

Book Review: *Pedagogy of Insurrection*, by Peter McLaren. 2015. Publisher: Peter Lang.

McLaren's Pedagogy of Insurrection and the Global Murder Machine in Education in 'Austerity Ireland'

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Abstract

*In this article, I review central concepts and ideas in the theoretical framework for education and democracy presented in McLaren's (2015) *Pedagogy of Insurrection* against a backdrop and global policy context of competitive individualism in education and the contemporary framing of democracy as participatory democracy for compliance within a fixed and immutable social and political order (McLaren, 2015). The framework is then briefly used to conduct a critical overview of a policy matrix of reforms in education and teacher education in 'Austerity Ireland' since 2011. The review draws from Pádraig Pearse's seminal essay in 1916, *The Murder Machine*, an essay about the loss of soul in an Irish education system under British colonial rule – a deficit schooling system designed for machine efficiency (Pearse, 1976). Pearse is a renowned Irish national hero, school master, poet and signatory of the Proclamation for Irish Freedom in 1916, whose memory is evoked as Ireland celebrates its 100th anniversary of nationhood in 2016. McLaren's (2015) *Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy* framework is a powerful explanatory framework to make meaning of the rapid policy changes in education in 'Austerity Ireland' and to understand the contemporary economic colonisation of education for a new type of neutered democracy bereft of discursive struggle and critical thinking in public spaces and education's role as a moral and political shaper of societal change for democracy, human emancipation and equity.*

Keywords: book review, McLaren's (2015) *Pedagogy of Insurrection*, Pearse's *The Murder Machine*, education, democracy, critical analysis, discourse, compliance, Ireland

Introduction

Education is that which intrudes upon our instincts and instruments of mind and augments them; it pushes us along the arcs of the stars where our thoughts can give rise to new vistas of being and becoming and to new solidarities with our fellow humans and non-humans alike. Our responsibilities for creating critical citizens should be proportional to our privilege. Today a good education is no longer seen as a social responsibility but as picking carefully from an array of consumer choices provided by a number of new gluttonous companies and corporations (McLaren, 2015, p.139).

Hard-hitting books in the field of education that deal in an honest and holistic way with the topic of education and democracy for human emancipation and social change are rare to find in a world obsessed with education of the young person as a competitive individual, a compliant citizen and a unit of labour for a global precariat workforce. So reading *Pedagogy of Insurrection* by Peter McLaren, published in the US in 2015 by Peter Lang Publishers, was a thought provoking, uncomfortable and challenging and a truly inspiring read. McLaren's book is passionate, poetic and full of justified rage for the contemporary colonisation of education and democracy by a new transnational global capitalism that demands that politics and the media effectively silence and stage manage nation states as units of new quality management for individual and national economic success. Bakan (2004) in his exposé on the Corporation, and its pathological pursuit of profit and power, shows how transnational corporations not only require governments to obsessively serve wealthy elites, but will shortly have a legal mandate through new transnational trade agreements to punish governments that dare to transgress.

McLaren's contact with and respect for Paulo Freire (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*) is obvious and his *Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy* continues the *conscientization* work of liberation theology begun by Freire (1998), through his identification with the oppressed and the central place of social class in education and democracy for equity. In McLaren's *Pedagogy of Insurrection* the writing is eloquent, rich in metaphor and strong in condemnation. The message is profound and the dissection of the invasion of the field of education by corporate interests gets to the heart of the problem: the social and political order in the western world has been overtaken by radical capitalism and an ideology of moral conservatism that is a law unto itself as it simultaneously advances the destruction of humankind and the planet. The thought of fifteen nation states in the skies over Syria bombing an invisible enemy is testament to the global loss of humanity and the abundance of fiscal resources for state aggression. In a similar way, *Corporate Law* was never established to serve public interest values and the common good. Its only justifiable goal is the pursuit of profit for shareholders. If it appears to do some good it is never for altruistic reasons. It furthers its own self-interest and generates good public relations to feed a consumerist agenda.

Critical scholars and educators seek not only to understand the world in order to interpret it but to change the world for the betterment of humanity. So how does McLaren's book help us understand what is happening in Europe and Ireland at this time, and what of the call to action for the future of humanity and the planet? The book connects with *Critical Rage Pedagogy* and the need for constructive and collective rage at the injustices of the contemporary social and political world order, the need for a new global stream of consciousness and what McLaren describes as a 'long Ginsbergian Howl'. The facts speak for themselves. After fifteen years of a global policy of chasing excellence and education of the individual we have ended up with a Europe of mass unemployment, precarious employment, a refugee crises of unimaginable scale and the majority of citizens living daily lives within a climate of fear and austerity measures, while the top 1% have absconded with 50% of the world's wealth. Not to mention a global war on terror that demonstrates an uncritical and uncaring political leadership.

McLaren (2015) explains that corporations came to their new position of global dominance where they removed protective laws across the globe in the mid-1990s that held a firewall between the corporate and the investment bank. This allowed bankers and brokers to gamble vast sums of money and, when things went horribly wrong as they did in the Global Recession of 2008, they were able to dump private debt directly onto governments and citizens. Nowadays, transnational corporations operate similar to Frankenstein who has come off his chains, running amok and laying waste to everything that stands in their path. Neoliberalism, as an economic policy and ideology is not that difficult to understand. It has only two or three operating principles - competition is always better than cooperation, private services are always better than public services and a crisis is a golden opportunity to diminish and dismantle the welfare state.

Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy: a theoretical framework for radical social change

McLaren's (2015) theoretical framework in *Pedagogy of Insurrection* is a confluence of moral and political philosophy, economic studies, and liberation theology that speaks to radical critical pedagogy, education and radical democracy. The main concepts and ideas in this *Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy* framework (McLaren, 2015) position and interpret the social and political world order of education for radical democracy, human emancipation, diversity and equity. The framework is not advanced as being about education and democracy through making incremental changes within a gentle framing of classical liberation theory. Instead, it is about radical and revolutionary change in the context of an unjust and (de)humanised global social and political world order.

McLaren's (2015) passionate manifesto for radical education and radical democracy and, schooling's moral and intellectual purpose to change society, is advanced as a coherent philosophical argument, justified rage and critical thinking that calls on multiple contradictory and strangely compatible sources. McLaren draws from sacred scripture and moral philosophy, such as, the writings of Jesus, Christian communitarianism, the concept of 'conscientization' by Freire (1998) and spirituality for the soul of education and seeking a higher purpose; from Marxist secular humanism and Marx's understanding of the means of production as the determining factor – nowadays seen in what I describe as a new *Global Murder Machine* in the colonisation by transnational corporations of governments, civil society and the media – the ruling class and proletariat defined by Marx has nowadays become a ruling elite and a precariat workforce burdened by debt and being perpetually on task while under constant surveillance; from critical pedagogy scholars in the academy, such as, Giroux (2015); and from inspirational political activist and revolutionary leaders, such as, Che Guevara, who identified and struggled with the oppressed for human rights, recognition and distribution, and, for example, by the story of democratisation of the workplace by the government of President Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in 1998.

The theme of education and democracy as personal relationship speaks to the journey of becoming a person and McLaren (2015) displays a profound understanding of the inner and outer worlds in this regard and the intensely spiritual dimension of education and teaching, with space for being, becoming and becoming more than. The spiritual and moral purposes of education have been written about by several Irish philosophers. Hogan (2003) speaks to the heartwork of educational practice and the power of the educator to influence with honour. Hederman (2012) in his treatise on education as personal relationship speaks to the delicate amalgam of personal relationship, higher purpose, cherishing and challenge needed in the intellectual, moral and mysterious spiritual and heartwork of teaching. O'Donohue (1997) in a seminal text on Celtic Spirituality *Anam Cara* uses a Hegelian dialectic of personal emancipation and invites the reader to resist seeking to subject everything of value, including education and teaching, to the logic of rationalism and its denial of mystery, aesthetic and creative possibility and invisible pedagogy.

McLaren's standpoint of education and radical democracy is discursively positioned within a deep understanding of social justice and oppression based on social class and is a challenging feminist discourse that speaks to dignity and respect for people and the enactment of a discourse that is anti-sexist, anti-racist and pro-democracy.

Educational Policy Reform in 'Austerity Ireland' 2011-2015

After the Great Recession of 2008, Ireland's economic system collapsed and required an international financial bailout from the *International Monetary Fund (IMF)*, *European Central Bank (ECB)* and the *European Union (EU)*. 'Austerity Ireland' was born and started to implement reforms that effectively started to dismantle the social welfare system and diminish all public services. From 2011 to date, there is evidence of increasing child poverty, homelessness, and cuts to guidance supports in schools. At the same time, there is evidence in OECD policy documents and elsewhere of the increasing super wealth of a small elite coupled with increasing exchequer returns, all challenging any view of Irish public policy as concerned with the common good and public-interest values of a fair and just society (Lynch et al., 2012; Mooney Simmie, 2012, 2014).

The ideological governing forms of education and teacher education in Ireland, from 1831 to contemporary times, display a complex interplay between religion, paradigms, power and cultural politics and have resisted a secular conception of church state separation (O'Buachalla, 1988; O'Sullivan, 2005). The church has retained a dominant position, over a long historical timeline, as a Catholic (Christian) communitarianism that seeks social justice and the common good based on the touchstone of Catholic social teaching as distinct from a touchstone of democracy and the public good. By the turn of the twentieth century, when Ireland was under British colonial rule, a new spirit of patriotism and irrepressible national pride developed. By 1916, the year of the Easter Rising and forerunner of Irish independence in 1921, there was a strongly felt cultural script that the soul of education needed to be reclaimed from a British

schooling machinery, which was perceived as rapidly diminishing all things distinctly Irish, especially religion and language, with machine efficiency.

Nowhere is this better articulated than in *The Murder Machine and other essays* written by the patriot and national hero, Padraic H. Pearse (Pearse, 1976). Pearse lamented the machine approach taken to life in schools within a bureaucratic and technical system that held ‘payment by results’ as a guiding mantra. Over a century later, this seminal essay in education needs to be re-visited by educationalists and theorists and anyone concerned with the shaping of contemporary education as a clinical practice of competence for visible learning, quality control and customer satisfaction.

In ‘Austerity Ireland’, a public policy of austerity is enacted on a number of different fronts: first, as a policy of inaction in the face of multiple crises of human suffering and inequality – including the loss of a generation of young Irish people to emigration, second, a policy plan that speaks more to a managerial discourse of compliance rather than opening a debate about the principles required for a new Ireland and third, a matrix of rapid policy reforms in the field of education that have (re)conceptualised former notions of education and teaching as a clinical practice of hard evidence, technical competence, data flows and self-regulation for lifelong learning (Teaching Council 2011a,b, 2015) within a narrow reductionist discourse of visible learning, training, coaching and quality assurance.

From 2011 to date, McLaren’s (2015) conception of the colonisation of governments by the dominant needs of transnational corporations play out on a daily basis in ‘Austerity Ireland’ operating under stringent EU regulations and the seeking of Foreign Direct Investment as it punitively deals with civil society. Citizens, particularly those from lower social classes, are regularly imprisoned for relatively minor public order offences, such as, failure to pay a television license, while there are little or no public prosecutions, mostly in-camera public hearings and a plethora of government reports, for major fraudulent transgressions by a golden circle of builders, speculators and bankers.

It is within this national background policy and context that an avalanche of reforms in education was introduced between 2011 and 2015 (Table 1.1). A combination of OECD PISA obligations, international policy borrowing and national policies of austerity all combined to reconfigure education within new ideological governance forms of scientific rationalism and moral conservatism, new modes of public accountability and legal enforcement. In the classroom and school there is no time or public space allowed for personal relationship, for being, for the aesthetic or for any concept of teaching for radical social change or productive and aesthetic possibility. Instead, the state inspector is required to behave as an enforcer, no longer engaging in authentic dialogue with thinking professionals at the school, and instead tasked with counting and gathering documented evidence that prescribed instruction and prescriptive dispositions are proceeding with machine efficiency. National statistics show that middle class young people

achieve high completion rates, and increasing access to higher education, while young people who are vulnerable or disadvantaged consistently underperform (HEA, 2012).

Table 1.1 Policy reforms in education and teacher education between 2011 and 2015.

Year	Reform	Mandated Change
2011a	Teaching Council <i>Policy on Teacher Education as a Continuum</i>	Teachers discursively positioned as lifelong learners and teacher's life divided using stage theory into: initial, induction and in-career stages
2011b	Teaching Council <i>Guidelines for Criteria for Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) as Initial Teacher Education Providers</i>	Nation policy changing the content, purpose, focus and duration of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) for higher education institutes as providers of a state service rather than knowledge academies within a simplistic conceptualisation of a linear rational input- output machine model
2012	Sahlberg 2012 <i>Report on Initial Teacher Education</i> Department of Education & Skills	National strategic policy document to amalgamate 19 HEIs to six centres of excellence within an ethic and language of the marketplace as quality assurance
2013	Quinn (2013)	Minister for Education explains the rationale of education as one of public accountability to the taxpayer - commodity for individual competitive achievement within an ethic of the market place
2014	<i>Junior Certificate School Programme</i> Mooney Simmie 2014	Reduction of the place of national state examinations in lower secondary education in favour of opening new markets and competition between schools, new school-based assessment with teaching for formative assessment of individuals using a system of moderation based on layers of bureaucracy and training of trainers with new modes of surveillance and public accountability
2014	<i>Forum Report on Patronage and Pluralism</i>	The Form reports a finding that children and young people have a right to an education that is not faith based. No plan to implement findings.
2015	Teaching Council <i>Cosán Draft Framework for Teacher Learning</i>	Discursively positions teachers as individual learners continually needing to self-regulate and to present hard evidence and data to prove their compliance and competence, within a clinical framing of teaching for a task-focused individual learner and quality assurance

Teachers' lifelong learning has become tied to continuing registration, remuneration and perpetual relays of hard evidence (Quinn 2013; Teaching Council, 2011a,b, Teaching Council 2015). Teachers are mandated responsibility for the development of responsible citizens, countering bullying in schools, dealing with special educational needs and inclusion, within substantially diminished resources and a governance mode of New Quality Management. A reform in lower secondary education (*junior cycle*) is underway, despite teacher union opposition, that will reduce the role of state examinations in place of school-based assessment, enacted through a complex matrix of functional training, moderation and surveillance strategies that will open new competitive markets between what are publicly-aided schools in a free education scheme, and will result in a substantive intensification of teachers' work practices similar to reforms implemented in Brazil, Sweden and the US (Mooney Simmie, 2014).

In line with developments elsewhere in Europe, and interest in the mediating role of religion for social and political stability, a debate has begun in relation to diversity issues and the need to cater for the needs of students and their parents (*European Commission*, 2011). 'Austerity Ireland' is predominantly a non-secular state that has only recently experienced a growing secularization of the population, and where the ethos and characteristic spirit of all schools and church (mostly Catholic) owned denominational schools - approximately 90% of primary (national) schools and a high percentage of second-level schools in the free education system - is legally protected (Education Act, 1998). *The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector* examined this diversity issue, from both a religious and Irish language perspective (Coolahan et al., 2012). The report has not been enacted to date and there is evidence of increasing tension between church and state in this regard (The Irish Times, 28 November 2015).

While teachers have been given full (political) responsibility for ensuring inclusive practices and participatory democracy, the way this is comprehended and grasped appears to have radically changed. The change suggests a subordination of the moral and political discourse of teaching for civic virtues and public-interest values in favor of a new scientific rationalism and moral conservatism that speaks to competence, prescriptive values and hard evidence for visible learning. The critical question, emerging from McLaren's (2015) framework, is how 'Austerity Ireland's political processes in education will resist or conform to relentless European pressure for a new competitive public education and, a neutered democracy that demands compliance. This is the heartless face of a soft totalitarianism described in McLaren's book with a searing political accuracy that urgently seeks a new way of doing schooling and society.

Discussion and Conclusion

Today, politics and by implication public education and democracy is shaped not as a struggle for radical democracy and equity but rather as a regime of compliance for the creation of rugged individuals for a *Global Murder Machine* of education and democracy. The role of government in relation to public services, such as, education appears to be more about opening new markets

for private entrepreneurs than it is about securing the common good and public interest values. This neoliberal and neoconservative ideology has serious consequences. Education has come to be regarded as little more than a commodity, an exercise in finding the brightest and the best for an insatiable and aggressive *Global Murder Machine* called the competitive economy. In this machine view, teachers are tasked with squeezing successful outcomes from each individual student. While social interaction is necessary it is constructed within a functional calculus, keeping the young person and their teachers on a perpetual conveyor belt of productivity and compliance.

The central message of McLaren (2015) book is clear, the existing social and political order of radical capitalism acting as Frankenstein off its chains is too voracious a feeder and psychopathic exploiter of the human spirit for civil society to find a way within existing structures to give this new version of capitalism a human face. The political system is deluded if it thinks it can ever tame this shrew. Instead people need to stand in solidarity and use a collective constructive rage to engage in the necessary discursive struggle for the creation of a democratic and equitable world order. McLaren's *Pedagogy of Insurrection* reminds us that the heart of education is always about personal relationship and pedagogy of spirit in preference to any scientism of techné or moral absolutism. His book is a valuable theoretical framework to reclaim the moral and political, spiritual and intellectual purposes of education and radical democracy in the face of unrelenting pressure from a runaway world.

*This book review of **Pedagogy of Insurrection** by Peter McLaren, published in 2015 by Peter Lang Publishers is written by Geraldine Mooney Simmie PhD. Geraldine lectures on education policy studies to the Structured PhD in Education students at the Faculty of Education and Health Sciences, University of Limerick. Geraldine's research interests are Critical Studies in Education and Teacher Education, including Productive Mentoring, Radical Democratic School University Partnerships and What's Worth Aiming For in Curriculum Innovation. Geraldine is actively involved with citizen lobby groups and contributes to public policy debates in Irish television and newspapers.*

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