

**Kevin Russel Magill - Book Review: Peter McLaren (2015) *Pedagogy of Insurrection: From Resurrection to Revolution*. New York: Peter Lang.**

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**Overview**

In his newest book *The Pedagogy of Insurrection: from Resurrection to Revolution*, Peter McLaren calls his readers to take an uncompromising approach to reject global capital and colonial relations of power by engaging in revolutionary critical pedagogy. Educators must re-connect critical pedagogy to its Marxist roots, critical theory and authentic praxis. Answering the mainstream educational discourse, McLaren asks readers to consider anti-dogmatic, critical, Christian and de-colonial exemplars that demonstrate revolutionary pedagogy in action. He suggests these figures might engender a more radical turn towards materialist class engagement, collective consciousness and action, much needed for more meaningful change. As a way of combating the antagonism of a culture dominated by these relationships, McLaren calls us to foster critical class consciousness, uniting against those who would alienate humanity in all its manifestations reading the cries of a “liberating alternative” (p. 100), while casting aside our “Market God” (p. 137). He concludes with a call for action, exploring the engagement he believes necessary for educators to work toward realizing a new society.

Pedagogy of insurrection follows the intellectual trajectory of McLaren’s career, situating his arrival at critical rage pedagogy. Critiquing global capitalism, in his work McLaren has argued that, like labor, value production, sexism and racism, might be ameliorated by revolutionary praxis. He suggests critical theories of race, gender, and sexuality are important but ought to be grounded in class analysis foregrounding the action of praxis. The implication: we must first complicate and critique western values, ideology and positioning, in developing our consciousness and further, real change requires organizing around the logic of dialectical materialism. McLaren champions the idea that experiencing and living our pedagogy is key to fighting for a meaningful socialist alternative.

Many of the ideas wrought throughout the book are McLaren transforming the body of work we have come to know: aiding the evolution of revolutionary critical pedagogy by emphasizing the complex intersections of critical love, cultural expression, and action for others, taking what Rodriguez and I (2015 & 2015b) might call a critically humanist approach to insurrection. He suggests this approach is often neglected in Marxist scholarship and practice. His early chapters

utilize identifiable historical figures to introduce stories of oppression, consciousness, resistance and action, demonstrating theory in practice. He proceeds by unraveling many of the tensions between what is *understood* to be critical work and what *is* critical work, re-connecting theory to material engagement with society. This book is the natural evolution of McLaren's oeuvre. I suspect it will be discussed by those practicing or wishing to practice a *critical rage pedagogy* and challenged by those sold on a positivistic view of society. With this text we are offered a theory of radical educational praxis, coming to a theory of insurrection based on dialectical materialism, liberation theology and an anti-colonial engagement of the social relations of production.

### **Ideology and the Assurance of Social Shortcoming**

The book begins by addressing the primacy of the capitalist system, over human relationships, as the system solidifies social structures discouraging critical thought, engagement and action that might lead to meaningful interrogation of hegemony. This is a thread that runs through the entirety of the text. The socialist ideas McLaren calls for are often neutralized by societies through the identity perception gap (Toshalis, 2010), restricting individuals from confronting differences between who they are and who they think they are. He discusses how, "inequality—stubbornly rationalized by the ruling class through the ideological state apparatus of schooling, religion and the media—beguile the masses with everyday distractions and falsehoods, mystifying them with respect to their aspirations, loyalties and purposes" (p. 70). He suggests capitalism, "has monopolized our collective imagination as never before, befouled our bodies through a frenzied pursuit of narcotizing consumption and turned education itself into a subsector of the economy" (p. 2), an understatement, he claims, to critical educators.

McLaren continues by suggesting social and educational reform must be grounded in revolutionary praxis. He furthers his arguments (2010) of the unfortunate realities of critical pedagogy- that materialist engagement has been relegated to an almost insignificant part of social consciousness. McLaren (2010) submits, "Marxist theory is such a rarity in the struggle for educational reform in the United States that the very idea has been received as an amusing cocktail party joke, even among members who self-identify with the radical left" (p. 1). As Giroux (1981) mentions, "the American left often appears baffled over the question of what constitutes radical educational theory and practice" (p. 63).

Relationships in this context are ontologically reductive in nature, built on inequality foster reification, alienation (Lukacs, 1971; Habermas, 1984; Honneth & Peterson, 2006) and isolation. Through purposeful misrepresentation, the standard by which we act is mediated by the same mechanisms that have placed us in a "media-enforced stupor" (p. 16) limiting action in organizing, revolution and critical democratic thought. These conditions, McLaren asserts, allow vampiric policies and economic allocation to ensure an unrecognized life of slavery to

capitalism.

The book considers how capitalist ideologies fuel the educational policies working to serve modern industrial capitalists. McLaren cites individuals like the Koch Brothers and Bill Gates (p. 139), who pave the way for the prognosticators, snake-oil educators and neoliberal reformers helping shape education into its most exploitable form. McLaren's argument can be observed in virtually all capital investment in schooling, where it almost never reaches students needing it most. Consider Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg's (and friends) 200 million dollar donation to Newark New Jersey Public Schools. Three quarters of his donation went toward neoliberal attempts to institute merit based pay, fund charter schools and line the pockets of educational consultants (Jackson, 2015). With reform in mind, their donation was meant to fix the broken system, but this case, as with countless other examples, merely represents an example of the system functioning as planned. Donors were likely unaware of the *outcomes* or downstream effect of their endowment, understanding that the education system has problems, but unaware of how to intercede in any meaningful way. This is where McLaren's argument is vital. Capital is the only medium many understand. There are similarly fundamental misunderstandings about policy, education and learning.

Genuine neglect, within the schooling apparatus facilitates maximum capital extraction and maintenance of positivist schooling outcomes. Like Gates, the Koch Brothers and Zuckerberg are, "the very persons responsible for championing the neoliberal economic policies that led to the current recession are those who are now anointing themselves as leading educational reformers" (p. 136). Reforms continually fail to address poverty, class and material reality of the students they are intended to serve, much like Gates and Zuckerberg whose capital donations fail to reach students who need it most. McLaren calls for an end to the capitalist era that has in this way, continually mined the tears of the poor (p. 4 & 161).

McLaren continues his assault on the organizational decision-making that serves the interests of capital rather than labor. He engages with the work of John Bellamy Foster who argues the "economic and ecological crises emerge inextricably entangled in each other" (as cited in McLaren, p. 70). As of the writing of this piece, several examples stand out that demonstrate the *negative externalities* of capitalism's effects on ecology, proving to be only the tip of the polluted iceberg. One such example is the Flint water crisis. Decision-making based on profit and organizational survival has proven the norm rather than the exception. Because of its poor financial state, the City made choices based on finance that resulted in the current public health crisis. The normalization of capital relationships on social consciousness makes this incident seem shocking, when it is all too common. It is clear to McLaren, that capitalism's finger will not plug cracks in the capitalist dyke before we are all struggling to keep our heads above water. The neglect of human needs has led to a crumbling structure that refuses to consider socialist reforms and organization in support of more human centered existence (p. 198). For overcoming

the tragic realities of capitalism's marriage to our modern condition, McLaren calls for new ideas for engagement with, "solidarity and *comunalidad*... through a pedagogy of commitment and obligation" (p.10).

### **Biography, Reframing Historical Figures and Philosophy**

McLaren's first five chapters frame his revolutionary pedagogy by questioning the western legacies of Jesus Christ, Paulo Freire, Hugo Chavez, Fidel Castro and Ernesto "Che" Guevara. McLaren argues for an, "analysis of experience" (p. 40) of the meaningful socialist reforms Chavez, Castro and Che made through their radical approaches to government. Similarly, he suggests Jesus and Freire offered the type of revolutionary ideas and love we must have recognizing love to, "exist between free and equal people who have the same ideals and commitment to serving the poor and the oppressed and it is this moral affinity that constitutes the conditions of the possibility of love" (p. 41). These individuals never had a chance at an authentic legacy in the capitalist discourse of "liberal modernity" (p. 66) except as they were used to fit the social spectacle (Debord, 1994). McLaren challenges the social ideology and values maintaining these ideas suggesting we can learn much from these individuals, who meet resistance with meaningful dialectical materialist action. He argues the true legacies of these men can be found in the fabric of what they helped create and the people they served.

The chapter "Comrade Jesus" was particularly helpful in deconstructing ideological formation of the modern consciousness for myself, someone who had always seen contradictions between the Jesus of the gospel and certain actions justified in his name. The book works to shatter both the dogmatic false consciousness of commodified culture and evokes in its readers the critical disposition required for the revolutionary love called for by "Comrade Jesus". McLaren foregrounds the hypocrisy of those claiming they are Christians, yet neglecting material service to the poor. McLaren claims, the strange creation used to justify ideologies of atrocity and empire (p. 6) is not Jesus. A holier than thou, classist id pervades the social consciousness and maintains the capitalist ideology in religiously justified action. Jesus was rather a teacher and a communist whose message was one of love and service to others. Camara alludes to the incompatibility of class and Christ, "when I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist" (Rocha, 2000, p. 53).

Similarly, in Mark 10:25, Jesus suggests, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (p. 104), yet religious apparatuses (Foucault, 2008) have cemented class as an enduring formation influencing Christian action. By highlighting Jesus' condemnation of wealth as it inspired Marx, McLaren, asks his readers to reframe how they understand the inexplicable relationship between capital and humanity. Miranda (2011) agrees, arguing the type of egoism in religion allows for development of the alienating relationships needed to exploit the poor. McLaren's analysis helps his reader

understand the misrepresented messages allowing the ideology of wealth. Many feel good about the hypocrisy of the modern Christian condition as they, perhaps unconsciously, reject Jesus' central philosophical tenets, feeding their Christian identity through an ideology of ethical consumerism (Žižek, 2009). McLaren helps his readers see those blinded by noble but un-revolutionary acts that foster deficit antipodes of savior and saved, Christian and barbarian, us and them (Derrida, 1981).

McLaren's analysis inspires readers to rethink the modernist misinterpretation of Christian service to the poor. The call to *save* the poor, through tax deductible giving or once a year homebuilding efforts in a *less fortunate community or country* as part of a church organization's *mission*, is the ideological middle ground so-called progressive educators take to dealing with oppression. Rather, McLaren suggests instituting socialist reforms, community organizing and material engagement makes more meaningful and lasting change and better reflects Jesus' call to serve the poor. McLaren identifies the omnipresent cognitive dissonance in Christian and other capitalist relationships suggesting the adoption of a revolutionary pedagogy.

A holy trinity has emerged in modern relationships shaping our material conditions. God the father is the Market, calling his disciples to worship at the altar of capitalism. God the son is the class relationships, enforced by a "coloniality of power" (Quijano & Ennis 2000 as cited in McLaren, 2015) or what are the material realities of the poor. God the Holy Spirit is the modernist ideology shaping social perception needed to foster an inequitable social structure. Understanding the trinity differently, McLaren might suggest as God the father is the earth itself and the way we are all connected to each other, God the son, our dialectical materialist engagements- the change we can make to transform social conditions, and the Holy Spirit, our revolutionary love supporting our fellow persons.

Jesus philosophy is more often written on working class walls than echoing from the gilded pulpit of the blasphemous preacher. People like George W. Bush and Pat Robertson (p. 171) use the preacher's words, as a mandate of heaven, a weapon to foster fear and exploitation creating, "dehumanizing trends built into social, political, educational and religious institutions" (p. 115). Instead, McLaren calls us to expand the way we understand sites of knowledge production to include the spaces of mutual support and love. He suggests community centers, conferences, church basements, and coffee houses are all important areas for knowledge production and spaces where we can have authentic human interactions informing revolutionary change. Only by expanding our understanding of knowledge and love to consider these spaces can we work toward needed socialist change in a humanitarian praxis. The focus of this chapter is one of Critical Revolutionary Christian love that explores transformative ideas through the eyes of the poor and marginalized. These, to him, are changes we can all make within ourselves and in our teaching.

Subsequent chapters illuminate other aspects of McLaren's critical rage pedagogy. McLaren's analysis of the Chavista legacy demonstrates socialist political movements that challenge empire. He argues Hugo Chavez, The Lion of the Left, was able to make a major impact on the lives of Venezuelans by reducing poverty by half and extreme poverty by 70 percent (p. 167) while being included as part of George W. Bush's so called Axis of Evil. These imperialist pressures created a dialectical formation we see exist in many of US relationships. McLaren compares Venezuela's socialist successes to conditions in the US where he suggests, "the vastness of the armies of the homeless, haunted by the slow death that stalked the dispossessed in the so-called most progressive democracy in the world" (p. 192).

McLaren continues his political analysis by examining Castro and Che's literacy campaigns (p. 195). Cuba's overall illiteracy rate, was reduced from over 20 percent, according to the last census taken before the revolution, to 3.9 percent (Supko, 1998 as cited in McLaren). Che and Castro's complicated western legacy is discussed; many in the US suggest Che is a butcher but McLaren argues he, stressed the "sanctity of human life" (p. 209). To Che, critique, love and struggle were linked in the type of anti-dogmatism needed for seeing and acting for liberation (McLaren, 2015, 2015b).

It is important to note that many of the figures McLaren describes paid the ultimate price for their work. Jesus, Castro, Che, Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King Jr. and possibly Chavez were assassinated or had attempts on their lives, because of what they were willing to do for their people and their world. It is a sad and commonplace reality for those engaging in revolutionary pedagogy to be villainized, experiencing very real threats to their wellbeing. McLaren's examples of those practicing revolutionary pedagogy help us understand the type of struggle that pedagogy requires. These men understood that relationships are more than merely their value within capitalist society. In their death each figure takes on a mythological nature that, as McLaren notes, is well worth exploring.

### **Critical Pedagogy as a Revolutionary Praxis**

Ultimately McLaren outlines what he sees is the needed way forward. He engages Freire's praxis to argue for greater interplay between consciousness, knowledge and action suggesting, "Freire understood that the form of action people take is a function of how they perceive themselves in the world" (p. 141). Current so-called *critical* teaching in the social studies largely centers on troubling the historical narrative without an action orientated praxis. These classrooms may or may not address issues of class, but when they do not, it rarely moves students toward transformative possibilities beyond the politics of difference. If the teacher subscribes to the traditional progress narrative, he or she fails to engage historical materialism, struggle, experience, and diverse knowledge crucial to understanding revolutionary action, citizenship and agency. Grounding this argument in a dialectical conception of education, McLaren argues

conversations of class are essential to our classrooms.

McLaren further enlists the help of a wide range of critical, cultural and decolonial theorists in his effort to situate consciousness and action related to revolutionary critical pedagogy arguing that expressions of culture are important parts of a pedagogy for insurrection. His work includes the philosophies of Peter Hudis, Raya Dunayevskya, Sergio Miranda, Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani and Ramon Grosfugal among others to argue for, “a coherent philosophy of praxis based on a dialectics of transformation” (McLaren, 2015, p. 90; McLaren 2015b). He highlights also that revolution is not only about bread but also of beauty, art, and thought (p. 343). Music and expression are important elements adding to the revolutionary dialectic and allow us to organize around grand ideas and spiritual experiences. The radical negation through music helps to, “understand[ing] the world dialectically, as an effect of multiple antagonisms whose conditions of possibility are intensified by the contradiction between labor and capital” (339). He says that, “Music...helps to bridge the gap between our inner and outer worlds, as difficult and agonistic as those worlds might be” (p. 338). The dialogical testimonies of culture help to illuminate truth, hope, pain and autobiographical elements needed for change and humanity (McLoughlin, 2009; McLaren, 2015, p. 346). McLaren's stories and analyses encourage the reader to become actively involved through dialectics, self-expression and by re-evaluating our relationship to knowledge formation to help us create personal revolutions that will make a difference in our lives and in the lives of our students.

Critical language, McLaren argues, is needed to interpret social elements and challenge capital in all its manifestations. McLaren suggests the lack of class engagement causes, “educators...to appropriate many different languages with which to navigate the terrain of current educational reform” (p. 54). Much like the investments of the Koch brothers and Bill Gates, neglecting conversations of class maintains marginalized social relationships leads to re-inscribing the status quo causing acceptance of given conditions without engaging the language of critique. It costs industrialists little to be progressive and challenge policy untethered to economic interests, but it becomes expensive when these discussions are connected to issues of class and poverty. He calls educators to overcome these shortcomings by grounding questions of ethnicity, race, gender and sexuality (p. 63) and other social categorizations in class struggle. Rikowski similarly suggests all “forms of inequality in capitalist society – class inequality, sexism, racism, discrimination against gay and lesbian people, against disabled people, ageism and differential treat of other social groups – and how all these forms of inequality link to capital accumulation and value production” (2004, p. 567).

Disciplinary teaching has become caught in the dialectics of western political thought where teachers move to what they see as a more centrist positions, taking a progressive rather than critical approach to education. While well intentioned, these educators continue to function as part of the “transnational capitalist class” (p. 135). He argues the field of education needs to go

beyond mere conversations for transforming society and considering historical conditions beyond the “head alone” (p. 148). Teachers struggle engaging students beyond what McLaren calls “a more digestible deconstruction” (p. 65) of the social studies curriculum. Ideas lacking in class engagement ensure students will not be exposed to consciousness raising crucial to what McLaren’s calls critical patriotism (p. 85) for re-ordering society and identifying shortcomings that can help us avoid tragedy.

McLaren also suggests the current responses to capital are often too feeble for transformational change, becoming appropriated. Within academic traditions, he argues people are relying too heavily on philosophy that moves us away from an action-oriented praxis. He encourages us instead to heed Che’s suggestion; we must be both kind and tough in relationship and action. To this end McLaren calls us to engage more deeply with the realities of material life (p. 65). Citing the lack of attention to those who have “killed millions of people and contributed to...instability” (p. 84) he advocates for justice for those who engage in “crimes against humanity” (p. 85). McLaren highlights the need for active protests citing the organizing that fought back against the racist policing in Ferguson, and classist social conditions illuminated by Occupy protesters, suggesting these are the types of action needed for revolutionary social change. He further calls educators to do this work in the classroom.

For this reason, McLaren encourages conscious engagement with Hegelian/Marxist dialectics for mediation of social reform and revolution. He further suggests, “drawing upon a Hegelian-Marxist critique of political economy that underscores the fundamental importance of developing a philosophy of praxis, revolutionary critical pedagogy seeks forms of organization that best enable the pursuit of doing critical philosophy as a way of life” (McLaren & Rikowski, pp.7-8). Our analysis of social systems, must consider Kosik’s (1976) dialectics of the concrete, where we work to understand both our material social reality and how we are positioned in a pseudo-concrete reality- the social construction and internalization of positions often *understood* as concrete. He suggests mystification has been embedded in our modern understandings of the self and that the human social condition is onto-formative, having captured representative social forms in the body. With this call, Kosik and McLaren critique the ontological universalism of neoliberal globalization, instead calling for Marxist humanist relationships. McLaren discusses this via his engagements with the systematic connection between labor and temporality, the relationship between praxis and labor, and through the explanatory power of the dialectical method. It becomes about reaching what Au (2007) calls “materialist dialectics of consciousness” (as cited in McLaren, p. 141) for revolutionary change.

McLaren, has arrived, with *The Pedagogy of Insurrection* at what I understand to be the needed response to oppression and approach to critical pedagogy, a return to Marxist, liberation theological and de-colonial roots. The critical posture has lost its way, a shadow of what it once was and needs be. For McLaren, “critical pedagogy needs to be renewed. It can no longer remain



as a bundle of classroom methodologies removed from a larger politics of socialist struggle... it has to be concerned with the problem of reasserting human action, what we call praxis” (2015, p. 38-39). In his critique of the so-called progressive educators calling themselves critical, McLaren argues, they merely, “challenge the totalizing grand narratives informing Western domination and Eurocentrism” neglecting conversation of, “the dualism of oppressor/ oppressed... with the ambivalence of cultural difference” (p. 246).

Examples of the type of conscious materialist engagement through the revolutionary dialectic are central to the book. His chapter with Lilia Monzo and Arturo Rodriguez discuss the pseudo-concrete of the “White Capitalist ID” (p. 355) that developed conditions by which people understand the border and transnational relationships. The authors discuss how these conditions serve to further divide and confuse revolutionary consciousness. As an example, they discuss how both Mexican capitalists and US capitalists alike benefited from the exploitative relationships by using fear and “disciplinary devices” (Foucault as cited in McLaren, 2015) that destroyed communities (p. 361). Highlighting gun walking, among other actions, they illuminate the ways in which capital interests are secured at the cost of innocent life. Media portrayals of gun walking lead the public to believe that the noble intentions of supplying cartels with weapons ended poorly, when it is likely that these were part of nefarious plans to destabilize the border that capitalists might buy the valuable land at a reduced cost. In the public discourse of border ideology, the authors discuss how little is done to support the victims of terror in this context. In their revolutionary response, McLaren, Monzo and Rodriguez call for the mobilization for a mass of critically educated people, which they suggest, requires organizations and praxis work to support the material reality of the disenfranchised. The imperialists, according to the authors, will not “put down their ideological weapons of death on the basis of sound reasoning or moral imperative and allow the precariats, the cognitariats, and the proletariats of our techno-capitalist present to march towards a socialist alternative without a fight” (p. 370).

In his final chapter *Critical Rage Pedagogy* McLaren embodies Pedagogy of Hope Paulo Freire dreamt of, fused with poetic prose and musical allusions to offer his manifesto, voicing what might be the collective demands of those revolutionary pedagogues who have organized around this call, fighting oppressive colonial relationships inspired by the revolutionary spirit. The revolutionary call McLaren discusses requires a consciousness that must transcend class and experience while many readers will relate to the examples he offers, others will take on the revolution.

## **Conclusion**

People are growing weary of life that is a perpetual capitalist hangover. The text accurately contextualizes critical life filtered through the culture industry (McLaren, 2015, p. 264; Adorno

& Horkheimer, 2002; Marcuse, 2013). Arguing for humanity beyond its value form McLaren utilizes biblical, historical, relational, literary, cultural, lyrical, poetic, media, and social elements. His socialist call reflects the words of Che, (as cited by McLaren, 2015), “If only we were able to become united ... how beautiful and near at hand the future would be” (p. 407). For this, McLaren claims we must, “see Jesus in the groundskeeper, in your neighbor, in the man who sweeps the laundromat, in the woman who folds your linen, in the waiter who spills tomato soup on your shirtsleeve, in the bartender who comforts you when you despair of life, in your students who bring both frustration and joy” (p. 437).

Pedagogy of insurrection asks us to consider an alternative to the capitalist ideology we rarely see affecting the choices we make by dialectically uncovering new possibilities. McLaren helps his readers understand the underutilized revolutionary action at our disposal, cast aside because of the many distractions of a capitalist life. His analysis offers the reader an approach to educational praxis crucial for contextualizing socio-political, economic and action orientations. The post-capitalist future McLaren envisions requires cultural expression, love, freedom, and support for our fellow man. Many people lack the ability or desire to see beyond the fear of action (Sartre, 1990; Fromm, 2001), not realizing we have become a one-dimensional, subject of consumerism (Marcuse, 2013; Baudrillard, 1998). But as McLaren contends, we can cultivate this in our students and ourselves, the conscious action needed to seize a more equitable future. He is asking us to decide the type world we want, first by informing ourselves and then taking a revolutionary dialectical materialist approach to realizing this dream (p. 430). Brecht suggests of hegemonic power that, “conditions are made for the exploitation of those who don't understand it, or are prevented by naked misery from obeying it” (p. 74). McLaren offers us his analysis of these conditions and what he sees as the needed engagement to resist what he understands to be an all out attack on humankind.

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