

REVIEWS

Facing Capital Down with the Face of Critical Pedagogy

Capitalists and Conquerors: A Critical Pedagogy Against Empire, by Peter McLaren, 2005. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield. Pp. 351. ISBN 0-7425-4193-2 (pbk) £19.99.

Teaching Peter McLaren: Paths of Dissent, edited by Marc Pruyn and Luis M. Huerta-Charles, 2005. New York: Peter Lang. Pp. 206. ISBN 0-8204-6145-8 (pbk) £19.30.

More than a century and a half ago, Marx declared that the revolutionary project required neither forging blueprints for the future, nor bringing an end to history, but rather the 'relentless criticism of all existing conditions, relentless in the sense that the criticism is not afraid of its findings and just as little afraid of the conflict with the powers that be' (Marx, 1986, p. 41). However, as Peter McLaren declares in his latest book, *Capitalists and Conquerors* – a wide-ranging and confrontational collection of personal and collaborative essays concerned with disarming the rapaciousness of Bush-Cheney gang politics and staring down the illuminati gaze of transnational capital in all its myriad permutations – Marxism hardly passes as fashionable amongst today's US educational left (p. 30). Indeed, as one of the primary architects of North American critical pedagogy, McLaren is now left to surmise disturbingly that critical pedagogy itself has largely succumbed to faddish valorizations of 'difference', which often take the idealized and grotesque form of postmodern word-salads, or otherwise it has retreated in the post-9/11 era to the safe curricular territory of promoting versions of state-and-class sponsored exercises in critical thinking, multiculturalism and pluralist relativism (pp. 32-3).

In opposition to this trend, by charting what he terms (after Paula Allman) 'revolutionary critical pedagogy' (p. 57), McLaren bids 'farewell to all that' (p. 30) and instead seeks strategically to re-centre the sort of complex social class analyses in education that could link up with, support, and produce wider class struggle in its many varieties, as well as rigorously seek out the ways in which educational practices are presently structured, tamed and made to serve the interests of capitalists. Far from having been falsified by history, in an age of neoliberal globalization and imperialist expansionism

run amok, McLaren asserts that Marxist analysis has perhaps never been more timely, apt and necessary. This holds doubly true for educators if, as McLaren, Allman, and Glenn Rikowski suggest in their chapter, education is directly implicated in producing 'the single commodity – labor-power – on which the whole capitalist system rests' (p. 151).

By returning Marxist analysis to the work of critical pedagogy, education becomes transformed into a locally enacted, but internationally-aimed, liberatory project. McLaren believes that, through Marxist critical pedagogy, peoples' colonized subjectivities can become de-commodified through Freirean acts of 'problem posing'. These Freirean acts increase the possibility of re-imagining productions of social agency that are capable of moving beyond the overdetermining logic of the labour-capital relation (p. 143), and, by doing so, work for a radically democratic politics of collective humanization (p. 6), and overturn the Big Lies (p. 193) that seek to manipulate our everyday lives in a class-based society. Additionally, in what constitutes an important turn for critical pedagogy, in this book McLaren repeatedly addresses how ecological questions must be much more deeply integrated into both the means and ends of education if it is truly to represent a force capable of separating the human from capital in the promotion of justice.

Against current trends that have attempted to re-work critical pedagogy into little more than a student-centred methodology of 'I'm okay, you're okay' confessionals masked as dialogue sessions (p. 83), McLaren believes critical educators can only work as transformative change-agents if their pedagogy is extended beyond the *class* room to target 'the material basis of capitalist social relations' (p. 57), and that this requires the production of sociopolitical action in its students. In this way, revolutionary critical pedagogy distinguishes itself by being 'less informative and more performative' (p. 91), which means that it must begin 'walking the talk' by working with the oppressed communities it professes to serve towards mutually emancipatory aims (p. 92). However, while McLaren is ultimately concerned with developing a 'pedagogy of revolution' based in socialist struggle, he counsels that it must be prepared for and supplemented by a 'pedagogy of demystification' that is capable of identifying, denaturalizing and historicizing dominant sign systems, as well as a 'pedagogy of opposition' which can augment students' analyses of political systems and ideologies and assist them in the development of autonomous political positions (p. 59).

Equal parts riotous Bush-bash and deadly serious analysis of how a real progressive alternative to the business-as-usual of the 'homeland' can be brought about through education, McLaren's latest offering is itself probably more demystifying and oppositional than it is imminently revolutionary. Yet, as McLaren illustrates in the book's Postscript, as the root of the problem is not merely one man (that is, Bush), this suggests that neither can one person be its solution. Therefore, it is in the anti-war demonstrations, the picket lines and the work of social justice educators everywhere that the revolutionary spirit must be discovered (p. 336). But, he concludes, these are highly

reactionary times, so ‘it will be a long revolution’ (p. 337). Perhaps if everyone demonstrated the sort of moral outrage and commitment to peace and justice that McLaren himself has exemplified in body and text, it could be – if not shorter – less brutal.

In a short review such as this, only a cursory statement can be made about the new book, edited by Marc Pruyn and Luis M. Huerta-Charles, *Teaching Peter McLaren*, that assembles a notable and varied list of contributors to reflect upon McLaren’s wide influence as a leftist scholar over the last two decades. The book is the first in a series dedicated to addressing the pedagogies and work of major contemporary figures in academia who have not only played a significant role in the development of their disciplines but also offer bold visions for the future. Consisting of four sections – Introductions and Contexts, The Arc and Impact of McLaren’s Work, McLaren Across Contexts, and McLaren the Marxist – it provides a recommended and excellent introductory study in its summary of McLaren’s large corpus of work, its analyses of the connections between his current Marxism and his earlier self-professed ‘resistance postmodernism’, and its fruitful questioning of the ways in which his work is being received outside North America in places such as the United Kingdom and Latin America.

Though not meant to be a celebratory festschrift, the book does mix critical reflections on McLaren’s theoretical outpourings with a number of friendly and intimate narratives about McLaren as both educator and man. For example, in her Preface, Antonia Darder extols McLaren’s rare kindness, generosity and patience (p. xv). A few pages later, Pruyn names him ‘The Man with the Ché Tattoo’ (p. xvii), then goes on to describe the manner in which McLaren’s revolutionary body art and oppositional hipsterism played a role in leading Pruyn to become a radical professor in his own right. Relatedly, Alípo Casali and Ana Maria Araújo Freire comment in their chapter on McLaren’s synaesthetic nature and paint a picture of an academic figure that seems much more the highly individuated avant-garde artist than the ubiquitous sweater-vest scholar that haunts most campuses. ‘But it is impossible not to notice Peter in the middle of the crowd, much as it is impossible not to be completely drawn in by his image: the extravagance of his mode of dress, his dishevelled hair, his tattoos, his quick, sudden gestures, his attentive manner and luminous aura’, they write (p. 21). Those unfamiliar with McLaren’s oeuvre might mistake remarks such as these as a sort of memorial, but he is still very much alive and tremendously prolific – for instance, during the last year he has commemorated the opening of the Fundación McLaren de Pedagogía Crítica (founded in Mexico by scholars and activists influenced by his work), and produced no fewer than three other books for publication (see also: McLaren, et al., 2005; McLaren and Farahmanpur, 2005; and the co-edited Fischman, McLaren, Süinker and Lankshear, 2005).

Pruyn and Huerta-Charles’ book, however, is no mean exercise in idolatry. On the contrary, that the book conveys so much of its subject’s

personality is a unique strength that speaks to the living spirit of solidarity, love and friendship that is at the very heart of the critical pedagogy project, and which McLaren, perhaps more than any other educator in the field today, manages to put a face to and correlate with the countenance of revolutionary indignation that he directs at the rampant and needless suffering that pervades the present growth of global capitalism.

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