

Contesting Capital: Critical Pedagogy and Globalism A Response to Michael Apple

Peter McLaren
University of California, Los Angeles

Several paragraphs from this essay have been taken from "Critical pedagogy, postmodernism, and the retreat from class: Towards a contraband pedagogy" by Peter McLaren and Ramin Farahmandpur, in press, Theoria.

Michael Apple (this issue) offers a perceptive diagnosis of the newpower bloc committed to neo-liberal marketized solutions to educationalproblems. The power bloc is an alliance among authoritarian populistreligious fundamentalists, neo-conservative intellectuals, the professionallyoriented new middle class, and neo-liberal policy makers. Education has responded by creating objectives that reveal a new set of ideological commitments--or discursive regimes--linked to the imperatives of the Hayekian cult of the free market. These are bolstered by often flawed researchthat serves as a "rhetoric of justification for preconceived beliefs about the supposed efficacy of markets or regimes of tight accountability". The state experiences a crisis in legitimacy after dominant economic groups shift the blame for their decision onto its shoulders, and it, in turn,attempts to "export the crisis outside of itself". Apple argues that the conservative alliance that has effectively produced this "reconstruction of common sense" and through its restorational policies and projects, the increase in power of the dominant educational models (i.e., national standards, national curricula and national testing with a programmatic emphasis on efficiency, speed, and cost-control as distinct from substantive social and ethical issues related to social justice), has not been adequately grasped by many progressive educators, "including many writers on critical pedagogy". I could not agree with Apple more that writers in critical pedagogy, in focusing mainly on school organization and classroom techniques(i.e., surveillance and social control), have ignored the most crucial aspects of the problem: the "exogenous, socioeconomic features" of educational restructuring under global capitalism and its twin, neo-liberalism. Infact, it is a point that I have been trying to make for some time now (see McLaren,1995, 1997, 1998, McLaren et al., 1998) and in the brief remarks here I want to follow and emphasize this theme in the interest of creating what Apple calls a "counter-hegemonic alliance".

Undermining Social Agency

Having confuted the socialism and Marxian optic of the Eastern bloc nations with a triumphalist "end of history" mockery, capitalism has found its most exalted place in the pantheon of quintessential bourgeois virtues celebrated by the apostolate of that great factory of dreams known as "America". The 1944 Bretton Woods conference at the now-famous Mt. Washington Hotel in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, that created theWorld Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and shortly after, the GeneralAgreement of Tariffs and Trade, established the framework and political architecture necessary for the United States to acquire free access to the markets and raw materials of the Western Hemisphere, the Far East,and the British Empire (Korten, 1996).

The vision that emerged from this historic meeting laid the groundwork for the lurid transmogrification of the world economy into a global financial system overrun by speculators and "arbitrageurs" who act not in the interests of world peace and prosperity and the needs of real people, but for the cause of profit at any cost (Korten, 1996).

As the world's "mentor capitalist nation" the United States has not only become detached from the struggles of its wide-ranging communities, but betrays an aggressive disregard for them. Of course, capitalism has not brought about the "end of history" as the triumphalist discourse of neo-liberalism has announced. Historically, capitalism has not carried humankind closer to "the end of ideology" or "end of history." Rather, as Samir Amin (1996, 1997, 1998a, 1998b) comments, in spite of the hymns to the glory of capital, the violence of the system's real contradictions was driving history not to its end as announced in triumphalist belle époque proclamations, but to world wars, socialist revolutions, and the revolt of the colonized peoples. Re-established in post-First World War Europe, triumphant liberalism aggravated the chaos and paved the way for the illusionary, criminal response that fascism was to provide.

As social agents within a neo-liberal capitalist regime, one whose link between international competitive forces and neo-liberal state policy tightens as market forces gain strength (Moody, 1997), we lack substance. Capitalism's history appears to have written us out of the story, displacing human agency into the cabinet of lost memories. The world shrinks while difference swells into a forbidding colossus, bringing us face-to-face with all that is other to ourselves. Global capitalism has exfoliated the branches of history, laying bare its riot of tangled possibilities, and hacking away at those roots that nourish a socialist latency. As capital reconstitutes itself á discrétion, as traditionally secure factory work is replaced by the feckless insecurity of McJobs, as the disadvantaged are cast about in the icy wind of world commodity price fluctuations, as the comprador elite expands its powerbase in the financial precincts of the postmodern necropolis, and as the White House redecorates itself in the form-fits-function architecture of neo-liberalism, capitalist hegemony digs its bony talons into the structure of subjectivity itself.

Communications networks--the electronic servo-mechanisms of the state--with their propulsions and fluxes of information that have grown apace with capitalism, make this hegemony not only a tenebrous possibility but also an inevitability as they ideologically secure forms of exploitation so furious that every vulnerability of the masses is seized and made over into a crisis. Neo-liberalism is not simply an abstract term without a literal referent. The current corporate downsizing, outsourcing, deregulation, and the poverty it has left in its wake is neo-liberalism in flagrante delicto. Look at the faces of the men and women who line up for food stamps in South Central and East Los Angeles, the slumped shoulders of the workers lining up at the gates of the malquiladores in Juarez, Mexico, and the wounded smiles of children juggling tennis balls, breathing fire, and washing car windows in the midst of a traffic jam in Mexico City, and you will have come face-to-face with the destructive power of neo-liberalism.

Colonizing Workers

The intensification of international competition among multinational corporations under the flagship of neo-liberal economic policies has the threatening tendency of colonizing

everyday life. It has created conditions in which declining living standards and increasing wage inequalities between the poor and the wealthy have become the norm. The new global economy is regulated by the growing service and retail industry, which relies significantly on the exploitation of unskilled immigrant labor in the Western industrial nations and workers in Third World countries. As a means of decreasing production costs, manufacturing jobs are exported abroad to Third World developing countries where a combination of cheap labor markets and weak labor unions create a ripe mixture for a massive accumulation of capital in a frictionless, deregulated industrial milieu. The "K-Marting of the labor force" has yielded unprecedented record profitability for transnational corporations, especially in Third World countries where a combination of cheap labor markets and weak unions has created extremely ripe conditions for economic exploitation of the working-class (Zukin, 1991). Kim Moody (1997) reminds us that today's transnational corporations "are clearly predators waging class war to expand their world-wide empires and restore the legendary profit-rates of decades ago" (p. 287).

The replacement of the United States manufacturing industry by low wage employment in the service and retail industry has contributed in no insignificant way to the increasing social and economic inequalities. Much of the recent evisceration of social programs and the vicious assaults against trade unions by the neo-liberal comprador elite can be traced to the 1980s, when the capitalist class was given a dose of corporate Viagra through massive deregulation policies. According to Robert Brenner (1998):

Capitalists and the wealthy accumulated wealth with such success during the 1980s largely because the state intervened directly to place money in their hands--enabling them to profit from their own business failure through lucrative bailouts, offering them massive tax breaks which played no small part in the recovery of corporate balance sheets, and providing them with an unprecedented array of other politically constituted opportunities to get richer faster through fiscal, monetary, and deregulation policies--all at the expense of the great mass of the population (p. 207).

Of course, after the initial surge, the economy went flaccid, which put lie to the myth of deregulation. Brenner (1998) remarks:

If, after more than two decades of wage-cutting, tax-cutting, reductions in the growth of social expenditure, deregulation and 'sound finance,' the ever less fettered 'free market' economy is unable to perform half as well as in the 1960s, there might be some reason to question the dogma that the freer the market, the better the economic performance (p. 238).

Moody (1997) reports that at a global level we are witnessing the production of a transnational working-class. He warns that "the division of labor in the production of the world's wealth is more truly international than at any time" (p. 308). In tandem with these economic shifts has been the unceasing virulence of neo-liberal attacks against social programs, educational opportunities, and the civil rights of working class women and minorities. The globalization of national economies--something that is not really new, but as old as capitalism itself (see Marx, 1977)--through deregulation, free marketization, and privatization has become an open door policy to the unrestricted

movement of finance capital from national to international markets, creating flexible arrangements suitable for capitalist exploitation. As globalization has dramatically intensified over the last several decades, its lack of an ethical foundation or warrant has never been so apparent. Michael Parenti(1998) writes:

Capitalism is a system without a soul, without humanity. It tries to reduce every human activity to market profitability. It has no loyalty to democracy, family values, culture, Judeo-Christian ethics, ordinary folks, or any of the other shibboleths mouthed by its public relations representatives on special occasions. It has no loyalty to any nation; its only loyalty is to its own system of capital accumulation. It is not dedicated to "serving the community"; it serves only itself, extracting all it can from the many so that it might give all it can to the few (pp.84-85).

Marxism or Eclecticism?

Over the last several decades the social, economic, and political metamorphoses in Western industrial nations and developing Third World countries have culminated in an increasing interest in Marxist social theory within various critical traditions of educational scholarship. Among educational scholars there has been a growing interest in melding various strands of postmodern social theory with elements of Marxist theory, a project that would be too otiose to summarize here. However, many theorists who straddle the postmodernist-Marxist divide have failed to formulate a sustained and convincing critique of the prevailing social and economic inequalities within advanced Western industrial capitalist nations. While some critical educators are rediscovering Marxism, recognizing its rich historical and theoretical contribution to social theory and acknowledging its invaluable insights into the role of schooling in the unequal distribution of skills, knowledge, and power in society, others are riding the fashionable currents of the postmodern soi-disant Quartier Latin (see McLaren,1995, 1997). As a result, too often such attempts have witnessed social relations of production becoming buried in the synergistic swirl of theoretical eclecticism.

I believe that it is an urgent task to locate educational theory more securely within a Marxist problematic than we have done in the past. We must explain in more convincing fashion, the dynamic mechanisms that ensure the production and reproduction of capitalist social and economic relations, as well as unravel the complex ways in which schools participate in the asymmetrical distribution of technical knowledge and skills. This is not an argument against eclecticism per se, but a cautionary reminder that much conceptual ground already covered gets lost in the laboratory of theory when trying to meld models into some grand synthesis in an attempt to reveal what has been hidden.

Why should educators bother to engage the legacies of Marx, especially now that the "end of history" has been declared? Especially, too, when broadside condemnations of Marxism abound uncontested? And why now, at a time when the marketplace has transformed itself into a deus ex machina ordained to rescue humankind from economic disaster and when voguish theories imported from France and Germany can abundantly supply North American radicals with veritable plantations of no-risk, no-fault, fashionable apostasy? One reason is that capitalism's Faustian urge to dominate the globe has generated a global ecological crisis. Another obvious but no less important reason is that the economic comfort enjoyed by North Americans is directly linked to the

poverty of our South American brothers and sisters. As Elvia Alvarado proclaims in *Don't Be Afraid Gringo* (1987), "It's hard to think of change taking place in Central America without there first being changes in the United States. As we say in Honduras, 'Sin el perro, no hay rabia' -- without the dog, there wouldn't be rabies" (p. 144). Yet another reason is that Che Guevara and Paulo Freire have given us a pedagogical course of action (not to be confused with a blueprint) fortaking bold steps to redress locally and globally current asymmetrical relations of power and privilege (McLaren, in press). But no one can deny that the climate for such an undertaking is not favorable. The advance of critical pedagogy within the current historical juncture appears to have reached an unresolvable impasse, at least within the United States. Stanley Aronowitz (1998) captures the ethos of the current "dark times" in the following passage:

These are dark times for education innovation and its protagonists. In schools and universities "reactionaries" (as Paulo Freire calls them) have all but overwhelmed the "progressives." Their agenda to construe the very concept of education as training dominates schooling in public universities and is steadily gaining ground in private institutions as well. During the last decade, schools that insisted on their difference committed an unholy violation of the new common sense that the highest mission and overriding purpose of schooling was to prepare students, at different levels, to take their places in the corporate order. The banking or transmission theory of school knowledge, which Freire identified more than thirty years ago as the culprit standing in the way of critical consciousness, has returned with a vengeance (p. 4).

The issue of whether a culturalist or an economist perspective prevails today in critical pedagogy is a nagging one, but essentially presents us with a false dichotomy. Individuals and groups live class relations through difference (i.e., as raced and gendered experiences), and live difference through class relations. Identity, difference and class are mutually informing relations. Class relations embody all kinds of differences that have been historically organized and structurally determined by imperialist and colonialist economies of privilege. The question is: How are differences mediated through the social contradictions of class formations and vice versa? This suggests that we examine the institutional and structural aspects of difference as they have been produced historically out of the contradictions of capitalist social practices. We can do this only if we examine how the production of gendered and racialized identities are shaped by the totality of social relations of production. That is, how can we read off in a dialectical manner particular formations and expressions of difference against the overarching and complex organization, networks, and mutually informing relationships that at different levels and in different modalities constitute global capitalist relations? This is one of the questions that currently faces the educational left.

Revolutionary Pedagogy

Part of the task before us is exegetical; it means recognizing and researching the distinctions among teaching, pedagogy, critical pedagogy, and revolutionary pedagogy. Part of the task is ethical: to make liberation and the abolition of human suffering the goal of the educative enterprise itself. Part of the task is political: to create a democratic socialist society in which democracy will be called upon daily to live up to its promise. Now is the time to brush hard against the grain of teaching until the full range of revolutionary pedagogical options are made available in the public schools of the nation,

realizing that none of these options is a panacea, and all of them will require sustained theoretical and political engagement.

A revolutionary pedagogy resists those immaculate discourses and representations of United States history, culture, and politics that too often make their way into the classroom of the nation. Such representations fail to accommodate the opaque and contradictory social forces and relations that inform United States culture and society and in so doing ignore the heterogeneity of insurgent struggles that have challenged-- and continue to challenge-- its imperial worldview and practices. A revolutionary pedagogy names and gives voice to those non-participants in the colonial encounter who refuse to work as adjuncts for global capitalism's consumerist ideology. Further, revolutionary educators refuse the role that global capitalism has assigned for them: to become the supplicants of corporate America and work at the behest of the corporate bottom line. Revolutionary educators contest the growing assaults on protections for the poor, for women, and for people of color, such as the attacks on affirmative action, immigration, and language rights that we have witnessed in California over recent years. These attacks have become well-nigh irresistible for politicians and education officials only too willing to genuflect at the corporate altar sanctified by reactionary conservative ideology. A revolutionary pedagogy challenges the assumptions that underlay the ideological strata upon which both conservative and progressive schooling has been built and attempts to refashion a politics in which market reality yields to the larger universal values of social democracy that both Che and Freire so forcefully advocated. While business leaders continue to serve as functionaries and cheerleaders for privatization, and as capitalism continues to crash all around us, collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions, the ideas and ideals of Che and Freire constitute bold and heretical strokes in the ongoing struggle of fashioning human freedom out of the debris of collapsed dreams (McLaren, in press).

The short-sightedness, mendacity, and bloodlessness of corporate-backed policies for educational reform in this current age of cynical reason cannot be overestimated. It is important that revolutionary educators resist those pundits who would police the poles of debate on education and disabuse educators of the notion that real educational reform requires social transformation, not merely reformation. The kind of pedagogy necessary to challenge the type of marketization of education of which Apple speaks will require what I have provisionally called the development of a "revolutionary pedagogy" (McLaren, 1998). Such a pedagogy is distinct from what criticalists have referred to as critical pedagogy.

Teaching is a process of organizing and integrating knowledge for the purpose of communicating this knowledge or awareness to students through an 'exchange' of understanding in pre-specified contexts and teacher/learner environments. Pedagogy is distinct from teaching in that it situates the teacher/learner encounter in a wider context of historical and socio-political forces in which the "act of knowing" recognizes and takes into account the differentiated politics of "reception" surrounding the object of knowledge by the students. Critical pedagogy constitutes a dialectical and dialogical process that instantiates a reciprocal exchange between teachers and students which engages in the task of re-framing, re-functioning, and re-posing the question of understanding itself, bringing into dialectical relief the structural and relational

dimensions of knowledge and its hydra-headed power/knowledge dimensions. Revolutionary pedagogy goes further still. It puts power/knowledge relations on a collision course with its own internal contradictions. Such a powerful and often unbearable collision gives birth not to an epistemological resolution at a higher level, but rather 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 which 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 and reconstructed, that is, in which subjectivity turns-back-on-itself, giving rise both to an affirmation of the world through naming it, and an opposition to the world through unmasking and undoing the practices of concealment that are latent in the process of naming itself.

In their best moments, the pedagogy of Paulo Freire and Che Guevara exemplifies the characteristics of revolutionary pedagogy. The point d'appui of revolutionary pedagogy for both these men was the development of a dialectical grasp of history and the contradictions of human labor under capitalism--and for those of us working in education this means recognizing and transforming those contradictions that create asymmetries of power in the manufacturing of relations of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Both these revolutionaries did not equate political liberation with the exposure of dominative social practices as a *trompe-l'oeil*, nor did they consider it sufficient to bewail the trials and tribulations of the dispossessed; they were both dedicated to transforming those social practices that lay at the root of human exploitation and misery (McLaren, in press).

Any pedagogy that is interested in making progress against the marketization of education of which Michael Apple speaks needs to move beyond bourgeois liberal reformism and towards a revolutionary transformation of existing social relations of exploitation. Today's social order is too dysfunctional, too poisoned by possessive individualism and a possessive investment in racial superiority, too ravaged by capitalism, too overwhelmed by the "metabolic interaction" of human technological relations, too burdened by dreams of consumer utopias, for educators to do anything less than work towards a socialist society free from what Marx called the "mephitic and pestilential breath of civilization" (p. 16).

References

Alvarado, E. (1987). *Don't be afraid Gringo: A Honduran woman speaks from the heart*. Translated and edited by Medea Benjamin. New York: Harper and Row.

Amin, S. (1998a). Spectres of capitalism. *Monthly Review*, 50(1), 36-39.

Amin, S. (1998b). *Spectres of capitalism: A critique of current intellectual fashions*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

- Amin, S. (1997). *Capitalism in the age of globalization*. London: Zed Books, Ltd.
- Amin, S. (1996). Imperialism and culturalism compliment each other. *Monthly Review*, 48(2), 1-11.
- Brenner, R. (1998). The economics of global turbulence. *New Left Review*, 229, 1-264.
- Foster, J. B. (1998). Revisiting the communist manifesto. *Against the Current*, 12(6), 15-16.
- Korten, D. C. (1996). The mystic victory of market capitalism. In J. Mander & E. Goldsmith (Eds.), *The case against the global economy and a turn toward the local* (pp. 183-191). San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.
- Marx, K. (1977). *Capital*. (vol. 1). New York: Vintage Books.
- McLaren, P. (in press). *Che Guevara and Paulo Freire: An introduction to the pedagogy of revolution*. Boulder, Colorado: Rowman & Littlefield.
- McLaren, P. (1998). Revolutionary pedagogy in post-revolutionary times: Rethinking the political economy of critical education. *Educational Theory*, 48(4), 431-462.
- McLaren, P. (1997). *Revolutionary multiculturalism: Pedagogies of dissent for the new millennium*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- McLaren, P. (1995). *Critical pedagogy and predatory culture: Oppositional politics in a postmodern era*. London and New York: Routledge.
- McLaren, P., Fischman, G., Serra, S., and Antelo, E. (1998). The specters of Gramsci: Revolutionary praxis and the committed intellectual. *Journal of Thought*, 33(3): 9-41.
- Moody, K. (1997). *Workers in a lean world: Unionism in the international economy*. London: VersoBooks.
- Parenti, M. (1998). *America besieged*. San Francisco: City Lights Books.
- Zukin, S. (1991). *Landscapes of power: From Detroit to Disneyland*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.