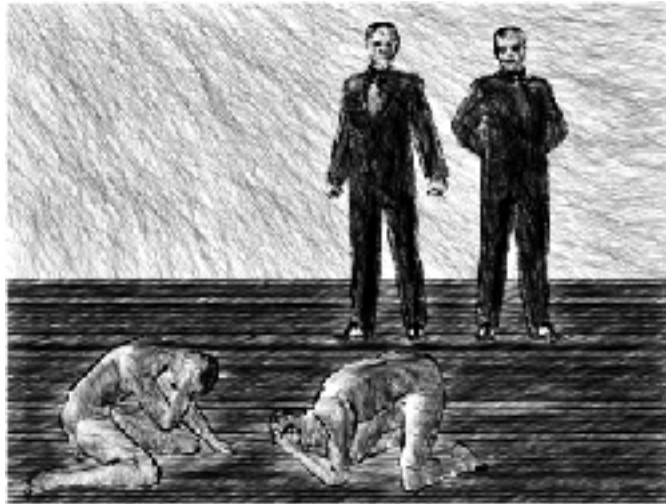


Teaching About Oppression and Exploitation: Critical Theory and the Origins of Inequality

Charles Reitz



"Poverty" by Roberto Font Ruiz

As it stands, the major purpose of education is to make the world safe for global capitalism. . . . [R]evolutionary educators refuse the role that global capitalism has assigned to them: to become the supplicants of corporate America and to work at the behest of the corporate bottom line.

-- Peter McLaren (2000, 196-97)

Critical social theories conceptualize the structures of domination and resistance. They point to forms of oppression and domination contrasted to forces of resistance that can serve as instruments of change. [. . .] Thus, critical social theories are weapons of critique and instruments of practice as well as cognitive maps. [. . .] If a theory illuminates a phenomenon . . . and produces altered reception of it (or perhaps rejection), or inspires the production of oppositional . . . practices, then the theory turns out to be valuable both in its theoretical and practical effects.

-- Douglas Kellner (1995, 25-27)

I. The Logic of Intensifying Inequality Within and Between Cultures

This essay¹ addresses the complex underlying structures of economic oppression and exploitation² that are too often still overlooked (sometimes actively suppressed) by

analysts, policy makers, commentators, and educators when examining both the causes and the impacts of imperial corporate globalization.³ My purpose is here pedagogical: to provide the outlines of a basic lesson plan that can help students understand the origins of economic inequality. I do this through a discussion of patterns of wealth and income distribution and other specific exhibits that can be intellectually and politically powerful tools for teachers in several interrelated disciplines -- sociology, economics, history, and ethics, as well as logic and critical thinking. My aim is also transformational: to mobilize students to root out the conditions, educational and otherwise, that serve to perpetuate the undemocratic realities of political and cultural life (including neocolonial terror war) deriving from the capitalist world's unfair and unequal social division of labor and wealth.

Corporate globalization is intensifying social inequality and cultural polarization worldwide. Increasing globalization correlates directly with growing inequality both within and between nations (Sernau, 2001, 52-55). This global polarization and growing immiseration have brought to an end what Herbert Marcuse (1964) theorized in *One Dimensional Man* as the totally integrated and completely administered political universe of the liberal welfare/warfare state.⁴ Neoliberalism has replaced this "comfortable, smooth, democratic unfreedom" (Marcuse, 1964, 1) with something more openly vicious. Peter McLaren (1997, 2) and others call it predatory culture: "Predatory culture is the left-over detritus of bourgeois culture stripped of its arrogant pretense to civility and cultural lyricism and replaced by a stark obsession with power fed by the voraciousness of capitalism's global voyage." Michael Apple (2001, 18) describes it as "capitalism with the gloves off." David Korten (1995, 195) writes similarly of predatory finance: "The global economy is not, however, a healthy economy. In all to many instances it rewards *extractive* investors who do not create wealth, but simply extract and concentrate existing wealth. The extractive investor's gain is at the expense of other individuals or the society at large." Intensified exploitation is occurring today through the "race to the bottom" as capitalism searches the globe for the lowest wage labor markets. Policies of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and NAFTA are leading also to structural adjustments that exemplify "policies of external domination that hurt the poor" (Sernau, 2001, 36). The result is the "champagne glass"-shaped graph that may be used to depict the global distribution of income among the world's population:

- 82.7% of the *total world income* accrues to the richest fifth of the world's population
- 11.7% to the second richest fifth
- 2.3% to the middle fifth
- 1.9% to the fifth next to the bottom
- 1.4% to the poorest fifth.

These figures are according to United Nations data presented by David C. Korten (1995, 107) in his *When Corporations Rule the World*. Of course, such policies are resisted by a variety of forces. Where armed insurrection is involved, these movements are being ever more frequently labeled "terrorist." Kevin Phillips begins his 2002 volume, *Wealth and Democracy*, tying the war against terror⁵ to his critique of the increasing concentration of wealth and its corrupting influence on democracy:

The terrorist attack on New York City in September 2001 came only a year after serious candidates in America's millennial presidential election had described how money and wealth in the United States were crippling democracy. Politics, they had said, was being corrupted as the role of wealth grew. . . . The new U.S. war against terrorism adds a further possibility: that U.S. government concerned with protecting wealth may do so at the expense of democratic procedures and may try to blame terrorism rather than flawed policy for hard times (Phillips, 2002, xi, xvii).

Globalization, war, and conquest aim at the overall reduction of payrolls on the global assembly line, no matter the greater levels of manufacturing employment in developing countries. Inequality is not simply a matter of gap between rich and poor, but of the structural relationships in economic arena of propertied and non-propertied segments of populations. The close correlation of corporate globalization and intensifying inequalities of income and wealth, however, do not explain causality or the origins of inequality. For this, a model is required that can explain incomes in terms of differential returns to labor and capital as the two basic factors in the production process itself. I develop in this essay just such a model that will also be able to elucidate the dynamics of unequal wealth accumulation, and be empirically testable and tested. My analysis of economic exploitation will also examine the context of property relationships that are key to wealth accumulation, starting with the central fact of the U.S. economy -- the dramatically unequal distribution of wealth and property.

II. Unequal Wealth Distribution in the U.S. Today

Students typically have little awareness of the nature of wealth or the pattern of its distribution in society. They also lack insight into the connection of income flows to relations of property ownership. Sociology texts, like that of Macionis (2004, 201), tend to stand out (over and above standard economics texts) in their emphasis on the facts of the unequal distribution of wealth. Macionis does utilize the standard economic definition of wealth in terms of assets to which one has title, minus debts. He depicts wealth distribution in the U.S.A. today by graphing all households on a line, top to bottom, in a declining order of property ownership. When matched with **shares of total assets**, this graph discloses that:

- 84% of the *total wealth* is held by the richest fifth of all households
- 11% by the second wealthiest fifth
- 5% by the middle fifth
- 1% by the second lowest fifth
- -1% by the poorest fifth of all households

The profound impacts of wealth distribution on life chances must also be stressed. "Life chances" is of course the technical term used to indicate the relative access a household has to the society's economic resources: decent housing, health care, education, employment, etc. The greater the wealth in one's household, the greater one's life chances. The less the wealth in one's household, the fewer the life chances. Questions

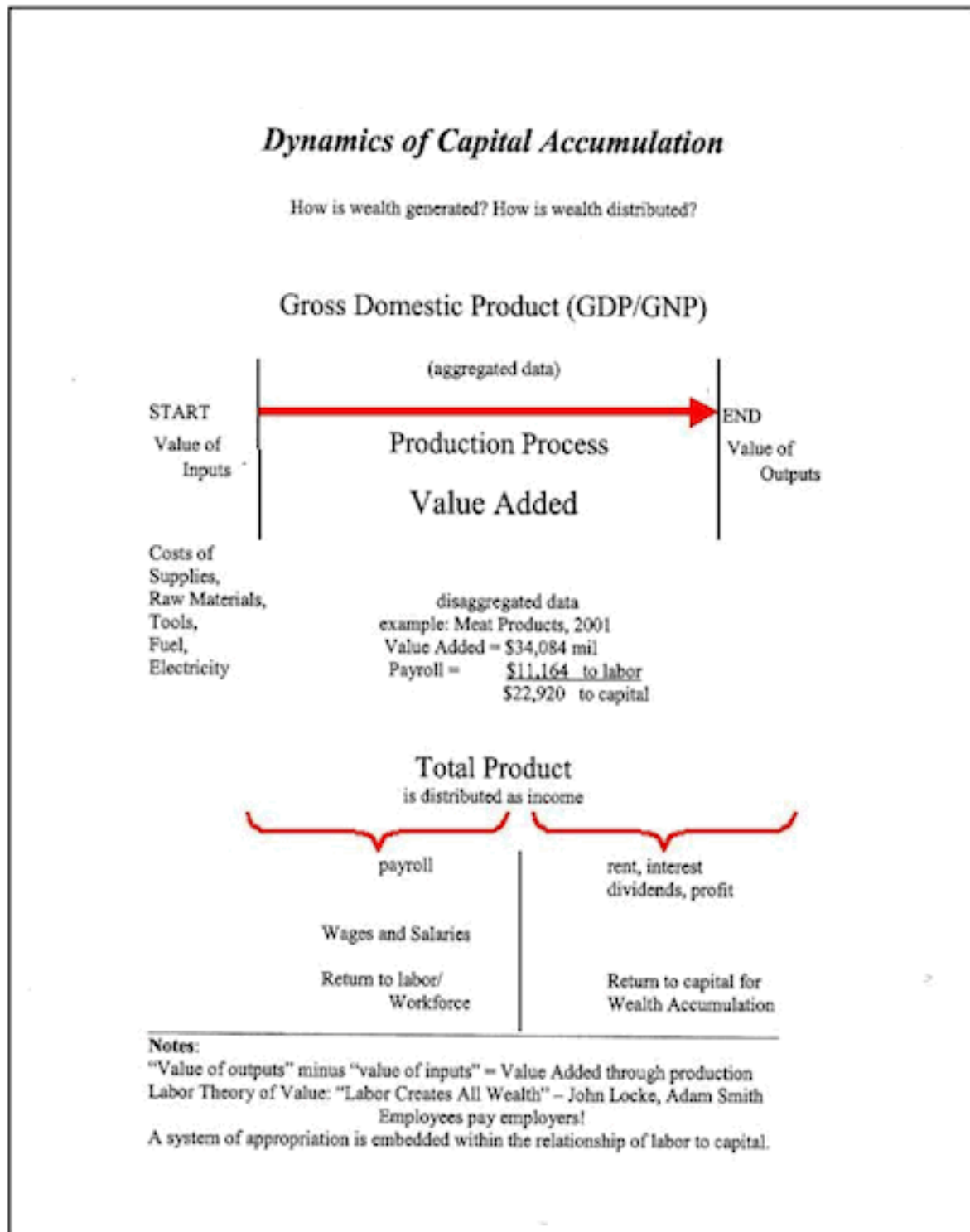
of justice and fairness arise when the unequal distribution of life chances clashes with political principles about equality of opportunity and level playing fields.

III. Dynamics of Wealth [Capital] Accumulation

The question of where wealth comes from was classically posed and settled by early social philosophers, John Locke and Adam Smith, though this is seldom discussed with students. Before Marx, they held that a person's labor is the real source of all property that one might have the right to call one's own. In advocating that labor has the right therefore to retain the full value of the wealth it creates Marx was simply carrying this thought through to its logical conclusion. Abraham Lincoln has also notably acknowledged that "Labor is prior to, and independent of, capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration."⁶ Capital is congealed labor. Yet the workforce, governed by capitalist property relations, is never fully remunerated for its contribution to the production process. A substantial portion of the value employees add to the economy is seized by employers as a return to capital. This is the meaning of exploitation.

Exhibit A outlines a model⁷ of the dynamics of capital accumulation and essential workings of the economy. Central to the model is the process of adding value to economic inputs by working them up by the end of the process into finished products. The amount of *new wealth created* through production is calculated by subtracting the dollar costs of the **inputs** (supplies, raw materials, tools, fuel, electricity, etc.) from the dollar value of the **outputs**. The difference equals the **value added**, and the value added is distributed as income to the two major factors in production, labor and capital. Every dollar of the value added is distributed into one of the two basic income categories: 1) returns to the workforce (in terms of the **payroll** -- wages and salaries), or 2) returns to owners and investors (in terms of profit, rent, dividends, interest). Subtracting the *payroll* from the *value added* discloses the income flow returning to capital, which accumulates as wealth. Thus, this model actually represents the three inextricably interconnected activities of production, distribution, and capital accumulation.

Exhibit A



Let me illustrate this model of the dynamics of capital accumulation with a simple hypothetical example. I can buy a guitar kit containing everything I need (all the *inputs*) to build a fine acoustic guitar for \$500. After I assemble the kit, the finished guitar (*output*) is an item I can really sell for \$2000. By the end of the production process, the materials in the kit have been transformed in economic value: there is \$1500 in *value*

added. The factor that generated the added value is my labor. Since I bought the kit and built the guitar, I have earned \$1500 through my economic activity. Now what if I get my friend Carlos to build my kit? He agrees to construct the guitar for \$500. At the end of his work process, I own the guitar, because I owned the kit and I hired him to work-up the materials. As owner, after paying Carlos his fee for his work, I keep \$1000 of the value added as my due, though I was not active in the production process myself. Carlos gets income because of his labor. I get income because of my ownership. I am the owner of *income producing property*. Of course we know it was not the property that produced my income, rather the property relationships of the capitalist system. Under this system, it is *not* employers who are paying their employees, but rather *employees who are paying their employers*.

IV. Value Added and Payroll Data in U.S. Manufacturing

If you add up the aggregate total of the values added across the economy for one year you get a measure of economic output termed the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). GDP is a major concern of the U.S. Department of Commerce and the federal government tracks the values added in all branches of the economy.

Exhibit B presents the empirical data from the *Statistical Abstract of the United States 2001* measuring wealth created in every manufacturing sector of the economy. This real world data can be plugged into the model outlined above to gain a concrete understanding of how the economy functions, especially the dynamics of capital accumulation, which results from the differential incomes distributed to labor and to capital. In the **meat products** industry, for example, total value added (in millions of dollars) was \$34,084. The payroll was \$11,164. Therefore the amount returned to capital was \$22,920, or more than double the amount returned to labor. What is true in this sector of the economy holds true in the other branches too. U.S. government data document the extensive exploitation. See also the July 4, 2004 **Appendix** to this essay from the *New York Times* on the high stress working conditions in a Kansas City, Kansas, ConAgra meatpacking plant.

Given the above model of the production and distribution processes, the concentration of wealth has enormous implications for the distribution of income. Those households with the greatest wealth also receive the greatest incomes, inasmuch as their incomes derive from their vast property holdings. Macionis (2004, 201) graphs the unequal **distribution of income** today as follows:

- 47.2% of all income accrues to the wealthiest fifth
- 23.0% to the second wealthiest fifth
- 15.6% to the middle fifth
- 9.9% to the fifth second from bottom
- 4.3% to the poorest fifth

Over the last two decades the inequalities of both income and wealth have been increasing, with middle range households losing the most. Life chances are thus also being redistributed to the advantage of the wealthiest, as injustice and unfairness also intensify.

Exhibit B

No. 974. Manufactures—Summary by Selected Industry: 1999

[16,711 represents 16,711,000]

Industry based on shipments	NAICS code ¹	All employees ²			Production workers ² (1,000)	Value added by manufacturing ³ (mil. dol.)	Value of shipments ⁴ (mil. dol.)
		Number (1,000)	Payroll				
			Total (mil. dol.)	Per employee (dol.)			
Manufacturing, total	31-33	16,711	600,090	35,910	12,011	1,962,644	4,038,109
Food	311	1,488	41,211	27,699	1,139	177,659	429,053
Grain and oilseed milling	3112	59	2,369	40,390	43	16,540	47,094
Fruit and vegetable preserving and specialty food	3114	180	5,035	27,914	154	25,064	49,373
Dairy product	3115	131	4,303	32,889	87	18,999	62,327
Meat product	3116	477	11,164	23,389	412	34,084	111,970
Bakeries and tortilla	3118	315	8,606	27,327	194	30,402	47,255
Other food	3119	150	4,550	30,331	113	28,474	53,189
Beverage and tobacco product	312	167	6,677	39,970	91	68,598	107,437
Beverage	3121	139	5,233	37,724	71	30,539	62,116
Tobacco	3122	28	1,445	50,960	20	38,059	45,321
Textile mills	313	357	9,466	26,535	301	22,954	54,854
Textile product mills	314	240	5,440	22,631	197	14,262	32,642
Apparel	315	576	11,022	19,138	470	30,594	62,798
Cut and sew apparel	3152	441	8,275	18,777	357	24,753	50,738
Leather and allied product	316	74	1,760	23,791	60	4,551	9,673
Wood product	321	589	15,954	27,076	493	38,413	97,583
Sawmills and wood preservation	3211	133	3,644	27,433	113	9,610	30,209
Other wood product	3219	341	8,839	25,957	283	19,250	45,386
Paper	322	560	22,789	40,683	432	74,602	157,491
Pulp, paper, and paperboard mills	3221	187	9,725	52,137	146	37,526	73,509
Converted paper product	3222	374	13,065	34,966	286	37,076	83,982
Printing and related support activities	323	838	27,369	32,651	609	62,428	102,404
Printing and related support activities	3231	838	27,369	32,651	609	62,428	102,404
Petroleum and coal products	324	104	5,625	54,220	69	42,355	168,096
Petroleum and coal products	3241	104	5,625	54,220	69	42,355	168,096
Chemical	325	881	42,101	47,765	506	229,284	419,674
Basic chemical	3251	193	10,355	53,516	111	50,239	106,875
Resin, syn rubber, and artif. & syn. fibers	3252	108	5,353	49,382	73	27,308	62,510
Pharmaceutical and medicine	3254	223	11,985	53,764	108	74,108	107,855
Soap, cleaning compound, and toilet preparation	3256	123	4,626	37,480	75	32,483	53,266
Other chemical product	3259	122	5,071	41,526	74	21,563	39,955

Plastics and rubber products	326	1,069	32,638	30,529	848	91,346	172,397
Plastics product	3261	858	25,368	29,567	680	72,183	136,873
Rubber product	3262	211	7,270	34,439	168	19,163	35,524
Nonmetallic mineral product	327	526	17,948	34,124	411	56,538	97,498
Cement and concrete product	3273	219	7,428	33,967	166	22,714	42,550
Primary metal	331	586	23,726	40,458	466	66,733	158,102
Iron and steel mills and ferroalloy	3311	141	7,288	51,574	111	21,781	53,054
Alumina and aluminum production and processing	3313	84	3,298	39,411	66	11,423	31,036
Fabricated metal product	332	1,799	59,915	33,309	1,359	142,451	256,899
Architectural and structural metals	3323	412	12,919	31,377	302	30,128	60,138
Machine shops, turned product & screw, nut, bolt	3327	424	14,512	34,240	328	28,910	44,497
Other fabricated metal product	3329	323	11,346	35,115	234	29,863	51,612
Machinery	333	1,401	53,802	38,416	922	138,798	277,117
Agriculture, construction, and mining machinery	3331	202	7,385	36,545	142	20,733	50,679
Industrial machinery	3332	186	7,553	40,672	107	19,605	36,526
Metalworking machinery	3335	241	9,858	40,895	173	18,508	30,038
Engine, turbine, and power transmission equipment	3336	117	5,004	42,825	78	16,894	34,834
Other general-purpose machinery	3339	348	13,508	38,842	214	31,689	64,296
Computer and electronic product	334	1,621	75,130	46,358	830	265,442	458,485
Computer and peripheral equipment	3341	217	11,433	52,636	81	47,803	112,677
Communications equipment	3342	286	14,553	50,975	124	48,805	90,600
Semiconductor and other electronic component	3344	581	23,697	40,776	376	102,003	146,560
Navigational, measuring, medical, control instr.	3345	460	22,756	49,480	195	58,606	90,451
Electrical equipment, appliance, and component	335	598	20,253	33,842	438	60,458	119,792
Electrical equipment	3353	207	7,275	35,170	144	19,158	36,720
Other electrical equipment and component	3359	216	7,473	34,665	155	23,482	46,558
Transportation equipment	336	1,876	86,806	46,260	1,371	268,511	675,122
Motor vehicle	3361	233	14,563	62,410	206	80,134	267,476
Motor vehicle parts	3363	795	33,984	42,771	642	86,310	201,470
Aerospace product and parts	3364	490	26,408	53,904	249	73,897	139,662
Furniture and related product	337	628	16,880	26,862	507	40,296	72,752
Miscellaneous	339	732	23,578	32,224	493	66,370	108,238
Medical equipment and supplies	3391	303	11,335	37,440	191	34,868	50,371
Other miscellaneous	3399	429	12,242	28,543	303	31,502	57,868

¹ North American Industrial Classification System, 1997; see text, Section 15, Business Enterprise. ² Includes employment and payroll at administrative offices and auxiliary units. All employees represents the average of production workers plus all other employees for the payroll period ended nearest the 12th of March. Production workers represents the average of the employment for the payroll periods ended nearest the 12th of March, May, August, and November. ³ Adjusted value added; takes into account (a) value added by merchandising operations (that is, difference between the sales value and cost of merchandise sold without further manufacture, processing, or assembly), plus (b) net change in finished goods and work-in-process inventories between beginning and end of year. ⁴ Includes extensive and unmeasurable duplication from shipments between establishments in the same industry classification.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, *Annual Survey of Manufactures, Statistics for Industry Groups and Industries*, Series M99(AS)-1.

V. The Pedagogy of Revolution

Herbert Marcuse has said that it is the particular duty of the intellectual to denounce injustice wherever it occurs. The unfairness of inequality has been argued profoundly by John Rawls (1971). His critique and the facts of the unequal distribution of wealth and life chances, especially with the implications for war and empire touched on in this essay, form a message that should be spread throughout our campuses in the United States.

Peter McLaren (1997, 38) reinforces this point when he characterizes "the overriding goal of education as the creation of conditions for social transformation." McLaren (1997, 237-301) stresses capitalism's incompatibility with democracy and combines a critique of the logic of capital accumulation and global predation with a critique of schooling for social control and the reproduction of the unequal social division of labor. He urges educators to "take the struggle over the social division of labor as seriously as we do the struggle over meaning and representation." (McLaren, 1997, 13). Michael Apple (1999, 56) concurs: "There are gritty realities out there, realities whose power is often grounded in structural relations that are not simply social constructions created by the meanings given by an observer."

As they see it, we are compelled by the force of economic necessity as well as the ethics of equality to alter these reproductive processes and pursue "the common goal of transforming the exploitative social relations of global capitalism" (McLaren 1997, 69). Without a world economic system based on equality and democracy, there will be no peace and no survival. Ultimately, McLaren (2000, 1997) calls for the pedagogy of revolution and revolutionary multiculturalism -- that is, teaching the truth about class exploitation, racism, gender inequality, empire, and war.

Neo-conservative culture warriors like Allan Bloom, William Bennett, and Lynne Cheney see the world quite differently. They explicitly wish to furnish students reasons to fight for U.S. cultural and political superiority in the world. They are attempting to reinsinuate an elitist, Eurocentric program for the liberal arts and U.S. general education against the critical impulses within higher education moving toward multiculturalism and radical democracy. Bennett (2003, 48) makes himself very clear in his *Why We Fight: Moral Clarity and the War on Terrorism*:

"... many people in the "peace party" who cloak their arguments in moral objections to war are really expressing their hostility to America, and ... are basically rooted in the period of the Vietnam war and its aftermath. It was then that the critique of the United States as an imperialist or "colonialist" power, wreaking its evil will on the hapless peoples of the third world, became a kind of slogan on the Left.

Kellner (2003, 66-70), on the other hand, criticizes the nation's post 9/11 warmongering, patriotism, and media propaganda, and McLaren (1995, 117) names the neo-conservative approach to educational reform "white terror."⁸ He urges revolutionary multiculturalism as a means of "unthinking" whiteness and "rethinking" democracy (McLaren, 1997). On a related neo-conservative theme that runs through Bennett's work in particular, Michael Apple (2001, 22, 25) comments scathingly that "For a rapidly growing segment of the conservative population God's message to all of us is to turn both to capitalism and tradition. ... Capitalism is 'God's economy.'"

While the abolition of the wages-system is not absolutely *sufficient* to secure the conditions for each of us to become all that we are capable of being, the alienation and exploitation of labor is the enabling material core that permits, if not to say requires, society to legitimate a variety of other forms of social oppression. We have learned from the movements against racism and sexism that class relations do not wholly demarcate structures of dominator power. Racism, patriarchy, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination, disrespect, and inequality sorely inhibit our powers of actualization. To theorize scientifically the cultural transformation of each of these negations and to be engaged politically and culturally with the labor force to end them must be the essential logic and manifesto of all future critical teaching.

Endnotes

¹ Dedicated to the memory of the 600 Iraqi civilian victims of war crimes carried out by U.S. Marines meting out punishment on behalf of the crusading U.S. regime in Falluja, the week of Easter, 2004. See "Anti-U.S. Outrage Unites a Growing Iraqi Resistance," *New York Times*, April 11, 2004, p. A-11. "A few days after the [four] contractors were killed, United States marines invaded Falluja, 35 miles west of Baghdad, in a major offensive to wipe out the insurgents behind the attack. So far, more than 300 people have

been killed." National Public Radio now (4-12-04) reports that the number has been revised to 600.

2 I wish in this essay to extend the analysis of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by adding to it this new and critical theoretical examination of the economics of exploitation. Scott Sernau (2001, 35) provides a useful description of the contemporary adaptation of the classic contributions of Marx and Lenin to the general sociological theory of dependency: "Worldwide industrial capitalism brings *exploitation* through unequal exchange and removal of surplus through profits, *domination* through subtle though powerful neocolonialism, and *distortion* through disarticulated economies that serve export needs but not the needs of local populations."

3 I also relate this analysis to current criticisms of corporate globalization and U.S. militarism. Generally insightful treatments of these interconnected themes are posted on the Global Policy Forum website -- <<http://www.globalpolicy.org/>>. These summaries furnish a fine first orientation, yet even they lack an examination of the fundamental dynamics of economic exploitation and capital accumulation such as I recommend here.

On globalization: "Throughout history, adventurers, generals, merchants, and financiers have constructed an ever-more-global economy. Today, unprecedented changes in communications, transportation, and computer technology have given the process new impetus. As globally mobile capital reorganizes business firms, it sweeps away regulation and undermines local and national politics. Globalization creates new markets and wealth, even as it causes widespread suffering, disorder, and unrest. It is both a source of repression and a catalyst for global movements of social justice and emancipation."

On empire: "The United States is the most powerful nation in the world and it often acts unilaterally, but is it an Empire? Though some insist that 'empire' means only direct rule over large-scale conquered territory, the idea of a US empire has long been popular in the global South. Recently, the concept has found wide usage in the North as well, not only by critics but also by advocates of muscular US policy and global superiority. Oxford economist Niall Ferguson has written about the British Empire as a lesson-book for contemporary US power. Influential Washington neo-conservatives are now using the E-word freely, insisting that the United States is the world's most benevolent nation and that it should use its power robustly to expand 'freedom' across the globe. . . . [The] United States (empire or not) deploys its economic, political and military power globally, limiting the force of international law, shrinking the capacity of international organizations, and reducing the possibility of multilateral action and democratic self-governance in an increasingly interdependent world."

On expanding military intervention: "The Bush administration says it will carry its 'war against terrorism' to many lands. By December 2001, after initial military successes in Afghanistan, Pentagon planners turned their attention to other targets, including Somalia, Sudan and Iraq. Washington also began deploying troops in many countries to carry out special operations against alleged terrorists. In early 2002, the administration announced that it considered Iraq, Iran and North Korea as part of an 'Axis of Evil.' Despite vocal opposition from all around the world, the US and Great Britain invaded Iraq on March 20, 2003. Before long, political analysts, journalists and others began speculating about who would be the next target for US regime change: Iran, Syria or North Korea?"

[4](#) Marcuse's description of advanced industrial society in *One Dimensional Man* (1964, 19) stressed that industrial civilizations combine "in productive union the features of the Welfare State and the Warfare State." On more recent developments, the conservative dismantling of the welfare system (the "War On Welfare"), see especially Scott Sernau (2001, 229).

[5](#) For sharply critical views of the terror war see Douglas Kellner (2003) and Gore Vidal (2002), who argue against it, in contrast to William J. Bennett (2003), who argues for it.

[6](#) *Lincoln's Annual Message to Congress, December 3, 1861*, cited in Michael Parenti (1988, 10).

[7](#) This model is derived from standard measures of domestic output, utilizing concepts like value added, gross domestic product (GDP), and national income accounting (especially the income approach to GDP), for example in McConnell and Brue (2005) and Parkin (2005). My contribution is to bridge the traditional macro-micro separations, which artificially and unnecessarily detach a (macro) discussion of National Income from a (micro) consideration of income distribution in terms of wages, salaries, rents, profits, dividends and interest.

[8](#) On the U.S. resurgence of racism, see also Michael Moore's (2001) *Stupid White Men*.

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Appendix

New York Times

"Fifth Victim Dies of Injuries In Kansas Factory Shooting"

By KIRK JOHNSON

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KANSAS CITY, Kan., July 3 - A fifth victim died early Saturday of wounds suffered in a rampage here on Friday at a meatpacking plant, where an employee opened fire with two handguns he had smuggled into work.

The police said they still were not sure about the motive of the gunman, Elijah Brown, 21, who killed himself. But police said that he had acted with apparent deliberation in choosing his victims. Mr. Brown had just attended an employee meeting with some of them.

"He knew exactly what he was doing," the Kansas City police chief, Ronald Miller, said at a news conference outside the ConAgra Foods plant where Mr. Brown and the victims worked the second shift on the manufacturing line, making products like bologna and braunschweiger.

Police officials identified the fifth victim as Ardell Edwards, 55, a production line worker from Grandview, Mo.

Chief Miller said that two other men wounded in the attack were expected to survive and that the investigation was continuing.

"It's a complex situation," he told reporters. Then, in the next breath, Chief Miller seemingly reversed himself. "It's really a pretty straightforward situation," he said.

Interviews with employees, family members of the victims and people familiar with the stresses, strains and singular workplace quirks of the industrial meat-processing economy here in eastern Kansas said much the same thing: what happened at ConAgra was a shocking mystery - ultimately unsolvable, perhaps, because Mr. Brown was not alive to answer for his crimes -- but on another level, it hardly seemed a mystery at all, after other such recent incidents in the American workplace.

One witness said he believed Mr. Brown had had a confrontation of some sort with co-workers earlier this week. Another said he believed Mr. Brown had been teased or taunted. Police investigators and company officials declined to say what the employee meeting just before Mr. Brown's attack had been about.

A spokeswoman for ConAgra, Julie DeYoung, said at the Saturday news conference that the company would not comment on its security procedures or how the guns got into the plant, and she would not say whether there were any disciplinary or grievance issues involving Mr. Brown. Ms. DeYoung said he had been hired last September as a manufacturing line worker, laid off earlier this year because of a production slowdown and rehired six weeks ago.

The police also were not sure whether it was a coincidence that three of the dead men were related. Lonnie Ellingburg, 46, and Travis Nelson, 23, both of Kansas City, and Mr. Edwards, the man who died early Saturday, were all part of an extended family, said Col. Sam Breshears, a deputy police chief.

Colonel Breshears said one of the dead men was a Mexican citizen whose name would not be released until his family could be located. He identified the other victim as Leonardo Rodriguez, 49, also of Kansas City. Two other wounded men are expected to survive, Colonel Breshears said.

People who work in the meatpacking industry here and in the niche businesses that serve it, like warehousing or refrigerated shipping, said the environment of a meat factory was probably an important element in explaining what happened at the plant. The work is high-speed and high-pressure, they said, which often means employees cannot spare too much attention noticing whether a co-worker is acting suspiciously. Lose focus, the workers said, and you risk getting behind on the line.

"It's a very stressful environment," said Eleazar DeLeon, 39, who left meat manufacturing after a few years and now works for a meat shipping and distribution company. Mr. DeLeon works nights at his job and had stopped for breakfast after work at a diner around the corner from the ConAgra plant. "Any processing plant is repetitive line work," he added. "It's very hard."

Employees at ConAgra said the bulky coats that everyone wears, both for warmth in the 40-degree refrigerator chill of the factory and for identification -- production side workers at ConAgra wear blue coats, packaging side workers wear white -- would also make it easy to conceal a weapon once it was on the factory floor. Many people also carry lunch boxes and coolers into the plant, and they have not routinely been searched in the past, one employee said.

Edna Perkins is a career meat-processing worker, with 28 years on the line. Ms. Perkins was one of the 160 or so people at the plant on Friday, and is related to Mr. Ellenberg, Mr. Nelson and Mr. Edwards, though she described the men as being from "another side of the family."

Just after 5 p.m., Mrs. Perkins said, she was at her job as a white-coated "boxer" on the packaging side, assigned the task of packing prepared meat for shipping, when she saw people running above her on the catwalk that extends out over the production floor. A few seconds later a man walked by above her, bleeding.

"My first thought was that they'd had a mechanical accident," she said. Then everyone started running and next thing she knew she was outside the plant in the parking lot. Interviewed by telephone on Saturday morning from her home, Mrs. Perkins said she had been unable to sleep all night.

On Saturday, the plant was closed, sealed by police barricades on the driveway, and the ConAgra spokeswoman, Ms. DeYoung, said she did not know when it would reopen. Counseling sessions were being offered Saturday for employees.

The shooting followed by a year and a day an attack in which a manufacturing plant employee in Jefferson City, Mo., killed three people and then himself.

Meat industry work has deep roots in Kansas City, where a nexus of railroads and ranching combined to build a culture of stockyards and packing plants beginning in the late 1800's.

The industry has declined significantly over the last 50 years but remains alive in the neighborhoods like Armourdale, named for the meat company, and in factories like ConAgra. In recent years, workers here say, the plants have seen an influx of immigrants from Mexico and other Latin American countries.

Even on Saturday while the ConAgra plant sat silent and employees mourned, there was a reminder of the city's culture of heavy trucking, rail and agriculture. As Chief Miller and other officials spoke at the news conference, reporters repeatedly had to lean in to hear, the speakers forced to shout, as another tractor-trailer rumbled by the factory door.