

## Review

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Books Reviewed:

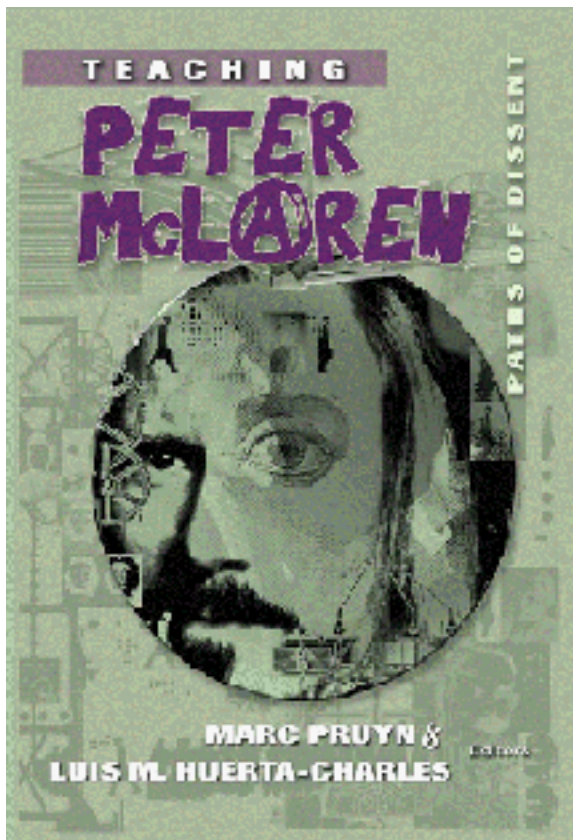
McLaren, Peter. *Capitalists and Conquerors: A Critical Pedagogy Against Empire*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005.

---. *Red Seminars: Radical Excursions into Educational Theory, Cultural Politics, and Pedagogy*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton, 2005.

McLaren, Peter, and Ramin Farahmandpur. *Teaching Against Global Capitalism and the New Imperialism*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005.

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### Peter McLaren's Recent Work: An Annotated Summary



There has been a small yet significant firestorm of publication around Peter McLaren, "professor of urban education at the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, University of California, Los Angeles" (according to the back cover of *Capitalists and Conquerors*). McLaren was a onetime friend of Paulo Freire, central figure of "critical pedagogy," and this friendship is emblematic of McLaren's commitment to the radicalization of teaching practices. The beginning of McLaren's book-publishing career contains two ethnographic studies of note, *Life In Schools* (about his experiences as a 5th-grade teacher) and *Schooling as a Ritual Performance* (about an observational study he did in a 7th/8th-grade school in Toronto). The current explosion, three books and a memorial volume about McLaren, is more strictly theoretical and deals largely with the ideological contexts

of present-day life in which critical pedagogy can operate.

So what is critical pedagogy, and what are these ideological contexts? Critical pedagogy, according to McLaren, is a way of thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the relationship among classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relations of the wider community, society, and nation-state. Developed by progressive educators and researchers attempting to eliminate inequalities on the basis of social class, it has sparked up to the present a wide array of antisexist, antiracist, and antihomophobic classroom-based curricula and policy initiatives. (2000, 35)

Within the field of critical pedagogy, Peter McLaren has for some time offered provocative suggestions to promote critical pedagogy as a theoretical alternative to the many excuses which constitute the procapitalist pedagogies of the present. The thematic commonality of all these suggestions lies within remedies for the problems associated with social class, sexism, racism, and homophobia as defined above. His (1995) book *Critical Pedagogy and Predatory Culture*, for instance, uses the theme of "predatory culture," inspired by media representations of violence and capitalist culture, right-wing political trends, and gang culture, to promote "resistance postmodernist critique" (i). More recently, McLaren has adopted a more wholly marxist approach, writing *Che Guevara, Paulo Freire, and the Pedagogy of Revolution* to show how

the image of Che ultimately embeds the mythic in the ordinary and is able to gather the past and the future into a single moment: the promise of redemption and the anticipation of a new order of being and becoming (2000, 8).

McLaren retrieved the memory of Che in order to "dislodge what appears to be the intractable hegemony of commonsense, quotidian reality." (8) In the contents that follow thereafter, Che's marxism is praised in order to bring up issues of imperialism, materialism, and capitalist domination while at the same time investigating Che's aura so that educators might "follow in the revolutionary footsteps of Che" (100). Paulo Freire is given a similar treatment in the second half of McLaren's (2000) book.

On one level, McLaren's prose is philosophical advice to education students. On another level, however, it offers the incantations of the "liminal servant," or shaman, that McLaren praised as a model of good teaching in *Schooling as a Ritual Performance* (1993; 114-119). This combination of roles persists throughout McLaren's recent work. These recent books are indeed a treasure trove of theoretical and bibliographic information for the Marxist researcher, a repeated incitement to revolutionary forms of thinking, and a set of documented evidences of a community of revolutionary critical pedagogues. Critical educators whose interests lie in that sort of thing will want to have access to them.

*Capitalists and Conquerors*, alphabetically the first of these newer books, offers a fair summary of McLaren's forays into the application of the theory of value to the field of education. Under capitalism, human beings are mere capital, and value is to be added to us in schools so that we might be made more accessible producers of capitalism's material surplus. This is explored for its shock-value, to be sure. Mainly, though, it is explored in terms of its implications for teachers, which are offered up as advice in the following vein:

Critical pedagogy must be critical of capital as a social relation, which includes being critical of labor as the subject of capital. The struggle against capital is, after all, the main game. (97)

Critical pedagogy must be antiracist, antisexist, and antihomophobic. (97)

Critical pedagogy must center around meeting the basic needs of human beings for survival and well-being in the struggle for a socialist democracy. (97)

McLaren's exploration of these themes remains resolutely Marxist throughout.

A more daringly exploratory essay within *Capitalists and Conquerors* is McLaren's essay with Donna Houston, "Revolutionary Ecologies: Ecosocialism and Critical Pedagogy," which brings in a new set of political themes. Here McLaren and Houston are careful to focus upon socialism as the antidote to ecological crisis. The essay's depictions of ecological crisis portray it in a somewhat introductory vein, starting with problems that have received significant media coverage, as (for instance) the situating of a new "Belmont High School" on top of a toxic waste site in Los Angeles is introduced as an ecological problem worthy of study. The essay fills a significant gap in the literature.

The rest of *Capitalists and Conquerors* is an exploration of the political and pedagogic meanings of the neoconservative takeover of government with the advent of the Bush Administration. McLaren's portrayal of neoconservative hegemony amidst capitalist consolidation is, of course, scathing. And in "facing up to acts of US imperialism," McLaren defines the role of "irreverent intellectual," following James Petras, as an intellectual who works with activists in popular struggles.

Yet nevertheless the missing piece of the puzzle of Marxist critical pedagogy is located in the terrain of everyday life. McLaren and Nathalia E. Jaramillo, in an essay on George W. Bush ("God's Cowboy Warrior," 261-333). This passage explains both McLaren's style and his substance:

. . . any revolutionary struggle must be dedicated to educating the emotions as much as the intellect and why anti-imperialist struggle must be waged on the triple continents of reason, passion, and revolution. It must take place not only on the picket line or protest march, but also in the

schools, places of worship, libraries, shop floors, and corporate offices -- in every venue where people come together to learn, to labor, and to love.

In order to shift critical pedagogy into a new register, we need to rethink the very premises of critical pedagogy, not as some grand contemplative act, but as part of a philosophy of everyday life. This challenge has to do with creating a living Marxism, a way of negotiating the reality of a racist and class society on a daily basis so as to transform such a society. (324)

For McLaren and others, then, critical pedagogy has to ignite the fires of social change out of the kindling of immediate existence. It's clear, from the undertakings of McLaren and his friends, that this will be a prodigious task employing projects such as the "Escola Cidada Program" (99-103), cultural criticism, abstract theory, marxism, and anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-homophobic struggles all together.

*Red Seminars* is a collection of essays McLaren has written with other scholars, extending itself to 500+ pages of varied critique in 24 chapters. I will not be able to summarize the contents therein without skipping over major portions of this book. There are sections within *Red Seminars* that deal with cultural politics. Nevertheless, the emphasis throughout these discussions is upon marxist education -- marxist education, that is, for the reader. In the middle of a discussion of the media phenomenon of Elian Gonzales, for instance, we are told that "the answer is not to transform exchange relations but to dismantle existing social relations of production." (377) A discussion of Richard Rorty, the philosopher of language, sidesteps into a discussion of how the relations of production are reflected in what Wittgenstein called "language games." (296-297)

The last section of *Red Seminars* contains a series of interviews with Peter himself, including one very revealing exchange between Peter and Glenn Rikowski in which he concisely explains his anti-postmodernist stance (explaining Derrida, for instance, as the "philosopher of fictitious capital), and in which he biographically depicts his intellectual path to marxism. Rikowski is also interesting for his marxist critique of human capital theory.

*Teaching Against Global Capitalism and the New Imperialism*, by McLaren and Farahmandpur, extends all of the above-stated themes further. The first essay in *Teaching Against Global Capitalism* proclaims a resurrection of marxist theory in an academic context permeated by neoliberalism and postmodernism. It is written in the rich writing style that generally characterizes McLaren's prose. An example:

The shift toward a postmodernism layered with a thin veneer of cultural Marxism, scaffolded by identity politics and postsocialist ideology, sprayed by aerosol terms such as "difference" and "indeterminacy," and dipped in the gurgling foam of Jacuzzi socialism and window-dressing democracy, has witnessed the categories of cultural domination and

oppression replace those of class exploitation and imperialism as capitalism's reigning antagonisms (21)

In one important essay within this collection, the authors declare their revolutionary intentions outright: "We need nothing short of a social revolution," (152) and then continue to argue: "Here we recognize that many readers might find our platform to be naive, impractical, or hopelessly utopian. We wish to remind these readers that such a turn to socialism in no way diminishes the importance of industrial, postindustrial, or technological development, which we believe must continue. However, in our socialist vision, individuals would contribute labor according to ability, and the material means of life would be distributed according to need," (153) following Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program*. The bulk of this book lays out the direction in which a "revolutionary pedagogy" would proclaim its transformative intentions, in light of neoliberalism and the new imperialist spirit that has transformed global politics with the Bush Administration and the events of 9/11/01.

*Teaching Peter McLaren* is a collected volume of essays in praise of Peter McLaren as an educator. Its content is much less intensive of McLaren's theoretical constructions (i.e. less "heavy") than the other three books, and more of a discussion of personal encounter with Peter McLaren the person (and with his prose). It nevertheless introduces us to a new range of scholars who have been influenced by McLaren. Some of these scholars (de Alba, Arenas, Moraes, and Hill especially) suggest contextual arrangements for what they see as a "McLaren pedagogy."

### **Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy as Frontier: Some Recommendations**

In proposing that critical pedagogy re-anchor itself in Marxist roots, Peter McLaren has proposed a frontier concept of critical pedagogy, as other, non-Marxist, concepts of critical pedagogy have become bogged down in either the turf-markings of theoretical discourse ("academic writing as real estate," as Ben Agger once called it) or the minutiae of everyday classroom practice (without challenging the regressive political background guiding everyday classroom practice into regressive aggregate outcomes). The above-cited texts are indeed prodigious, in their proposal of an analytic for critical pedagogy centered upon the analysis of capitalism in Marx's *Capital*.

The application of the theories of historical materialism to critical pedagogy in order to furnish a praxis of teaching/ learning is, clearly, a developing project. The explorations of this theoretical niche offered so far by Paulo Freire, Peter McLaren, Paula Allman, Glenn Rikowski, Ramin Farahmandpur and many others have broken the ice surrounding Marxist cultural analysis in an era of politics when the forces of capital have fully consolidated and united around the Bush Administration's reactionary knee-jerk hegemonic politics. In future works, however, the theoretical implications of historical materialism can be picked up and extended further. Here are some preliminary suggestions:

1) There should be a renewed emphasis upon historical materialism as a critique of a flexible capitalism that changes with historical development. Some of the essays in these books have done an admirable job of this; "Freire, Marx, and the New Imperialism," (2005c, 38-67) for instance, portrays the current political and economic climate as a product of concrete historical development. However, the portrayal of capitalism as a discontinuous and developing history filled with historically-bound types of exploitation is not easy to achieve. Rather than offering up a history of capitalism as uniformly oppressive, a critical pedagogy should recognize the discontinuities in capitalist history, the moments at which capital puts itself in crisis and is thus at risk for revolutionary transformation. For instance, the creation of consumer society (out of the impoverished capitalist working-class societies of the 19th century) as an ambiguous development in which the material improvements in well-being of a working "middle class" offered (and, decreasingly, still offer) material hopes to our students. The economic histories of Robert Brenner (2002), M. Shahid Alam (2000), and Kees van der Pijl (1996) suggest a discontinuity in capitalist history between the early post-World War II period (1945-1971) and afterward that suggest that capitalist labor once had material compensations that were much stronger than they are today. Even capital once had firmer grounds for proclaiming a state of prosperity than it does now; Brenner (2002), especially, reminds us of what thin grounds current claims to "economic prosperity" lie upon.

The pivotal moment in the changeover to the post-'70s neoliberal economy was the moment of the upheavals of the late 1960s, which contained an activist spirit that today's radicals might find useful. The discontinuities between the "populist Keynesianism" of the pre-'70s era and the dominant "neoliberalism" of today have produced today's political/ economic realities, which can be productively explored by a critical pedagogy. This exploration, moreover, should be able to test the limits of capitalism as it is currently dominated by "virtual accumulation" (van der Pijl 63) so that critical pedagogy can attune itself to the next period of capitalist crisis, the next period to "wake up" from the sleep of declining consumer society.

2) Revolutionary critical pedagogy needs to start compiling its own history of case studies. Even if the call to revolutionize pedagogy in a reactionary political period is incapable of producing the utopian results promised in McLaren's many texts, the attempt to implement it should produce something worthy of study. Practical illustration of critical pedagogy must go beyond the citation of examples to critical examinations of everyday practice, both in terms of evaluating the embodiment of principles and in terms of further exploration of how revolutionary conditions come into being. The hindsight of 150 years of radical experience has told us that Marx's formulation of revolutionary conditions in the (1847) *Communist Manifesto* is too facile when applied to present-day conditions -- the advance of industry does not necessarily produce the "revolutionary combination, due to association" of the working class:

The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the labourers, due to competition, by the revolutionary combination, due to association. The development of Modern Industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on

which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. (1976b, 496)

The truth about class relations in the advanced capitalist countries is today something a lot closer to Marx's statement about the working class toward the end of Volume 1 of *Capital*:

The silent compulsion of economic relations sets the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker. Direct extra-economic force is still of course used, but only in exceptional cases. In the ordinary run of things, the worker can be left to the 'natural laws of production', i.e. it is possible to rely on his dependence on capital, which springs from the conditions of production themselves, and is guaranteed in perpetuity by them. (Marx 1976a, 899)

A theory of revolutionary conditions must therefore be rethought out of a careful analysis of capitalist history and geography, and a history of case studies in revolutionary pedagogy could impel that rethinking.

3) An exploration of the materially-destructive aspects of capitalist technological development, especially as regards its ecological consequences, and of the particularity of socialist alternatives to said development. McLaren quotes at length authors such as John McMurtry, whose other writings offer graphic detail about capitalism's ability to destroy planetary life. Or, more centrally, McLaren's writings have borrowed from Joel Kovel, whose (2002) book *The Enemy of Nature* is centered on the idea of "ecological production." Ecological production focuses upon the fact that acts of material production produce ecologies, and that capitalist production produces shrinking ecologies. The mandate of "production for production's sake," production for the anonymous and all-powerful force of the market, is also a mandate to use the latest capitalist technologies to chew up the global ecology for the production of consumer items, with the concomitant transformation of the Earth into a wasteland. The "symptom" of all this is that human occupation of the planet has become a calamity for the rest of the biosphere. Extinction threatens biological networks; human encroachment destroys habitats, oceans are fished dry, oil is belched into the air as carbon dioxide, weather patterns are disrupted, soil loses its fertility with corporate agriculture, and so on. Catastrophes are the result; their long term effect is the deterioration of everything, even the possibility of socialism itself. What would ecological production look like under socialism? Certainly the discipline and practice of critical pedagogy (as McLaren has proposed it) would forcefully interrupt the wastelanding of Earth in favor of sustainable practices of ecological production -- but this also means a heightened sensitivity to how production produces ecologies, which constitute a frontier for critical pedagogy.

In the revolutionary daring of works such as McLaren, much will ride upon the health of the capitalist system as a whole, for its illness (i.e. capitalism) foretells its possible collapse. Certainly there remains the possibility that capitalism is so deadly that it could

extinguish both itself and its material substrate, the natural world, leaving a regressive sort of devastation behind in an extreme outcome of what James O'Connor called "the second contradiction of capitalism."

## Conclusion

Educational practice is not usually discussed in the language of Marxist political economy such as McLaren has used in his books. And, indeed, this may limit the audience for McLaren's books; educators may well ask, "what does this have to do with me?" But what McLaren has done is to suture the discussion about the role of the teacher, of the "critical pedagogue" in the classroom, to discussions about the politics of culture and political economy. Those who are sceptical of the quality of McLaren's suture should know that this is not about "politics." "Politics," the discourse of today's market for politicians, is all about selling the interests of capital to the working-class voter. Vote for me, the politicians say, because I speak sweet words to your insecurities about life, while plotting to make you less secure, through corporate invasion of the schools, through standardized testing, and through other attempts to suck the schools dry for capital (as McLaren and others have cited them). This is about control over the adult world, to establish the security of your role as a teacher in the first instance. You become less secure because capital must sacrifice you and your students for its greater profits today; your fight, therefore, is the fight of labor against capital. McLaren's writings can help you recognize how that manifests itself.

And the interests of capital, as Marx reminds us in volume 1 of *Capital*, are those of everyone-for-herself nihilism, of what McLaren called "predatory culture":

Capital . . . allows its actual movement to be determined as much and as little by the sight of the coming degradation and final depopulation of the human race, as by the probable fall of the earth into the sun. In every stock-jobbing swindle everyone knows that sometime or other the crash must come, but everyone hopes that it may fall on the head of his neighbour, after he himself has caught the shower of gold and placed it in secure hands. *Apres moi le deluge!* is the watchword of every capitalist and of every capitalist nation. (380-381)

Within this configuration, the role of the revolutionary, the "irreverent intellectual" a la Petras, or of the critical pedagogue, is to defend the worker who makes all this "civilized" activity possible. Marx continues:

Capital therefore takes no account of the health and of the length of life of the worker, unless society forces it to do so. Its answer to the outcry about the physical and mental degradation, the premature death, the torture of over-work, is this: Should that pain trouble us, since it increases our pleasure (profit)? (381)



Note to teachers: your students will join the working class. Are you to trust them in the hands of capital, or must you, as "society," oblige capital to take account of their health and lives?

The political economy of the present day is characterized by the knee-jerk movement of capital to shift the regimes of production in directions less favorable to the worker, and more favorable to the owners of capital, as per its "actual movement" in Marx's day. Capital is not as brutal in America as it once was; yet it struggles today to set itself free from the restrictions placed upon it in the pre-1970s era of capitalist development. Peter McLaren and his friends have tried in these volumes to throw the doors open so that readers can see this development as a background to the lives lived in their classrooms.

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