

**Remaking Critical Pedagogy: Peter McLaren's Contribution to a Collective Work**

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**Abstract**

This article explores the collective works of Peter McLaren and his contribution to critical pedagogy within the field of education and beyond the academy. To understand how McLaren's work took a radical turn in the 1990s, the article traces the historical development of his praxis. In particular, McLaren's engagement with the postmodern Left and his response to developments in British educational Marxism are highlighted in this paper. Bringing Marxism, class analysis and politics back into the heart of education, McLaren has situated himself at the forefront of remaking critical pedagogy as a material force for social change. The resulting fusion has provoked a storm of controversy amongst the educational Left. Beyond this, however, has been the influence of critical pedagogy in social spheres beyond the university and academia, including the mass workers movement.

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### **Remaking Critical Pedagogy: Peter McLaren's Contribution to a Collective Work**

But the worker has the misfortune to be a living capital, and therefore a capital with needs-one which loses its interest, and hence its livelihood, every moment it is not working. (Marx, 1988, p. 85)

In the Byzantine labyrinth of the bourgeois academy, the frustration, anger and political maximalism of Peter McLaren lets the world know that the “protest gene” is alive and kicking (Ng, 2006). On the whole, out of character with his compassionate and hypersensitive disposition, McLaren's ideologically driven truculence is spurred by a vision of proletarian actions aimed at overcoming a corrupted and crumbling system of injustice. Whether on the page, at the podium or in the trenches, McLaren holds up amazingly well and there certainly doesn't seem to be much that frightens him. Over the past twenty years, he has been an astute observer of the political landscape who has sought to demystify bourgeois ideology and thus expose (with exhilarating clarity) the interests and workings of capitalist culture. Fired from his first academic appointment at Brock University, McLaren was invited in 1985 to work with Henry Giroux at the University of Miami Ohio (Pozo, 2003). McLaren recently stated, “Working with Henry for me was like a budding artist working with Picasso. He was, and still is, a great mentor” (Engles, 2005, p. 3). In 1993, McLaren began teaching at UCLA and at a time when Marxism has gone underground he is the only Marxist on the faculty in the Department of Education and Information Studies.

With a handful of others (including Henry Giroux), McLaren is one of the founding architects of critical pedagogy and is a staunch proponent of its Marxist current. At a time when socialism is a dirty word, he has breathed new life into Marxist education, which prompted Joe Kincheloe (2000) to call him “the poet-laureate of the educational left,” acknowledging his unusual gift of communication (p. ix). Indeed, it is impossible to miss, ignore or deny

McLaren's impact on the field of education and cultural studies. Endlessly prolific, he has written over 40 books as well as hundreds of single and co-authored book chapters, monographs and articles on critical pedagogy, as applied to curriculum, educational policy and grassroots political, educational and cultural movements (e.g., anti-war mobilizations, multiethnic labour struggles, indigenous and neo-colonial liberation movements, struggles for environmental justice, international Palestinian solidarity campaigns and student activism). Channeling the spirit of the times, the carnage of the Iraq War bleeds into his writing and indicates an engagement with a key aspect of Marxist politics, namely internationalism (McLaren, 2005; McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005a). Indeed, he was recently invited to speak and teach in Venezuela, where he declared his support for the revolution and democratic socialism. Having absorbed the lessons that are to be learned from Venezuela, McLaren operates from the starting point that all people can play a leading role in some way in the mass movement and he encourages his audience to make decisions about how to transform existing structures and social relations into desired ones.

Very briefly, it should be clear from the outset that McLaren's theoretical work is inspired by Marxist Humanism. Unlike Stalinism, which negated the "free, conscious activity" of the individual, Marxist Humanism is dedicated to a democratic communism aimed at a better life for the world's inhabitants (human and non-human) (Marx, 1988, p. 76). Raya Dunayevskaya (1910-1987), who was Trotsky's Russian language secretary in 1937 before she broke with him politically at the time of the Hitler-Stalin Pact in 1939, is hailed as the founder of Marxist-Humanism in the United States (Trotsky still defended the USSR as a degenerated workers state) ("Who is Raya," nd). Taking his cue from Raya Dunayevskaya and Peter Hudis, an organizer for the Chicago-based *News & Letters* collective, and co-editor (with Kevin Anderson) of *The*

*Power of Negativity*, McLaren (2005) writes, “My own Marxism is informed by the philosophy of Marxist-Humanism, which posits, after Hegel, that forward movement emerges from the negation of obstacles. It is the negation of “what is” and a critique of the given that spurs development and creates the path to liberation” (p. 35). Without ignoring the conflicts between theory and practice, and concretely, the struggles between the tendencies in the academic, trade union and revolutionary left, McLaren argues that there is no such thing as a pure or unadulterated Marxism.

Basically, as concerns Marxism, McLaren’s approach is eclectic and non-sectarian. He displays admiration for such diverse figures as the Marxist revolutionary and Cuban guerilla leader Che Guevara, the anarchist Emma Goldberg, the revolutionary nationalist Emilio Zapata and revolutionary pacifists such as Ghandi in India and Martin Luther King in the United States. We can also connect his brand of critical pedagogy to the work of John Dewey, the Latin American tradition of popular education and liberation theology as well as critical aspects of the Enlightenment tradition (see McLaren, 2005, p. 40). In his latest writings, he is sympathetic to the anti-vanguardist tradition of Marxism (the Hegelian Marxism of Raya Dunayevskaya and Peter Hudis), libertarian Marxism or following Harry Cleaver (2000) autonomist Marxism (Nick Dyer-Witheford, Massimo De Angelis) and certain trends in anti-authoritarian anarchist politics: i.e., council communist/workers’ council Marxists. These minority tendencies in Marxism share a close affinity with the work of autonomist and Open Marxists such as John Holloway and Werner Bonefeld whose writings are associated with *The Commoner*. It is not possible to provide a more concrete elaboration here, however, while McLaren provides critical support for new forms of anti-hierarchical, decentralized and grassroots organizing characteristic of autonomist Marxism (as a class alternative to the parties of the bourgeoisie), he does not put any faith in its non/anti-Hegelian tendency, which is particularly influenced by the cult of French anarcho-

communist philosophers such as Deleuze and Guatari.

### *The Early Years*

Born in Toronto, Canada, McLaren received his education teaching in the Jane Finch corridor in Toronto, a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual working class suburb scarred by utilitarian public housing blocks for which there is no ecological justification. This high-density landscape exemplifies how capitalism concentrates uneven economic and urban development (market forces, speculative greed, zoning laws). Rather than moan privately McLaren rolled up his narrative sleeves and wrote a blistering expose of the “savage inequalities” built into the Canadian school system, which are “invisible” to those separated from this world by privilege and uneven development. An instant bestseller in Canada, McLaren used *Cries from the Corridor* (1980) as an opportunity to speak out against a system that routinely exercises violence against poor children at school. At the same time, the making and tracing of such geographies and knowledges resists casual explanation and McLaren rewrote *Corridors* to bring a theoretical lens to his earlier journalistic documentations. In an interview for Mike Pozo (2003) in *Dissident Voices*, McLaren reflected:

I eventually grew to dislike the book—disgusted perhaps is a better term—but felt it was useful in publishing here in the US on condition that it be accompanied by an extended self-critique. The problem that I had with the original book is that it was a journalistic description of my experience with little analysis so that it could have been—and was—read as blaming the students and their families for the violence that permeated their lives both inside and outside of the school context. That all changed when I republished the book as *Life in Schools*, with an extended leftist analysis, and the book gradually became more politically radical and more theoretically nuanced with each edition (there have been four so far).

To his credit, McLaren’s groundbreaking book *Life in Schools* was recently listed as one of the 12 most significant books written by a foreign author in the field of educational theory, policy and practice by an international panel of experts assembled by the Moscow School of

Social and Economic Sciences; other writers named by the panel include Paulo Freire, Ivan Illich, Basil Bernstein, and Pierre Bourdieu. Rebutting his conservative critics who exploited his narrative to construct teachers and students as “problematic” and “deviant,” McLaren challenged this deficit discourse that shifts blame for problems to do with “the system” onto its victims.

With regards to Marx’s theory of alienation, McLaren (2003a) has “always taken a stand against the abuses of capitalism” and “supported emancipatory politics” (p. 3). Without ever losing sight of his overall socialist perspective, McLaren undertook a careful critical engagement with the post-modern left because of his interest in issues to do with the politics of difference and representation (Cole & Hill, 1995). Paying a debt to British Marxists such as Mike Cole, Dave Hill and Glenn Rikowski, McLaren recognized that the privatized spheres of left postmodernism represented a social dead end. Immersed in the radical political culture of Los Angeles (Pruyn & Huerta-Charles, 2005), he started reading the work of British Marxists such as the HillCole Group and became acquainted with the writings of Raya Dunayevskaya, which is evident in his writing, particularly in the latter editions of *Life in Schools*.

Enlarged by Marxist theory, the fourth edition of *Life in Schools* is buoyed by McLaren’s personal anecdotes and the full cataloging of data that surge from every page. Using Marx’s humanized materialism as the starting point for a “philosophy of praxis,” McLaren (2003a) blends theory with biography and history at the intersection of where students/teachers construct themselves subjectively within schools to offer a real-and-imagined “pedagogy of hope” (Freire’s words); or as he prefers to term it, following Paula Allman (1999, 2001), a “revolutionary critical pedagogy.” McLaren achieves this by providing the reader with both the explanatory concepts (class, ideology and exploitation) and empirical tools to simultaneously understand and intervene in emerging global structures that are increasingly organizing and regulating everyday practices

of schooling. By situating this critique (which is at the core of a revolutionary critical pedagogy) not in the space of the self but in the site of the social, McLaren puts the ideology of capitalist knowledge industry permanently on the defensive. According to McLaren and Farahmandpur (2005), this will require students, as social and historical agents, to “gain control over both their intellectual and physical labour” (p. 180), which includes figuring out ways to “pry theory away from the academics and incorporate it in educational practice” (McLaren, 2003a, p. 189). This is intrinsically important to a revolutionary critical pedagogy, which is not so much about liberal notions of “empowerment” but rather collective action and “power” directed toward “the abolition of class society and the realization of a socialist alternative” (McLaren, 2003a, p. 191).

Certainly, in *Che Guervara, Paulo Freire, and the Pedagogy of Revolution* (2000), McLaren makes clear that his leave of absence from Marxism was temporary. Grappling with the historical pedagogy of Che and Freire, he explores the question of how to transform the spontaneous potential of class-consciousness into actual proletarian class-consciousness. At this moment, he argues that the key is the development of class consciousness that is both coordinated and principled with regard to the knowledge produced about the material conditions and limits within which revolutionary struggle must be fought. While the different tactical problems to building socialist organizations in each country will need to be confronted, “organic intellectuals,” to take advantage of Gramsci’s use of the term, should not underestimate the accumulated political knowledge embedded in the collective capacity of diverse spontaneous elements.

What should not be forgotten here is that Marxism is not a disembodied idea but is rather the subject “both of *sensuous* consciousness and of *sensuous* need” (Marx, 1988, p. 111). With his emphasis on “de-fetishizing theoretical (of the mind) categories” (De Angelis, 1996, p. 10),

Marx (1978) argues that people's understanding of the world is not autonomous from the "immediate sensuous environment" or material conditions that make an individual human (p. 158). This is central to Marx's notion of praxis as sensuous beings are "able to act upon these senses" (individually and collectively) to change the world (De Angelis, 1996, p. 11). In the real world struggles of real world victims, proletarian ideas are built upon an extended questioning of "the way things are" as well as theories and ideas from outside an individual's existing belief system. Moreover, at this critical juncture of repression that has swept right in behind a whole juggernaut of war and terror, such opposing ideas at the level consciousness are expressions of the limits of an era.

Eschewing intellectual vanguardism (like his mentor Paulo Freire), McLaren argues that a revolutionary pedagogy acts as an antidote to political alienation and defeatism. Given that capitalist control of subjectivity and consciousness is never total, it does so by making the ideas and intentions that are censored in capitalist society more active through acts of radical critique that are dialectically grounded in praxis. McLaren (2000) writes:

Critical pedagogy constitutes a dialectical and dialogical process that instantiates a reciprocal exchange between teachers and students—an exchange that engages in the task of reframing, refunctioning, and reposing the question of understanding itself, bringing into dialectical relief the structural and relational dimensions of knowledge and its hydra-headed power/knowledge relations. Revolutionary pedagogy goes further still. It puts knowledge/power relations on a collision course with their own internal contradictions; such a powerful and often unbearable collision gives birth not to an epistemological resolution at a higher level but rather to a provisional glimpse of a new society freed from the bondage of the past, a vision in which the past reverberates in the present, standing at once outside the world and beside the world, in a place of insight where the subject recognizes she is in a world and subject to it, yet moving through it with the power to name it extopically so that hidden meanings can be revealed in the accidental contingencies of the everyday. Revolutionary pedagogy creates a narrative space set against the naturalized flow of the everyday, against the daily poetics of agency, encounter, and conflict, in which subjectivity is constantly dissolved both to an affirmation of the world through naming it, and an opposition to the world through unmasking and undoing the practices on concealment that are latent in the process of naming itself. (p. 185)



Here, as always, it is important to guard against any pre-conceived notions about how to build the struggle against exploitation and oppression. Grounded in shared experience, discussion and investigation, revolutionary critical pedagogy must be constantly reinvented. At the same time, McLaren and Farahmanpur (2005c) argue that its praxis should not be limited to, in the words of Marx and Engels (1850), “the smoothing over of class antagonisms but the abolition of classes, not the improvement of existing society, but the foundation of a new one” (p. 61).

### ***Toward a Pedagogy of Revolution***

Holding up a carnival sideshow mirror to bourgeois society, McLaren has acted as our anti-tour guide of capitalist schooling for the past twenty years. Critical pedagogy, immortalized by Paulo Freire and rebooted by Peter McLaren, is actually more than 30 years old. According to McLaren (2003a) there are many different strands to critical pedagogy (libertarian, radical and liberationist) and revolutionary critical pedagogy is a recent materialist intervention in the struggle for socialism within the field of regular and adult education. As demonstrated by McLaren (2000, 2003a), the ancestral DNA of revolutionary critical pedagogy reveals that it emerged out of disillusionment with critical pedagogy, which was caught in the quicksand of liberal/deconstructive/post Marxist approaches to social change (Martin, 2005). Even today McLaren (2000) reminds us:

The conceptual net known as critical pedagogy has been cast so wide and at time so cavalierly that it has come to be associated with anything dragged up out of the troubled and infested waters of educational practice, from classroom furniture organized in a “dialogue friendly” circle to “feel good” curricula designed to increase students’ self image. It has become, in other words, repatriated by liberal humanism and cathected to a combination of middle-brow, town-hall meeting entrepreneurship and Sunday School proselytizing. Its multicultural education equivalent can be linked to a politics of diversity that includes “tolerating difference” through the celebration of “ethnic” holidays and themes such as Black History Month and Cinco de Mayo. If the term ‘critical pedagogy’ is refracted onto the stage of current educational debates, we have to judge it

as having been largely domesticated in a manner that many of its early exponents, such as Brazil's Paulo Freire, so strongly feared. (pp. 97-98)

In contrast, McLaren and Farahmandpur (2005d) describe some of the foundational principles of a "revamped" critical pedagogy:

First, critical pedagogy must be a collective process that involves utilizing a dialogical (i.e., Freirean) learning approach. Second, critical pedagogy has to be *critical*; that is, it must locate the underlying causes of class exploitation and economic oppression... Third, critical pedagogy must be profoundly systematic in the sense that it is guided by Marx's dialectical method of inquiry, which begins with the "real concrete" circumstances of the oppressed masses... Next, it reconstructs and makes the social world intelligible by transforming and translating theory into concrete social and political activity. Fourth, critical pedagogy should be participatory. It involves building coalitions among community members, grassroots movements, church organizations, and labor unions. Finally, critical pedagogy needs to be a creative process by integrating elements of popular culture (i.e., drama, music, oral history, narratives) as educational tools that can successfully raise the level of political consciousness of students and teachers. (p. 9)

As mentioned earlier, McLaren's work underwent a change of direction in the 1990s. Tired of the tepid and reformist politics of the postmodern Left, he was very much influenced by a resurgence of interest in the relationship between Marxism and pedagogy. Forging new relationships with Marxist academics and activists both inside and outside of the university, he began to bring Marxism, class struggle and politics back into the heart of education. Breaking free from the shackles of institutional patronage and the social universe of capital, McLaren argues that a revolutionary critical pedagogy "sets as its goal the decolonization of subjectivity as well as its material basis in capitalist social relations" (Rizvi, 2002). Elaborating upon Rikowski's (2000, 2001) work on Marx's value theory of labour, McLaren (2003a) argues that, "class struggle occurs *intersubjectively* as well as collectively as a clash of contradictory forces and drives within the social totality" (p. 30). To clarify this point, McLaren (2003a) cites Rikowski (2001):

The class relation runs through our personhood. It is internal to us; we are labor, and we are capital. We are social beings incorporating antithetical social drives and forces. This fact sets off contradictions within our lives, and their solution can only come from the disintegration of ourselves as both capital and labor and our emergence as a new, non-capitalised life-form. (p. 30)

Given, as Rikowski (2002) puts it, that the underlying contradictions of our social existence “screw us up, individually and collectively”, he argues that we need to overcome our alienation within the labor process itself by resisting our self-reduction to the “peculiar” form labour power takes as human capital under the alien and hostile powers of money and the state (Marx, 1967, p. 167). Rikowski (McLaren & Rikowski, 2001) writes:

We require a *politics of human resistance*. This is a politics aimed at resisting the reduction of our personhoods to labor power (human-capital), thus resisting the capitalization of humanity. This politics also has a truly negative side: the slaying of the contradictions that screw-up, bamboozle and depress us. However, only collectively can these contradictions constituting personhood (and society: there is no individual/society duality) be abolished. Their termination rests on the annihilation of the social relations that generate them (capitalist social relations), the social force that conditions their development within social phenomena, including the 'human' (capital) and the dissolution of the substance of capital's social universe (value). A collective, political project of human resistance is necessary, and this goes hand-in-hand with *communist politics*, a positive politics of social and human re-constitution.

In view of all this, a revolutionary critical pedagogy, which ties individual human development (the interior life of the subject) to forms of collective engagement aimed at social transformation, is designed to resist the “capitalization” of subjectivity” (McLaren, 2003a, p. 25). All that has been possible is to sketch the most general about McLaren’s (2005) theory of the subject but as it relates to pedagogy and those trapped in lives of desperation and hope, it is worth quoting him at length:

Revolutionary critical pedagogy must speak not only to those already far along the path of dissent but to those wayfaring citizens who live Icarus-like lives of ascents and descents yet whose optimism of the will remains a constant source of strength, who seek ballast in the swirling eddy of political decision making but fear losing their faculties of

critique, who desire to transform the sociopolitical terrain but lack a systematic language of social analysis, who outflank despair with steady resolve but long for more opportunities to build alliances around a coherent philosophy of praxis, who refuse to take refuge in some unnamable space, some fertile void or sublime metaphysical retreat where fungible epiphanies replace concrete struggles to transform the social relations of production, who resist official advice from the plenipotentiary of the state in favor of reflecting critically upon their own historical experiences, who refuse to turn the seminar room to a self-serving precinct of reflection safely ensconced from the absurdity of human existence and the turbid and restless sea of contemporary struggles against capital, who avoid the pitfalls of religious triumphalism but who long for inner revelation in life-affirming communal settings with like-minded citizens. (p. 66-67)

Still, what does revolutionary critical pedagogy mean to the average reader? Except in rare exceptions, the audience of this literature is limited to a mostly in-group academic readership, even if it appears in high profile teacher education journals or is published by respected academic publishing houses. This is perhaps one of the greatest criticisms leveled against the work of Marxist educators in the academy: that it has had little impact in the public policy domain (which in any case is reproductive rather than transformative). Despite such deeply unflattering sentiments, this is a static and one-dimensional view of the situation, which forgets the broad and flexible work being conducted by Marxists such as McLaren and an army of “barefoot” educators in the leftward moving layer of social movement organizations to expose workers at the point of production and all spheres of culture to a revolutionary viewpoint in the developing world situation. Recognizing that public opinion is deeply divided and that the crisis ahead looms far deeper for U.S. imperialism, Marxist educators such as McLaren and his colleagues are laying the practical groundwork for the possibility of a revolutionary situation by “stretching out” a Marxist line into various social movements through what Lenin (1975) termed, “political exposures.” These political exposures are focused on “living examples” of the “shameful outrages” committed by the bourgeoisie and are organized to bring the “inner workings” of capitalism into question (pp. 43). In Lenin’s political pamphlet *What is to be*

*Done?*, he argued that this form of “all-round political agitation” constitutes “a comprehensive political education” that ought to focus on social questions and world events in the most varied spheres of everyday life and thought (p. 57). He insisted:

The consciousness of the working class cannot be genuine class consciousness unless the workers learn, from concrete, and above all from topical political facts and events to observe *every* other social class in *all* the manifestations of its intellectual, ethical and political life; unless they learn to apply in practice the materialist estimate of *all* aspects of the life and activity of *all* classes, strata, and groups of the population. (p. 42)

What matters here is that the development of working class struggle will depend upon the conscious ability of the proletariat “to respond to *all* cases of tyranny, oppression, violence, and abuse” (p. 42).

Whether through teach-ins, seminars, on-line journals, flyers, newspapers or pamphlets, McLaren believes that the ongoing cycle of dialogue, reflection and critique produced by these “vivid exposures” will have a tremendous impact on the different class forces operating in the field today by breaking down the class structure of bourgeois thought, thereby creating the necessary pedagogical conditions for the development of revolutionary thought and a whole repertoire of practices capable of bringing people consciously into motion against this oppressive system (“Support Every Outbreak,” 1980). Does revolutionary critical pedagogy seem utopian? Only, as Peter McLaren reminds us, if we blindly or cynically accept as a matter of fact the rule of capitalism and its tyranny of exploitative relations that systematically deny human beings the full exercise of their creative capabilities and potential.

### ***Numero Uno: Dirty Thirty***

A period of economic crisis and political shocks such as the one unfolding now under the

corrupt Bush gang undermines the authority of bourgeois institutions. It is symptomatic of the present period that it opened with the bourgeois campaign to destroy the class struggle left wing within bourgeois institutions. Whilst working conditions are substantially different for academics, engaging in this kind of political work is not without its dangers. Without shopping for heroes, McLaren was recently attacked by Andrew Jones (a UCLA graduate and former UCLA Republican and research assistant to David Horowitz) and his right sympathizers who treat McLaren's writings as an anthrax-like deadly contagion that must not, under any circumstances, be inflicted on an unsuspecting populace, particularly students (Fassbinder, 2006; Younge, 2006). It is a sad fate for the United States when sporting a Che tattoo makes you a terrorist suspect alongside Muslims and Arabs who are perceived as evil, dangerous and second-class citizens. Refusing to accommodate and pander to the far-right fringe, McLaren's willingness to question authority and speak out in favour of socialism earned him the number one ranking on Jones' *Bruin Alumni Association Dirty Thirty List*, which gained international attention. Although McLaren's work is controversial and has made him a target of modern-day Communist witch-hunts he draws inner and collective strength from his international support network within the larger mass workers movement. What needs to be understood is that this McCarthyite-style campaign is part of a much larger drive by rightist forces linked to the state to drive the left out of universities by blacklisting professors considered "unpatriotic" ("As US Bombs," 2001; Jones, 2006). Recognizing that the ruling class will do anything to protect its privileges and profits, McLaren has denounced this current wave of right-wing repression in his discussions with workers, trade unionists and students in workplaces and communities both in the United States and around the world.

As the neo-liberal economy transforms the university into a corporation that reduces education to the status of an alienable commodity (intellectually and institutionally), McLaren is rare beacon of social conscience and left-wing political activism in a new dark age of totalitarianism, fascism and terrorism. As Trotsky (1939, 1940) noted, fascism and parliamentary democracy are merely two different ways to administer capitalism. From the point of view of capital, parliamentary democracy is the preferred way to regulate conflicts between different classes, groups and strata in society. However, adopted as a last grasp, fascism provides the state with a whole arsenal of weapons to suppress political dissent during a period of economic crisis. Although we cannot speak of fascism in the same way that Trotsky used the term, over the past couple of years we have witnessed the roll back of democratic rights and the emergence of the Homeland Security State, which adopts some aspects of fascism (anti-terrorist legislation, the development of electronic surveillance systems, National Identity Cards and the storing of biometric data about citizens) (McLaren & Martin, 2004). Always on the look out for internal and external enemies as a manifestation of its fear, the new totalitarianism that rules our world today is driven by imperialism and finance capital. Having entered a long and agonizing period of decline, imperialism, as the highest and most degenerate phase of capitalism, rules the world through the production of media images and projections of raw power, at the expense of the environment and millions of human and nonhuman lives. Here, capitalism no longer has a progressive role to play and is characterized by the hammer blows of fascism at home and military aggression abroad (McLaren & Martin, 2004).

Like Lenin, who never troubled himself with the etiquette of the salon (Trotsky, 1937), McLaren's razor-sharp lines cut through the decorum to expose the writhing mental and social effects of United States policies. Accordingly, McLaren pays special consideration to the role of

the bourgeois state in pursuing neo-liberal policies that aim to shore up the crisis of accumulation and declining rate of profit. Hopelessly addicted to the flow of capital, the bourgeoisie has flourished from the exploitation of the proletariat, as the boundaries between the “haves” and “have-nots” are reinscribed, especially along lines of “race” and gender. Acknowledging that class division in society is derived from the definitive economic relations which enable the exploiting class to appropriate the labour of the exploited, McLaren (cited in Pozo 2003) suggests that students and teachers ask the following question: “What is the maximum damage you can do to the rule of capital?”

Given that McLaren is not afraid to get his hands dirty, his recent work is informed by the Marxist-Humanist idea that says both philosophical theorizing and social activism should be dialectically intertwined. With regards to what he and Ramin Farahmandpur (1999a, 1999b, 2000) refer to as “praxis-orientated pedagogy,” they argue that reflection (and knowledge) arises from the struggle over contradictions that come up in the various realms of human practice (e.g., the gap between the American Dream and institutionalized racism). Of course, theory (as an idealized version of the world) must be tested against the experience of the mass movement and in the course of class struggle (Martin, 2005). In this sense, practice is not only the source of ideas and consciousness but also a criterion of the truth of an idea (Martin, Lisahunter & McLaren, 2006). That outrages are committed and that a reign of state terror persists means that there are going to be obstacles in the path of the workers struggle for understanding. With this in mind, the use of sophisticated and intellectually hard-won theories to consciously guide difficult and complicated class-struggle questions on strategy and tactics is central in the midst of capitalist decay on a whole scale.

***Debunking the Myth that there is No Alternative***



As McLaren has made clear in his recent political work, the current “War on Terrorism” signifies that the inherent contradictions of imperialism have now raised themselves in the form of the historic alternative of what Rosa Luxemburg referred to as “socialism or barbarism” (Martin, 2004). Just look at what has happened over the past five years as what Lenin referred to as “moribund capital” resorts to increasing state intervention and imperialist war to resolve the disruptions and crises that erupt from the falling rate of profit (Lenin, 1977). Amidst a sea of subaltern discontent, McLaren argues that as the contradictions of the imperialist system worldwide come to the fore, bringing forth spontaneous outbursts of protest and rebellion, opportunities for revolutionary work are opening up. Still, at a political level, it is hard to ignore the fact that despite recent developments such as the outpouring of protest against the war in Iraq, the present situation is not one characterized by vast numbers of people engaged in active debate and action against a social system, which is the cause of barbarity that is descending upon the entire planet. Depending upon the country, part of the problem is that symptomatic of capitalism’s degeneration, the ruling class and its supporting state apparatuses have created new networked command structures to crush, pulverize and atomize the consciousness of workers in a frantic bid to hold society in a state of equilibrium (Martin, 2004).

Despite such blows against the consciousness of the working class, McLaren argues that capitalism will not last forever (Martin, 2004). While it is easy to lose sight of hope in the face of capitalist authority, rather than view the current situation as static and bleak, McLaren urges us to see every outbreak of protest and rebellion as a training ground in preparation for revolutionary opportunities in the future. Faced with a new world situation, this will require tactical flexibility, both political and organizational. Clearly, there is a lot of debate about how to build revolutionary organizations and no blueprint or recipe exists. Although the time is not “ripe

for revolution” in the home-citadels of imperialism, we are living in a period of opportunity when the movement of the working class can learn from the rich experience of other countries and forces, particularly in oppressed capitalist countries in Asia, Latin America and Africa (Percy & Lorimer, 2001, p. 11). More work needs to be done to understand this, but the conditions leading up to revolutionary crisis in advanced capitalist countries are also being prepared for by the thousands of minor skirmishes and struggles engaged in today (Martin, 2005; Percy & Lorimer, 2001). For example, over a period of ten weeks in early 2006, youth and workers across France transformed mass mobilizations against the introduction of the “first job contract”-known as the CPE-a youth employment law that makes it legal for employers to sack workers under the age of 26 without notice or compensation, into an indefinite strike (Clancy, 2006; Smith, 2006).

The point here is not to fall prey to economism, pragmatism or sectarianism but to remain flexible and ready in any period to consciously intervene in class struggle, both ideologically and practically, by responding to the demands of various social movements for political and educational action, whether in small activities to establish neighborhood protest campaigns or in vast mobilizations to establish or re-establish internationalist organization (Martin, 2004). While the process of building socialism is not a straight line there are grounds for hope. Within the most visible social struggles to oppose capitalism, militant and leftward moving tendencies are developing and it is becoming increasingly clear that a new layer of radicalized activists is very interested in taking real steps toward left renewal/regroupment.

There is much that has not been said about McLaren’s work but I can say it is driven by a deep sense of passion, hope and revolutionary love. At the heart of these attitudes is a political approach to every aspect of McLaren’s work, which is part of a larger collective effort. As a

former student of McLaren, I can attest that he is never ashamed to make himself vulnerable and expose his heart socially. Perhaps it is for this reason that his revolutionary message is getting such a great response. For some strange reason, academics are supposed to adopt a cool and distant approach to their students yet I am grateful that McLaren was never sufficiently detached. Over the past eight years, I have felt his daily gestures of care as well as his great love for the planet's inhabitants, which are grounded in his supportive networks that provide unhampered opportunities for growth and solidarity. Here, McLaren operates within a collective framework, helping others to lead, encouraging his students to do their best, and taking pleasure and pride in the success and victories of other comrades and the mass workers movement as a whole. A hundred and fifty years ago, Marx gave revolutionary hope its lineage but he also wrote that ideas by themselves could not change society. Adopting a long view of history, McLaren's main argument is that destroying capitalism is more a matter of reconstituting our internal and social relations than it is a matter of propagating a particular set of ideas. Against the backdrop of an intolerable world that can only be described as a "war zone," fighting the outrages of ruling class will require a new relation between theory and practice (Hudis, 2003). More to the point, a revolutionary struggle that brings with it revolutionary love, will require academics to develop a more reflexive culture of orientating toward working class communities (Martin, 2005). In short, as right-wing attacks escalate to further enrich an increasingly isolated and tiny layer of the population, a critical pedagogy that is grounded in the material struggles and interests of the working class is both a humanitarian and revolutionary act.

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