

**Samuel Day Fassbinder - Book Review: Peter McLaren (2014) *Life in Schools*. 6th edition.
Boulder CO: Paradigm**

Samuel Day Fassbinder

DeVry University Online, USA

The project engaged by this, the revised sixth edition of *Life in Schools*, is the same as the object of the previous editions of the book, all the way back to the first edition (1989). Revision is always a good thing – it suggests that a text is being redone to meet the needs of a changed audience, and implies the possibility of further future revisions. The purpose of *Life in Schools*, from its beginnings, is to take the teacher narrative that was in the earlier (1980) book *Cries from the Corridor*, and fashion an introductory textbook of revolutionary critical pedagogy around it, perhaps for a college-level course on the topic.

The project, in this author’s opinion, is doable – though instructors willing to take on the topic of “revolutionary critical pedagogy” might wish to import supplementary materials to make it work, as I suggest below.

In my opinion this is the most enjoyable of the six editions produced so far. Of the volumes produced so far, its personal approach and its consolidation of introductory topics is more fittingly addressed to its intended audience of introductory textbook readers – so, for instance, part one of the Third Edition (1998) is titled “The Illusion of Education in an Age of Decline,” a title which might make sense to those who already understand education as more than the commodified process currently taking place in American schools, but which might confuse other readers.

The author of this volume, Peter McLaren, is an accomplished writer, world-traveler, and activist for revolutionary critical pedagogy. His works include the groundbreaking (1986) *Schooling as a Ritual Performance*, an ethnographic study of ritual states in a school context, and *Che Guevara, Paulo Freire, and the Pedagogy of Revolution* (2000), a biographical study. His early existence was marked by significant immersion in the culture of the 1960s in the United States. According to his biographical webpage with the Chapman University website (where he currently teaches), he:

...is the author and editor of nearly 50 books and his writings have been translated into over 25 languages. Five of his books have won the Critic's Choice Award of the American Educational Studies Association. Professor McLaren's book, *Life in Schools: An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy in the Foundations of Education* (New York: Routledge), has been named one of the 12 most significant writings by foreign authors in the field of educational theory, policy and practice

by the Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences; the list includes *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire and *Deschooling Society* by Ivan Illich and books by Pierre Bourdieu and Howard Gardner.

Life in Schools begins with a number of introductions explaining what it is about. The introductions should give the reader a good sense of who Peter McLaren is and how the state of the world-as-it-is relates to the subject matter to be discussed, that of revolutionary critical pedagogy. So this is about the world, and consequently *Life in Schools* invites the world to participate in revolutionary critical pedagogy. As McLaren argues, “Revolutionary critical pedagogy is designed to serve the purpose of both empowering teachers and teaching for empowerment. I have tried to deepen the notion of empowerment by connecting it to the Marxist-humanist tradition.” (xxvi) Also, from page 190: “Revolutionary critical pedagogy attempts to develop a new kind of critical discourse, one that will inspire us to play a more active role in school, community, and classroom life. In my view, such a discourse is vital in order for educators and others to understand the specifics of oppression and the possibilities for democratic struggle and renewal in our schools.” There is of course an advocacy of socialism in all of this, which I have discussed below.

There are plenty of works on critical pedagogy, on critical theory, on critical media analysis and critical race theory and Marxist critique of capitalism out there, but there really isn’t anything like this, and this is why *Life in Schools* is worth a read. I rather doubt that any other author in the field of education would even dare to do what McLaren has done in *Life in Schools*. In academic writing most professors limit the potential audience to those already in the university, while at the same time looking for ways to build on what the small anticipated audience actually knows. This book is for teachers, professors, students, and the world.

The tensions of this volume lie in the fact that it is intended as an introductory set of readings, but Peter McLaren isn’t really an introductory type of person; he’s more of a frontier personality, someone who takes the next step for the benefit of those who have already been introduced. This book review would hope to illustrate those tensions with a view to the further development of *Life in Schools* as an introductory text.

The “Cries from the Corridor” narrative, which comes in the second part of *Life in Schools*, is illustrative of the conditions teachers face, and indeed in that regard it does what it’s supposed to do. There’s an introduction and a conclusion, but for the most part this narrative is composed of journal entries from McLaren’s teaching experience in Canada in the 1970s. I have to conclude that, in part, the popularity of McLaren’s “Cries from the Corridor” journal entries stems from their aptly-worded tragicomic character. Things were always happening in McLaren’s life to turn the serious task of teaching into something quotidian and comedic, and this is one thing that makes this portion of *Life in Schools* such engaging reading. So, for instance, a particular passage illustrates teacher burnout as follows:

This afternoon I took a seat beside a teacher I hadn't seen before. She introduced herself as a supply teacher who had been working the area for a while. I was struck by how much she looked the caricature of the spinster teacher: hair in a bun, horn-rimmed glasses, worn tweed jacket. She reminded me of the middle-aged women I saw in church when I was a child. "How do you like being an inner-city teacher?" she asked.

"Things are getting easier," I replied. "I'm doing a lot of reading ... trying to discover some new ideas. By the way, what kind of approaches do *you* use with the kids? Maybe we can exchange ideas."

She cleared her throat, looking down at her lunch, smiling. "There *is* one thing that I find helps me make it through the day," she said softly.

"Yes?"

"I never talk about the kids during lunch." (48)

It might be useful for McLaren, in future editions of *Life in Schools*, to investigate further the topic of the applicability of teacher journals to the study of revolutionary critical pedagogy. While they describe many common experiences with those endured by present-day public school teachers in the United States, McLaren's journals also gave an impression of being distant in time and space. To some extent, upon rereading this portion of his book, I thought he had it relatively easy as a teacher, even despite the onerous circumstances of McLaren's work in the "ghetto" in Toronto. McLaren didn't have to deal with standardized test mania, Common Core, Open Court or other programs involving mandatory scripted lessons, mandatory use of Lee Canter's "Assertive Discipline," "English language learners" as constructed under California's Proposition 227, school lockdowns, or the revolution in electronic gadgets as it is currently constituted by iPads and so on. Perhaps in a future edition McLaren could bring in more recent teacher journals for further analysis, comparison, and contrast.

The second part of this book is of course an introductory text of revolutionary critical pedagogy. McLaren starts out, appropriately, with a glossary of terms which anyone who wanted to speak the language of revolutionary critical pedagogy would have to know. There is, however, a particular angle to McLaren's exploration of basic terms which gives this portion of *Life in Schools* its distinct character, and this is where the tension between "introductory" and frontier thinking appears, at least in this reading.

To some extent I have to wonder what the audience reception is for McLaren's use of the words "revolution," or "socialism." It's not that he isn't being specific – in his last chapter he details what he means by socialism and by socialist struggle, and from the beginning he suggests that socialism will be the realization of democracy: "What is needed is a protagonistic or direct democracy, which entails the abolition of the distinction between the ruler and the ruled, and which does not represent the person but enables the person to be there. But in order for this to occur, I believe that we need to create a society where the value form of labor (capitalism) is abolished altogether." (8). The problem, of course, is that for much of society democracy has also

become as irrelevant as socialism, since almost all political choice is not available under what we call “democracy.” Perhaps the section on “the retreat from democracy” in the next edition could have a brief history along the lines of Ellen Meiksins Wood’s (1995) book *Democracy Against Capitalism*?

And it’s not as if world-society, at present, doesn’t need revolution or socialism. The commodification, misery, and oppression of the great masses of humanity would justify such a thing by itself, as McLaren shows well in numerous places in the text. Indeed, a movement toward socialism might be the one essential phenomenon to save the present-day civilization from the bad end promised by analysts of abrupt climate change, which itself threatens to make large portions of planet Earth uninhabitable if carried far enough. In the lectures which accompanied his groundbreaking work *Negative Dialectics*, spoken in 1965/1966 but published in 2008, the critical philosopher Theodor Adorno argues: “today we simply cannot think any more as Marx thought, namely that the revolution was imminent – simply because, on the one hand, the proletariat in his day was not integrated in bourgeois society and, on the other hand, bourgeois society did not yet possess the vast instruments of power, both actual physical instruments of power and also psychological instruments in the broadest sense, that it now has.” (45) How have things changed since 1965 when this was spoken? Are we smarter about revolution now, that we can “get around” what Adorno described then?

What’s at stake in McLaren’s revisions of *Life in Schools*, which have consistently improved upon the first edition all the way up to the current sixth, is the possibility of a greater positive reaction to the revolutionary content in the text. To some readers, the idea of a socialist revolution, fulfilling the promise of democracy, appears as distant in time and space as does McLaren’s experience as a teacher in Toronto in the 1970s. Perhaps such audiences can be persuaded through further application of the tools of inquiry – to place the terms “revolution” and “socialism” in historical context to show in further depth what it means to remake history. So, for instance, when McLaren says on pages 134-135 that “revolutionary critical knowledge combines theory and practice and contributes to the transformation of existing social relations in the interest of emancipation from the rule of capital and its associated social antagonisms,” a college-level class could engage an investigation into “emancipation from the rule of capital” as a dream of what McLaren calls a “concrete utopia,” with a history and thus also with a future.

Perhaps the key term to be explored within the glossary, as a way for readers to comprehend revolutionary critical pedagogy, is hegemony. Specifically, “Hegemony refers to the maintenance of domination not by the sheer exercise of force *but primarily through consensual social practices, social forms, and social structures produced in specific sites such as the church, the state, the school, the mass media, the political system, and the family.*” (140) People are led to believe that the system serves them, when in fact it’s the other way around; they serve the system without being adequately served themselves. The mass public is led to believe that the current social order is the only natural one, whereas in fact nature, both in terms of human nature

and outer nature, contains far more in the way of diverse possibility than what we see in today's social order. I keep thinking that the key terms illustrated so well in McLaren's book could be explored in the manner described by McLaren himself (182) and as fleshed out in Victoria Purcell-Gates and Robin A. Waterman's (2000) *Now We Read, We See, We Speak* – classes would start with the key terms in McLaren's third section, and explore them as generative themes for classroom discussion. Perhaps such a classroom method would help students see how hegemony works in real life.

The fourth section of this book deals with analysis. It starts out with a discussion of how race, class, and gender intersect with schooling practices. There is a chapter on myths in education – educational practice is itself shown to be guided by a mythology which constructs students, teachers, and schools in hegemonic ways. There is, lastly, a section on “voice” which hopes to point the way toward revolutionary critical pedagogy with a discussion of the importance of student experiences and student voices. In that section, McLaren states: “I would argue along with Giroux that a critical and affirming pedagogy has to be constructed around the stories that people tell, the ways in which students and teachers author meaning, and the possibilities that underlie the experiences that shape their voices.” (179) This truth of constructivism is, then, well-woven into revolutionary critical pedagogy.

The last section concludes this book by discussing issues that weren't discussed in previous editions. There is a section on racism in the age of Obama: “As people of color still lag well behind whites in almost every major social, economic, and political indicators, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2008) asked whether President Barack Obama will contest the new system of racial practices—what Bonilla-Silva calls ‘the new racism’—that is constructed by a new racial ideology called color-blind racism.” (193) McLaren's apt, topical ideology critique brings the reader to a sentence which is in need of unpacking: “Whiteness must be abolished because it is the major enabling condition for white supremacy and racialized prejudice.” (196) McLaren is much clearer later in his discussion, on p. 210: “To abolish racism, we need to abolish global capitalism.”

McLaren concludes with a chapter on “hope and the struggle ahead.” This chapter offers a long discussion of imperialism, racism, and capitalism in the current era, and a discussion of what McLaren means by socialism (with specific reference to Peter Hudis's work on Marx's vision of a world after capitalism). An autobiographical conclusion ends the volume. There is a lot to *Life in Schools*, sixth edition. It continues a project that is not generally being pursued in the academy, and is recommended for all of those who seek a better world for themselves and for everyone else.

Author's Details

Samuel Day Fassbinder teaches English with DeVry University Online and is the author of numerous articles and book reviews. He attained his Master's Degree in English from Sonoma State University and his Ph.D. in Communication from The Ohio State University in 1998. He currently lives in Claremont, California, in the United States.