bank had previously refused to fund education projects, by the early 1960s the bank's lending priorities began to shift as it began to pay more attention to the

47. *Records of the General Conference of UNESCO*, General Conference, 11th, Paris, 1960, Resolution no. 8.62, 78, UNESCO Archives.

48. Gary S. Becker, *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education* (New York, 1964), 2, 159.

49. Ingemar Fägerlind and Lawrence J. Saha, *Education and National Development: A Comparative Perspective* (Oxford, 1983), 44.

50. *Ibid.*

developing world.⁵¹ Without technical expertise to run the newly created industries, Schultz asserted, developing countries would be perpetually dependent on foreign support. Still, World Bank President George Woods was wary of lending for education and established firm rules for the Bank's educational investing.⁵² Restricting itself to projects developed jointly by bank staff and host country officials (sometimes with the assistance of other UN organizations such as UNESCO), the bank invested solely in capital projects (e.g., bricks and mortar). In the early stages of lending for education, therefore, the only projects that bank officials approved were those that resulted in new school buildings and equipment (the first educational staffers at the bank were mostly architects, while the physical expansion of schools was an easily quantifiable investment where "progress" could be charted with some accuracy).

Although human capital theorists may have suggested otherwise, these first education-related projects were strictly vocational. Through the use of relatively clumsy manpower planning models, the World Bank tried to estimate how many engineers, technicians, or managers a particular country would need for its industrial sector to function properly, and then invested just enough in education to produce the required experts. Thus, between 1963 and 1969, 84 percent of the bank's educational lending went to secondary education, 12 percent went to higher education, and a mere 4 percent went to finance a few experimental projects in non-formal education.⁵³

The bank, however, was unable to avoid lending for primary education much longer. The international political climate was changing, and after the 1959 Cuban revolution, combating the threat of international communism became more urgent than ever. Communists mounted successful mass literacy campaigns aiming to prove that socialist states could (and would) redistribute nationalized wealth for the benefit of laborers as well as guarantee full employment for literate workers. In response, the West was increasingly challenged to identify and promote educational programs that would similarly demonstrate the ideological and practical superiority of capitalism.

THE CUBAN AND IRANIAN LITERACY CAMPAIGNS

In his seminal study of the discourse of "development," Arturo Escobar argues that prevailing Cold War politics deeply influenced the World Bank's efforts to promote economic development in the "Third World," with the bank championing the cause of private property and relatively free markets in the face of growing Soviet influence.⁵⁴ At the beginning of the 1960s, many countries

51. Robert Oliver, *George Woods and the World Bank* (Boulder, CO, 1995), 165; Phillip W. Jones, *World Bank Financing of Education: Lending, Learning and Development* (London, 1992), 23.

52. Oliver, *George Woods and the World Bank*, 162.

53. *Ibid.*, 136.

54. Escobar, *Encountering Development*.

were breaking their colonial bonds and hoping to emulate the path to rapid industrialization that the command economy seemed to provide (particularly if it was accompanied by generous Soviet foreign aid). Part of the Communist package of ideologies offered to the developing world was a commitment to the education of the poor and oppressed, particularly in the form of mass literacy.

In September 1960, Fidel Castro addressed the General Assembly of the United Nations and announced a massive campaign to combat ignorance and illiteracy on his island. In 1961, the government claimed that they had marshaled 250,000 Cubans, more than 100,000 of them students between the ages of ten and nineteen, to go into the countryside and eradicate illiteracy among the peasants.⁵⁵ In under one year's time, the Cuban government managed to reduce a national illiteracy rate from around 23 percent (over 40 percent in the countryside) to less than 4 percent. The Cuban literacy campaign was hailed as an incredible achievement that succeeded where countless other international initiatives had failed, including those directed by UNESCO.

The key to the remarkable efficacy of the campaign was the unique pedagogy of the Cuban socialists. Similar to the ideas propounded by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, which conceived of education and literacy as a method for raising peasant and worker consciousness, the Cuban literacy campaign offered a testimony to the power of revolutionary political will and the liberatory potential of mass education. The Cubans had carefully constructed a literacy primer that taught peasants the value and importance of the revolution as part of their literacy programming. Learning to read became an essential part of the consciousness raising of those theoretically most served by the overthrow of Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista. One of the coarchitects of the literacy campaign, Raul Ferrer, described why, he believed, the Cuban campaign succeeded when so many other UNESCO efforts had failed:

Why do they fail? They have the money. They have UNESCO. They have the expertise. They have the international promotion. How is it possible then, that they do not succeed? It is because the starting point is anti-human . . . They do not dare to use the words we use. They do not dare to speak of land reform, to speak about the sick and poor . . . the international corporations and banks . . . They do not dare to put these words into the hands of the poor people. And, because they do not dare, therefore they fail—and they will always fail until they do!⁵⁶

For Fidel Castro and his supporters, teaching peasants to read meant teaching them to think, and teaching them to think meant teaching them to question the political system that had kept them poor and ignorant for so long.

55. H. S. Bhola, *Campaigning for Literacy* (Paris, 1984); A. Prieto Morales, "The Literacy Campaign in Cuba," *Harvard Educational Review* 51 (1981): 31–39.

56. Quoted in Jonathan Kozol, "Literacy and the Underdeveloped Nations," *Journal of Education* 162, no. 3 (1980): 29.

Having politicized literacy to such an extent that many other developing nations began to look to their model for inspiration, the Cubans added a powerful weapon to the Communists' political arsenal. As a result, the U.S. State Department began to take an interest in developing its own literacy campaign—one that would promote capitalist economic development goals by providing trained manpower for nascent industries and increasing peasant productivity by teaching “modern” farming methods. The newfound interest in literacy inspired the Kennedy administration to work more closely with UNESCO to develop international literacy programs.

When France's René Maheu began serving as UNESCO's acting director general in 1961, U.S. officials questioned whether they would find in him a like-minded ally.⁵⁷ Maheu had, in fact, come into conflict with Luther Evans at UNESCO headquarters in Paris, where Evans was serving as director general and Maheu assistant director general, resulting in Maheu's “exile” to UNESCO's New York office as representative of UNESCO to the United Nations.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, following Maheu's election to the director general's position in 1962, the United States began working closely with UNESCO's leadership. In 1963, for instance, the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs claimed that it was “instrumental in helping UNESCO develop a realistic policy on illiteracy,” and the following year UNESCO and the World Bank signed a cooperative agreement that provided the former agency with the financing necessary to pursue much of its programming and the latter with the expertise it lacked in the field of education.⁵⁹ The agreement, moreover, coincided with growing coordination between UNESCO and the Johnson administration, resulting in the creation of a new experimental approach to promoting literacy.

Just two years after the success of the Cuban literacy campaign, the Shah of Iran, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, created the Iranian Literacy Corps to combat the illiteracy that plagued two-thirds of his population. The formation of this corps in 1963 was one of the six original points of the so-called White Revolution, a series of policies aimed at rapidly modernizing Iran. The apparent brainchild of the John F. Kennedy administration, the White Revolution was a part of the U.S. strategy to combat the threat of yet another “red” revolution. Communists around the world had made significant headway in radicalizing the peasantry by promising modernization and promoting rural education and land

57. Italy's Vittorino Veronese was elected director general in December 1958 but resigned due to poor health less than three years later. Upon Veronese's resignation, Deputy Director-General René Maheu was promoted to acting director general until his election in 1962 when he became director general, a position he held for twelve years.

58. Mircea Malitza, “Higher Education: Its Role and Contribution to Our Common Advancement,” *Higher Education in Europe*, 27, nos.1/2 (2002): 13.

59. Department of State during the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson, Volume I—Administrative History, Chapter 12: Educational and Cultural Affairs, Miscellaneous, DEPARTMENT OF STATE. SECRET. Date Declassified: September 27, 1988, Unsanitized, DDRS, 40; Jones, *The United Nations and Education*, 99.

reform. U.S. aid to Iran was conditioned upon the successful launch of the White Revolution, which included the privatization of many national industries.

In order to strengthen a secular Iranian national identity, undermine the power of the Muslim clergy, and strengthen support for the Pahlavi regime, Iran's Literacy Corps sent tens of thousands of young women and men (including military conscripts who held high school diplomas) into the countryside to teach peasants to read in Persian.⁶⁰ Like the Cuban literacy campaign, the Literacy Corps was relatively inexpensive to run since all Iranian men were required to provide two years of military service. Although the success of the program was difficult to measure, the Iranian government proclaimed the Literacy Corps' achievements as proof that the White Revolution was achieving its goals.

The Shah's commitment to literacy most likely influenced his decision to host UNESCO's World Congress of Ministers of Education on the Eradication of Illiteracy in Tehran in September 1965. In the run-up to the conference, Pahlavi and the Johnson administration exchanged several letters regarding the Shah's intention to make a \$700,000 donation to a special UNESCO World Literacy Fund. This amount represented one day's worth of military spending for Iran, and, on the first day of the World Congress, the Shah planned to propose that other nations earmark contributions to the fund based on the amount of their own defense spending. In a letter to President Johnson requesting that the U.S. government support his proposal, the Shah wrote,

[T]he eradication of this painful social problem [illiteracy] at the international level requires more time and greater resources than the modest contribution of my government. Yet let us hope that this decision, which for a developing country like mine represents a real sacrifice, will be followed by many other countries, thus, perhaps, enabling UNESCO to create a special fund for the successful implementation of this very fruitful task. This is a worthy goal to realize. It is one of liberating two fifths of humanity from ignorance and opening the way towards new horizons of enlightenment and economic and social development. That is why I take the liberty of making an urgent appeal to Your Excellency to consider the possibility of contributing to the realization of this great humanitarian objective. I am fully convinced that our concerted efforts in supporting UNESCO activities in this field would constitute a historic step on the way towards the progress and happiness of humanity at large.⁶¹

60. Seyed Farian Sabahi, "The Literacy Corps in Pahlavi Iran (1963–1979): Political, Social and Literary Implications," *Cahier d'études sur la Méditerranée orientale et le monde turco-iranien*, No. 31, janvier-juin, 2001, <http://www.ceri-sciencespo.com/publica/cemoti/textes31/sabahi.pdf> (accessed March 17, 2009).

61. Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi corresponds with Johnson concerning Iran's \$700,000 contribution to UNESCO's literacy program, Miscellaneous, WHITE HOUSE, OFFICIAL USE. Issue Date: April 25, 1966, Date Declassified: January 10, 1989, Unsanitized, DDRS.

The letter, which triggered a brief foreign policy debate over literacy within the Johnson administration, led U.S. National Security Adviser W. W. Rostow to warn against making a contribution to a special UNESCO literacy fund.⁶² Rostow, the author of an influential book on third world development strategies entitled *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, was most likely opposed to any form of mass literacy campaign (which he believed the Shah's initiative to promote).⁶³ Instead, he supported limited efforts to link literacy with technical and vocational training and specific mechanisms for free market economic growth. Sensitive to the need for the United States to show support for Pahlavi's rule, however, Rostow wrote to Johnson, "We want to congratulate him [The Shah] on his initiative. We can now also assure him that we are doing our share. Monday, we confirmed before the UNESCO Executive Board meeting that we would increase our pledge for the next two years (\$19 million, 30% of UNESCO's regular budget). We will also be contributing another \$40 [million] to UNESCO-sponsored projects through the UN Development Program. That is about all we can do."⁶⁴

The Johnson administration had to act delicately with regard to the Shah of Iran's well-intentioned initiative. While teaching people to read seemed a "great humanitarian objective" to the Shah, the United States refused to support a special fund for literacy, thereby undermining its success. In an international climate where ideological conflicts between the United States and the Soviet Union informed almost all political engagements in the developing world, it is no surprise that world literacy efforts would also fall victim to Cold War machinations.

FUNCTIONAL LITERACY

Since the completion of the Cuban literacy campaign, UNESCO Director-General René Maheu had grown increasingly wary of supporting mass literacy. According to one scholar, for instance, when UNESCO received an overwhelmingly positive report from an Italian researcher it had commissioned to assess the effectiveness of the Cuban campaign, Maheu attempted to suppress it (perhaps fearing the negative reaction of the Johnson administration).⁶⁵ Nevertheless, one of the Cuban campaign participants, Dr. Raul Ferrer, brought five hundred copies of the UNESCO study to the World Congress in Tehran and personally distributed them.⁶⁶ Furthermore, an official message from the

62. Walt Rostow and Johnson discuss Shah's \$700,000 contribution to UNESCO's literacy program, Miscellaneous, WHITE HOUSE. CONFIDENTIAL, Issue Date: May 26, 1966, Date Declassified: January 10, 1989, Unsanitized, DDRS.

63. On Rostow's work, see Mark H. Haefele, "Walt Rostow's Stages of Economic Growth: Ideas and Action," in David C. Engerman et al., eds., *Staging Growth: Modernization, Development, and the Global Cold War* (Amherst, MA, 2003).

64. Ibid.

65. Jonathan Kozol, *Children of the Revolution* (New York, 1978), 74.

66. Ibid.

Cuban government, read aloud during the Congress, informed participants, “The concerns of the Revolutionary Government of Cuba to eradicate illiteracy has been expressed in actions of undeniable importance. The experience acquired in the literacy campaign, which constituted a veritable national mobilization and in a single year rid Cuba of this pestilence, can provide data and a model for any similar undertaking.”⁶⁷

The Cuban message resonated with many conference participants, including some UNESCO representatives who believed that literacy should be an end in itself, a basic human right. The U.S. representatives, however, believed that literacy efforts should be targeted to achieve development in specific economic sectors. In response to Cuba’s purported success, the U.S. delegation to the World Congress championed a more gradual approach to literacy, arguing that raising the educational levels of the poor was dangerous in emerging economies that could not guarantee full employment. As a result, the Johnson administration threw its diplomatic and economic weight behind the idea of a more limited definition of literacy, one in which basic reading skills were not seen as a human right, but rather as a key stepping stone on the path to economic development.

In 1965, Maheu declared “a new approach” to eliminating illiteracy in the developing world.⁶⁸ Employing the term “functional literacy” as a label for its efforts in promoting literacy for the specific purpose of fostering economic development, Maheu wrote in September 1967, “Literacy teaching for adults—that is, for the productive section of the population—is increasingly becoming the concern not only of educationists, but also of the authorities responsible for development. Now that it is realized that illiteracy is a factor in underdevelopment, literacy teaching is conversely gaining recognition as a factor in development. Such is the meaning of the idea of functional literacy, which UNESCO has adopted as a guiding principle.”⁶⁹ This guiding principle, according to Maheu, directed the organization’s efforts to eradicate illiteracy through the 1966–74 Experimental World Literacy Program (EWLP).

The EWLP arose from U.S. opposition to a 1960 Ukrainian proposal (sponsored by the Soviet Union) to the UN General Assembly for a massive, global attack on adult illiteracy.⁷⁰ Judging the proposal “unworkable and likely to lead to disillusionment,” American officials succeeded in burying it through a series of diplomatic maneuvers (the proposal’s announcement also coincided with

67. UNESCO, *Inaugural Speeches, Messages, Closing Speeches, World Congress of Ministers of Education on the Eradication of Illiteracy, Tehran 8–19 September 1965* (Paris, 1965), 49. It is also interesting to note that in the message to the Congress from the Romanian government, the Romanians openly claimed that the eradication of illiteracy in their country was also a fait accompli.

68. UNESCO, *Literacy: 1965–1967* (Paris, 1968), 49, UNESCO Archives.

69. *Ibid.*, 10.

70. Jones, *The United Nations and Education*, 202–03.

Cuba's mass literacy campaign).⁷¹ Still, Maheu's support for a worldwide literacy campaign, along with U.S. fears of further alienating developing nations, led American officials to propose what Phillip Jones has called "a kind of consolation measure" in the form of the EWLP.⁷²

Thus, by the opening of the World Congress of Ministers of Education on the Eradication of Illiteracy in Tehran in 1965, UNESCO had already embraced functional literacy—along with U.S.-backed funding from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). As Maheu's opening remarks to congress participants made clear regarding UNESCO's commitments, "Just as illiteracy is an integral part of underdevelopment, so the promotion of literacy must be an integral part of development; this is the basic axiom which distinguishes and governs the approach and the strategy which we are recommending to you; it also sums up the concept of functional literacy."⁷³

UNESCO's Tehran congress report, entitled "Literacy as a Factor in Development," explicitly defended the organization's pursuit of functional literacy (also called "selective and intensive literacy") as opposed to mass literacy campaigns such as those carried out in Cuba and Iran:

Most of the programmes to eradicate illiteracy, or at least a large number of them, have been based upon a mass approach, the method being to attempt to bring as many adults as possible into a classroom-type literacy programme. Taking it as a basic assumption that every individual has a right to education and that it is in the general interest that all adults should become literate, they have set out with that as their aim; in short, need and not resources has been the basic consideration. They have also been conceived from the point of view of the aims to be achieved rather than from that of the returns to be secured. It goes without saying that, *setting aside a number of undoubted successes*, a certain lack of balance between the two goals has made it difficult to carry out programmes of this type (emphasis added).⁷⁴

71. *United States Participation in the United Nations: 1961–1964* (Washington, DC, 1966), 196–97. Regarding the EWLP's functional literacy approach, historians Robert Arno and Harvey Graff note, "It was perhaps also logical (but nonetheless curious) that the EWLP strategists virtually ignored the recently completed Cuban Literacy Campaign, which was anything but innovative in technical terms . . . which indeed violated several basic EWLP precepts (it was massive rather than selective, it was politically rather than vocationally functional, it used a single curriculum and manual rather than a diversified/adapted approach, and it was definitive rather than experimental)—which was nevertheless a resounding success. The Cuban effort demonstrated forcefully that pedagogically *uninnovative* literacy action could succeed." Robert Arno and Harvey Graff, *National Literacy Campaigns: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (New York, 1987), 205–06.

72. Jones, *The United Nations and Education*, 203.

73. World Congress of Ministers of Education on the Eradication of Literacy, Tehran, September 8–19, 1965, 36.

74. *Literacy as a Factor in Development: Report of the World Congress of Ministers of Education on the Eradication of Illiteracy, Tehran 8–19 September 1965, 30 July 1966: Final Report* (Paris: UNESCO, 1966), 20, UNESCO Archives.

Indeed, the language of the UNESCO report implied that mass literacy campaigns served political (e.g., Communist) goals whereas functional literacy programs served economic (e.g., capitalist) ones.

Literacy was no longer to be seen as a lauded humanitarian goal, but rather as an investment in human capital that would produce capitalist economic growth. Under pressure from the United States, Maheu's UNESCO opted to pursue the "purely economic" course, eventually establishing eleven experimental world literacy projects with UNDP support, including those in Algeria, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Guinea, Iran, Madagascar, Mali, Sudan, Tanzania, India, and Syria.⁷⁵ The organization also conducted experiments in Zambia, Venezuela, Afghanistan, and Kenya, although funding for these projects came from other agencies. Finally, eight additional microprojects were conducted in Algeria, Brazil, Chile, India, Jamaica, Nigeria, Tunisia, and Upper Volta (Burkina Faso). As Robert Arnove and Harvey Graff have described, these projects were "overwhelmingly vocational" in nature. Almost 90 percent of EWLP learners, for instance, were educated for the direct purposes of agricultural and industrial development. Moreover, of the 131 curricula created for the program, 41 percent were directed towards agricultural development, 28 percent towards industrial development, and 13 percent towards developing craftwork; only 18 percent included social goals such as hygiene, child care, and civics.⁷⁶

In 1968, Maheu was reelected as UNESCO's director general and was called to Washington for a special meeting with President Johnson where he continued to press the United States for more financial support for UNESCO's campaign against illiteracy.⁷⁷ Although Johnson reiterated that the United States preferred to channel aid through UNDP rather than UNESCO, Maheu maintained his commitment to the EWLP. In 1969, one-third of the way through the EWLP's life, for instance, program officers met at UNESCO headquarters in Paris to address the challenges they encountered in implementing the program's various literacy projects, including falling dramatically behind schedule, conflicts between national and international objectives, tensions within nations between traditional and functional approaches to literacy instruction, and a concern over a lack of rigorous experimentation.⁷⁸ Acknowledging that the EWLP had not "so far produced such substantial and rapid results as had been expected," Maheu nevertheless stated his conviction "that the basic approach [functional literacy] is the right one."⁷⁹ As a result, the report that UNESCO published

75. For descriptions of these projects, see UNESCO, *Functional Literacy: Why and How* (Paris, 1970), UNESCO Archives.

76. Arnove and Graff, *National Literacy Campaigns*, 201.

77. Johnson meets with Director General Maheu of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Cable, DEPARTMENT OF STATE. CONFIDENTIAL, Date Declassified: October 31, 1985, Unsanitized, Complete, reproduced in *Declassified Documents Reference System* (Woodbridge, CT, 2009), doc. no. CK3100243274.

78. Jones, *International Policies for Third World Education*, 169-75.

79. UNESCO, *Functional Literacy: Why and How*.

following the meeting strongly urged continuing the EWLP. The document's most striking feature, however, was the degree to which it foreshadowed the ever-increasing influence of the United States, through the World Bank and its new president Robert McNamara, over worldwide educational programming. "It is both significant and extremely encouraging," the report concluded

that Robert McNamara, President of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, in his policy speech to the Bank's board of governors on 29 September 1969, should have stated that greater attention would be given to "functional literacy for adults in those countries where the growing pool of adult illiterates constitutes a serious obstacle to development." This statement not only confirms that the approach adopted by Unesco is the right one; it also augurs a notable broadening of the scope of international endeavour.⁸⁰

Accurately indicating increased World Bank commitment toward education-related investments, the report nevertheless incorrectly predicted the form that such lending would take under McNamara's leadership. Although a strong promoter of education in the developing world (especially programs that undermined the allure of Communist ideologies), McNamara quickly led the World Bank away from functional literacy as a central principle for bank investing and toward "redistribution with growth."

Fresh from his tenure as U.S. Secretary of Defense, after having fallen out with President Johnson over American involvement in Vietnam, McNamara assumed the presidency of the World Bank in 1968.⁸¹ He had spoken and published widely on the idea that poverty bred communism, arguing that the only way to fight socialism around the world was to raise the living standards of the poor and soften the worst inequalities created and perpetuated by capitalism. "Given the certain connection between economic stagnation and the incidence of violence," McNamara wrote, "the years that lie ahead for the nations of the southern half of the globe look ominous. This would be true if no threat of Communist subversion existed, as it clearly does. Both Moscow and Peking, however harsh their internal differences, regard the modernization process as an ideal environment for the growth of Communism. . . . It is clearly understood that certain Communist nations are capable of subverting, manipulating and finally directing for their own ends the wholly legitimate grievances of a developing society."⁸²

Unlike George Woods, a banker who spent his professional life in the finance industry and "strongly believed the Bank was, and should continue to be, identified with a capitalist, free-enterprise system period," McNamara's

80. *Ibid.*, 17.

81. Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York, 1995).

82. Robert McNamara, *The Essence of Security: Reflections from Office* (New York, 1968), 147-48.

thirteen-year presidency of the World Bank ushered in an era of lending for projects based on a new paradigm—"redistribution with growth" (what the UN organization, more broadly, labeled "basic needs").⁸³ Focused on improving the living standards of the poor, this new paradigm included massive funding of primary education, with World Bank lending increasing from \$883 million per year in 1968 to \$12 billion per year in 1981 (the year of McNamara's departure).⁸⁴ Saturating the economic development establishment, redistribution with growth fundamentally altered international funding for education.

Employing economic development to combat communism meant a new focus on rural populations hitherto ignored by Western nations. Raising incomes in the rural sector, however, depended upon two related phenomena: increasing a nation's food supply and decreasing its population. McNamara believed that both problems found solutions through expanded access to both formal and nonformal education. For instance, receiving formal education at the primary level would increase the value of women's time, resulting in a decrease in fertility levels.⁸⁵ Increased opportunities in nonformal education, furthermore, would help rural farmers understand and be able to utilize Green Revolution technology.

Investing World Bank resources in this fashion represented a serious departure from previous policies. Rather than solely restricting the bank's investments to formal types of secondary and higher education, these new priorities placed emphasis on types of knowledge indirectly related to worker productivity. Duncan Ballantine, director of the World Bank's Education Department from 1964 to 1977, confirmed that it was McNamara's concern with growing global inequalities and their Cold War implications that allowed his department to reshape the bank's educational leading agenda:

with McNamara it was really a breath of fresh air . . . [M]ost of us there in what was then a department were just very strongly in favor of the general McNamara approach, the poverty social equity approach. And we saw an opportunity to mold Bank policy within that broad framework and to express it in terms of educational development . . . [T]his gave us a chance to talk more and do more about basic education, whether it was formal or non-formal. There came, as you are aware, this big thrust into primary education, among other things, and less successful efforts, but some, at basic, non-formal education.⁸⁶

83. Oliver, *George Woods and the World Bank*, 73.

84. Derek Leebaert, *The Fifty-Year Wound: The True Price of America's Cold War Victory* (New York, 2002).

85. Becker, *Human Capital*.

86. Phillip Jones, "Transcript of interview with Duncan S. Ballantine," November 21, 1986, 15, The World Bank/IFC Archives: Oral History Program, Washington, DC.

During Ballantine's tenure at the bank, lending to primary education rose from zero to 14 percent, while nonformal educational loans rose 13 percent.⁸⁷ Under McNamara, the World Bank invested in primary education, extending loans rather than grants to developing country governments. Because credits for education would have to be repaid, it was hoped that governments would utilize the funds more efficiently. Educational lending for basic literacy was ideologically reframed as an economic investment in human capital rather than a political right.

CONCLUSION

In an influential 1974 report prepared for the World Bank and entitled *Attacking Rural Poverty: How Nonformal Education Can Help*, Philip Coombs and Manzoor Ahmed extended the definition of useful investments in education to include four categories.⁸⁸ The first was general or basic education, which was embodied in traditional primary and secondary schooling. The second form of "educational needs for rural development" included "family improvement education," which was "designed primarily to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes, useful in improving the quality of family life, on such subjects as health and nutrition, homemaking and child care, home repairs and improvements, family planning, and so on."⁸⁹ The third category was community improvement education, which was deemed to help the national governments solidify their rule through local governments, cooperatives, and community projects. Finally, occupational education, the last category of educational spending, served as the primary focus of the study. According to Coombs and Ahmed, occupational education was "designed to develop particular knowledge and skills associated with various economic activities and useful in making a living."⁹⁰ The World Bank study directed occupational education at three primary groups: "persons directly engaged in agriculture," "persons engaged in nonfarm artisan and entrepreneurial activities," and "rural administrators and planners." Needless to say, teaching peasants about land reform or exploitation was not part of the World Bank's educational agenda.

Thus, despite the bank's radical rethinking of education as a necessary investment for fueling economic development, Ballantine's department did not lend to literacy campaigns, even specifically functional ones, choosing instead to leave those to individual country governments. "Literacy programs?" Ballantine later recalled, "I don't think we actually supported those to a great extent. . . . We did feel maybe that's the kind of thing that ought to be more homegrown."⁹¹ The

87. Jones, *World Bank Financing of Education*. Lending to secondary education, however, decreased 41 percent during approximately the same period.

88. Philip Coombs and Manzoor Ahmed, *Attacking Rural Poverty: How Non-Formal Education Can Help* (Baltimore, MD, 1974).

89. *Ibid.*, 11.

90. *Ibid.*, 5.

91. Phillip Jones, "Transcript of interview with Duncan S. Ballantine," 16.

bank's 1974 *Education Sector Working Paper*, prepared by Ballantine and his staff, affirmed the bank's growing hesitation towards functional literacy. Although it was still very much in support of investments for primary and nonformal education, the working paper expressed some doubts about the success of even the most narrow literacy programs. "Functional literacy," the paper asserted, "which teaches reading and arithmetic as part of the training for skills for a particular job, is essentially a sound concept, although the results have been mixed."⁹² These "mixed results" were not enough to justify new loans, and therefore literacy fell out of the bank's education portfolio.

The World Bank's reluctance to commit itself to literacy programs is especially ironic considering that Robert McNamara's wife, Margaret McNamara, had used her White House connections to establish a literacy program for children in the United States in 1966. The program, *Reading Is Fundamental*, would go on to become the largest literacy program in the country, ultimately expanding to the United Kingdom and Argentina.⁹³ The politics of the Cold War, however, continued to taint mass literacy work in the international context with fears of the spread of communism, particularly as it became clear in the early 1970s that the United States was losing the war in Vietnam.

Without World Bank support and resources, it was near impossible for the EWLP to achieve its educational and development goals. Rather than accept this failure as evidence of their organization's inability to implement literacy programs successfully on a worldwide scale, however, UNESCO used a formal evaluation of the EWLP to reconsider the political, social, and economic principles that underlie functional literacy. Comprised of members from Canada, Vietnam, Algeria, Brazil and India, the evaluation team's final report issued a scathing indictment of literacy programs designed to increase worker productivity as a way to challenge the motives of the West and its allies in international organizations, particularly the World Bank.

What led to such a dramatic shift in UNESCO's position? As developing countries became increasingly aware that the World Bank's economic development programs were mostly benefiting the first world, they formed a voting block in the General Assembly and demanded the establishment of a New International Economic Order (NIEO). Based on the ideas of Latin American dependency theorists, who believed that less developed countries would always be reliant on the West, the NIEO called for an end to the global hegemony of capitalism. In 1974, at a special session of the General Assembly convened to discuss the NIEO, this voting block began to assert its influence over the UN's development agenda. In the same year, UNESCO's new director general, Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow of Senegal, established a panel of counselors (which included several prominent leftist academics favorable to the ideas of dependency theory) for the purpose of reinterpreting UNESCO's constitution in

92. World Bank, *Education Sector Working Paper* (Washington, DC, 1974), 24.

93. See <http://www.rif.org> (accessed November 19, 2011).

terms of the NIEO. UNESCO, therefore, became a platform for Third World countries frustrated by the West's failed development programs. UNESCO's internal politics were clearly reflected in the EWLP evaluation, which criticized the "view prevalent in United Nations and Western academic circles . . . that development was first and foremost a question of economic growth, stressing capital-intensive development and high-level technical skills."⁹⁴ "[T]he relative underdevelopment of certain economies," the report claimed, "is a partial result of the iniquities of the prevailing world economic system."⁹⁵

Finally, the EWLP evaluation firmly criticized the organization's previous leaders for allowing it to become a tool of the United States and the World Bank in their efforts to promote functional literacy as a necessary alternative to what had been demonstrably successful mass literacy campaigns. According to the evaluators, functional literacy was bound to fail because there was never a real political commitment to the goals that universal adult literacy was meant to achieve: social and economic changes that would favor the poor. They argued,

Like the notion of functionality, selectivity was the international agencies' alternative to the supposedly probable failure of mass literacy. In retrospect, it seems unfortunate that, in their comprehensible haste to act, EWLP's framers did not assess (or assess with more care) earlier successful mass literacy campaigns. Had the Cuban, and similar experiences been taken more fully into account, the world program might well have avoided certain pitfalls. . . . To gain perspective on both past and future strategies, however, it must be understood that, at the beginning of EWLP, most countries knew how to approach (and in some cases achieve) much more massive literacy as part of broader socio-economic change, if they wanted to. It is often a question of political (and resource) priority rather than technical capability, not "we don't know how to," but "we don't really want to."⁹⁶

When UNESCO released the evaluation in 1976, it became clear that more than a decade of international literacy work completed under its auspices had produced few tangible results. M'Bow's UNESCO argued that this outcome was a deliberate attempt on the part of the United States to undermine the humanitarian goal of worldwide literacy. Because it was politically unfeasible to openly state opposition to literacy efforts, the United States (according to the report) had intentionally created literacy programs that were destined to fail, an outcome that ultimately soured the international community's appetite for future literacy campaigns of either the "mass" or "functional" type.

An early proponent of literacy as a basic human right and as a core component of any program to eradicate poverty, UNESCO has always struggled against U.S. interference with its educational programming. Either it was

94. World Bank, *Education Sector Working Paper*, 121.

95. *Ibid.*

96. *Ibid.*, 126–27.

painted as an organization infiltrated by Communists (and therefore undeserving of financial support) or it was co-opted by the United States in order to undermine the more ambitious literacy programs of other nations. Although Director General Maheu had tried to work together with the Americans, his successor M'Bow concluded that U.S. machinations were undermining UNESCO's ability to act on behalf of the world's poor in the developing nations. He eventually led UNESCO down the leftist path of which it had long been accused of walking, precipitating the U.S. withdrawal from UNESCO while he was still Director-General in 1984.

Similarly at the World Bank, ideology colored the institution's willingness to promote literacy. Because of its emphasis on promoting a capitalist path to economic development,⁹⁷ the bank under Presidents George Woods and Robert McNamara agreed to extend loans to educational endeavors as long as these endeavors could be shown to support the promotion of free markets.⁹⁸ Because literacy had become ideologically linked with political rather than economic goals, it fell outside of the bank's self-defined agenda to promote redistribution with growth. Furthermore, because UNESCO was dogged with endless accusations of being under Communist influence beginning as early as the 1940s, the idea of teaching poor people to read became hopelessly entangled with fears of socialist revolution. Thus, the goal of a world campaign against illiteracy became yet one more unfortunate casualty of the Cold War.

97. See, for instance, Catherine Weaver, *Hypocrisy Trap: The World Bank and the Poverty of Reform* (Princeton, NJ, 2008).

98. Steve Berkman, *The World Bank and the Gods of Lending* (Oakland, CA, 2008).

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