

The Path of Dissent

An Interview With Peter McLaren

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The work of U.S.-Canadian Peter McLaren has assumed a central place in the debates over the role of critical pedagogy in North America; less known among North American educators is that his work has sparked considerable interest in South America for more than a decade and has received special attention in Brazil, the birthplace of Paulo Freire. McLaren is one of North America's most significant ambassadors of Freire's work; in recent years, he has also moved into a pedagogical terrain uninhabited by the majority of North American educators—that of Marxist theory and analysis. Of course, this may account for the increased interest in his work throughout many Latin American countries, but it is sure to alienate McLaren from many of his long-standing supporters in the United States. It is clear that McLaren is dedicated to developing schools into sites where students can begin to imagine socialist alternatives to capitalism. Although the vast majority of educators in the United States are calling for a redistribution of economic resources within a more “compassionate” capitalism, McLaren is convinced that only within a socialist society can democracy be achieved.

This interview began with McLaren over the Internet and continued in person during a recent trip McLaren made to Rio de Janeiro to speak to teachers and professors. It has taken on the form of a guided essay.

Marcia: In Brazil, despite the brilliant contributions of Paulo Freire, it is quite difficult to say that Teacher Education programs are totally related to the philosophy of critical pedagogy. On the other hand, Teacher Education programs in the United States have been dealing with critical pedagogy for several decades now. What progress has been made on the critical pedagogy front?

Peter: This is an excellent question to begin our conversation. Let me begin by challenging the term “critical pedagogy.” I much prefer the term that British educator Paula

Allman has christened "revolutionary critical pedagogy." It raises important issues that more domesticated currents of critical pedagogy do not. For example, it draws attention to the key concepts of imperialism (both economic and military) and the value form that labor assumes within capitalist society. It also posits history as the mediator of value production within capitalist society. In political partnership with educationalists such as Allman, Glenn Rikowski, Dave Hill, Ramin Farahmandpur, and Mike Cole, and in comradely conversations with Peter Mayo, Rich Gibson, Wayne Ross, and others, I have made some modest efforts to revive the fecundity of Marxist critique in the field of education, since I believe Marxist theory, in all of its heteronomous manifestations and theoretical gestation for well over a century, performs an irreplaceable analytical and political function of positing history as the mediator of human value production. By pivoting around the work of Karl Marx, Paulo Freire, and Antonio Gramsci, and by maneuvering and tacking around the work of contemporary continental philosophers and critical theorists, critical revolutionary pedagogy brings some desperately needed theoretical ballast to the teetering critical educational tradition. Such theoretical infrastructure is absolutely necessary if we are to create concrete pedagogical spaces in schools and in other sites where people struggle for educational change and transformation. The critical revolutionary pedagogy I am envisioning here operates from the premise that capital in its current organizational structure provides the context for working-class struggle. My approach to understanding the relationship between capitalism and schooling and the struggle for socialism is premised upon Marx's value theory of labor as developed by British Marxist educationalist Glenn Rikowski and others, including scholars such as Enrique Dussel (especially his commentary on Marx's manuscripts of 1861-1863). In developing further the concept of revolutionary critical pedagogy and its specific relationship to class struggle, it is necessary, I believe, to focus on labor's value form. This focus will unlock a path towards a Marxist-humanist approach to educational struggle. There are many approaches to Marxist humanism, and here I look to the writings of Raya Dunayevskaya, the works of Erich Fromm, C.L.R. James, and various and varied works within the Marxist-Hegelian tradition. Critical revolutionary educators follow the premise that value is the substance of capital. Value, it should be understood, is not a thing. It is the dominant form that capitalism as a determinate social relation takes. Within the expansive scope of revolutionary critical pedagogy, the concept of labor is fundamental for theorizing the school/society relationship and thus for developing radical pedagogical imperatives, strategies, and practices for overcoming the constitutive contradictions that such a coupling generates. The larger goal that revolutionary critical pedagogy stipulates for radical educationalists involves direct participation with the masses in the discovery and charting of a socialist reconstruction and alternative to capitalism. However, without a critical lexicon and interpretative framework that can unpack the labor/capital relationship in all of its capillary detail, critical pedagogy is doomed to remain trapped in domesticated currents and vulgarized formations. That's precisely why it is important to bring the various languages of Marxist analysis into schools of education. Why? Because the process whereby labor-power is transformed into human capital and concrete living labor is subsumed by abstract labor is one that eludes the interpretative capacity of rational communicative action and requires a dialectical understanding that only historical materialist critique can best provide. Historical materialism provides critical pedagogy with a theory of the material basis of social life rooted in historical social relations and assumes paramount importance in uncovering the structure of class conflict as

well as unraveling the effects produced by the social division of labor. Today, labor-power is capitalized and commodified, and education plays a tragic role in these processes. According to Rikowski, schools therefore act as vital supports for, and developers of, the class relation, at the core of capitalist society and development.

Here is a crucial point. Insofar as schooling is premised upon generating the living commodity of labor-power, upon which the entire social universe of capital depends, it can become a foundation for human resistance. In other words, labor-power can be incorporated by the forces of capital only so far. Workers, as the sources of labor-power, can engage in acts of refusing alienating work and delinking labor from capital's value form. As a relation of general commodification predicated on the wage relation, capital needs labor. But I emphasize labor does not need capital. Labor can dispense with the wage and with capitalism and find different and more autonomous ways to organize its productive relations. I am thinking of social forms and human relations that draw from, but are not limited to, the rich tradition of socialism.

Inasmuch as education and training socially produce labor-power, this process can be resisted. This is because labor power is never completely controllable. Glenn Rikowski has made the important point that people can learn something other than that which capital intends them to learn. Critical educators push this "something other" to the extreme in their pedagogical praxis centered around a social justice, anticapitalist, antiracist, and anti-imperialist agenda. One key—and I am not suggesting it is in any way sufficient—is to develop a critical pedagogy that will enable the working class to discover how the use-value of their labor-power is being exploited by capital but also how working-class initiative and power can destroy this type of determination and force a recomposition of class relations by directly confronting capital in all of its hydra-headed dimensions. Here I am talking of an anti-imperialist, internationalist, gender-balanced, and multiracial social movement that addresses issues related to education, but not limited to education. Efforts can be made to break down capital's control of the creation of new labor-power and to resist the endless subordination of life to work in the social factory of everyday life. Students and education workers can ask themselves, What is the maximum damage they can do to the rule of capital, to the dominance of capital's value form? Ultimately, to which we need to respond, Do we, as radical educators, help capital find its way out of crisis, or do we help students and educational workers find their way out of capital? And as I have phrased this in a number of my recent writings, the success of the former challenge will only buy further time for the capitalists to adapt both its victims and its critics; the success of the latter will determine the future of civilization, or whether or not we will have one.

Possibility often hides its liberating force within contradictions. The struggle related to what Marx called our "vital powers," our dispositions, our inner selves and our objective outside, our human capacities and competencies and the social formations within which they are produced, ensures the production of a form of human agency that reflects the contradictions within capitalist social life. Yet these contradictions also provide openness regarding social being. They point towards the possibility of collectively resolving contradictions of "everyday life" through what Allman has called revolutionary/transformatory praxis or, if we prefer, "critical subjectivity." Critical subjectivity operates out of practical, sensuous engagement within social formations that enable rather than constrain human capacities. Here, critical revolutionary pedagogy reflects the multiplicity and creativity of human engagement itself: the identification of shared experiences and common interests; the unraveling of the

threads that connect social process to individual experience; the rendering as transparent the concealed obviousness of daily life; the recognition of ourselves as both free and conditioned; an understanding of the future as both open and necessary; the recognition of a shared social positionality; the unhinging of the door that separates practical engagement from theoretical reflection; the changing of the world by changing one's social nature, one's social subjectivity. It achieves this through an understanding of Marx's dialectical approach. While I don't have space to go into these, I would like to point to Bertell Ollman's analysis of Marx's dialectical approach and repeat Ollman's warning here that the laws of dialectics do not in themselves explain, prove, or predict anything in themselves or cause anything to happen. What they do is organize the most common forms of change and interaction that exist on any level of generality so that we might be able to study and intervene into the world of which they are a part.

The work of Bertell Ollman has proved valuable in explaining how Marx's dialectical analysis can bring out the differences between two or more aspects of an interactive system in order to highlight the asymmetry in their reciprocal effect. For instance, take Marx's example of abstracting social reality into objective and subjective conditions. By abstracting a vantage point first in objective conditions, and then in subjective conditions, Marx can see these conditions as two distinct forms of the same essential conditions, and thus he can uncover the objective aspects of what is generally assumed to be subjective and vice versa.

Critical revolutionary educators seek to realize in their classrooms democratic social values and to believe in their possibilities—consequently, we argue that they need to go outside of the protected precincts of their classrooms and analyze and explore the workings of capital there as well, to workplaces, to neighborhoods, to urban zones, to rural communities, and so forth. Critical revolutionary pedagogy thus sets as its goal the reclamation of public life—what has been called by Canadian philosopher John McMurrtry the “civil commons.” It seeks to make the division of labor coincident with the free vocation of each individual and the association of free producers. At first blush, this may seem a paradisiac or radically utopian notion in that it posits a radically eschatological and incomparably “other” endpoint for society as we know it. Yet this is not a blueprint but a contingent utopian vision that offers direction not only in unpicking the apparatus of bourgeois illusion but also in diversifying the theoretical itinerary of the critical educator so that new questions can be generated along with new perspectives in which to raise them (I emphasize this point because it is precisely here that the postmodern pundits argue that, as a Marxist, I must be trying to impose some kind of totalitarian vision on unsuspecting educators). Here, the emphasis is not only on denouncing the manifest injustices of neoliberal capitalism and serving as a counterforce to neoliberal ideological hegemony but also on establishing the conditions for new social arrangements that transcend the false opposition between the market and the state.

In contrast to a number of incarnations of postmodern education, critical revolutionary pedagogy emphasizes the material dimensions of its own constitutive possibility and recognizes knowledge as implicated within the social relations of production (i.e., the relations between labor and capital). I use the term materialism here not in its postmodernist sense as a resistance to conceptuality, a refusal of the closure of meaning, or whatever “excess” cannot be subsumed within the symbol or cannot be absorbed by tropes; rather, materialism is being used, after Teresa Ebert, in the context of material social relations, a structure of class conflict, and an effect of the social

division of labor. Historical changes in the forces of production have reached the point where the fundamental needs of people can be met—but the existing social relations of production prevent this because the logic of access to “need” is “profit” based on the value of people’s labor for capital. Consequently, critical revolutionary pedagogy argues that without a class analysis, critical pedagogy is impeded from effecting praxiological changes (changes in social relations).

As I often discuss the term, critical revolutionary pedagogy includes what might be perceived as a three-pronged approach: I have called the first moment a pedagogy of demystification centering around a semiotics of re-cognition, where dominant sign systems, tropes, conceits, discourses, and representations are recognized and denaturalized, where commonsense understandings of social and institutionalized spheres of everyday life are historicized, and where signification is understood as a political practice that refracts rather than reflects reality, where cultural formations are understood and analyzed in relation to the larger social factory of the school and the global universe of capital. The second moment could be called a pedagogy of opposition, where students engage in analyzing various political systems, ideologies, and histories, but with the emphasis on students developing their own political positions that, in time, they are able to both extend, deepen, and refine. They are also able to defend their political positions, perspectives, and philosophies within, alongside, and in opposition to other positions. Inspired by a sense of ever-imminent hope, students move to a third moment, which includes developing a philosophy of praxis, where deliberative practices for transforming the social universe of capital into noncapitalist alternatives are developed and tested, where theories are mobilized to make sense of and to deepen these practices, and simultaneously where everyday practices help to challenge, deepen, and transform critical theories. How this occurs within the classroom will vary from individual to individual, from group to group, depending upon the sociopolitical context and the historical and the geopolitical spaces in which such pedagogies are played out. Revolutionary critical pedagogy supports a totalizing reflection upon the historical-practical constitution of the world, our ideological formation within it, and the reproduction of everyday life practices. It is a pedagogy with an emancipatory intent. It looks towards the horizon of the future from the vantage point of the present while simultaneously analyzing the past, refusing all the while to form a specific blueprint for change. Practicing revolutionary critical pedagogy is not the same as preaching it.

Revolutionary critical pedagogy is not born in the crucible of the imagination as much as it is given birth in its own practice. That is, revolutionary critical education is decidedly more praxiological than prescored. The path is made by walking, as it were. Revolutionary educators need to challenge the notion implicit in mainstream education that ideas related to citizenship have to travel through predestined contours of the mind, falling into step with the cadences of common sense. There is nothing common about common sense. Educational educators need to be more than the voice of autobiography; they need to create the context for dialogue with the other so that the other may assume the right to be heard. But critical pedagogy is also about making links with real, concrete human subjects struggling within and against capital and against the structures of oppression that are intimately linked to capital: racism, sexism, patriarchy, and imperialism.

The principles that help to shape and guide the development of our “vital powers” in the struggle for social justice via critical/revolutionary praxis discussed at length by Allman include principles of mutual respect, humility, openness, trust, and coopera-

tion; a commitment to learn to “read the world” critically and expending the effort necessary to bring about social transformation; vigilance with regard to one’s own process of self-transformation and adherence to the principles and aims of the group; adopting an “ethics of authenticity” as a guiding principle; internalizing social justice as passion; acquiring critical, creative, and hopeful thinking; transforming the self through transforming the social relations of learning and teaching; establishing democracy as a fundamental way of life; developing a critical curiosity; and deepening one’s solidarity and commitment to self and social transformation and the project of humanization. These principles are not enough by themselves. They must be accompanied by dialectical investigations of the social relations of production in which all of us toil.

Marcia: Your own work has helped to define the tradition of critical pedagogy not only in North America but in South America as well.

Peter: The tradition of critical pedagogy in North America is not an easy history to trace. But yes, it most certainly grew out of Freire’s path-breaking work in the early 1980s and its adaptation to North American contexts by Henry Giroux, Donaldo Macedo, and Ira Shor (and later by others such as Antonia Darder and Pepi Leistyna), and we can see in its varied inflections the birthmark of John Dewey and the social reconstructionist movement in the United States that developed after the Great Depression in the 1930s; I think it is fair to say that major exponents of critical pedagogy in North America were influenced by the sociology of knowledge that was emerging from England in the early 1980s as well as the pioneering work that was produced by Raymond Williams and the cultural studies that was being undertaken at England’s Birmingham School of Contemporary Cultural Studies. We would have to include the work of U.S. economists Sam Bowles and Herb Gintis, especially their book, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, but admittedly there was never much of a Marxist tradition in North American instantiations of critical pedagogy. Certainly, there were neo-Marxist interpretations and, of course, an interest in Western neo-Marxism, particularly the Frankfurt School. As in the early days of critical pedagogy, we don’t in today’s incarnations of critical pedagogy see much influence from Soviet Marxism and very little reference to Lenin or Trotsky. But we do see a strong Gramscian—albeit watered down—presence. Today, we see on North American shores the influence of recent international work on critical pedagogy, and I am thinking of the work of Peter Mayo and Carmel Borg in Malta as one important instance and the work of Colin Lankshear and Mike Peters from New Zealand and Australia, respectively. I have already mentioned the work of Rikowski, Cole, and Hill, as well as Allman, and for me these are the most urgent voices because of their grounding in the Marxist tradition. If we examine critical pedagogy within the graduate schools of the United States, for instance, we notice that it is highly transdisciplinary, and there are few theoretical perspectives that you can’t find these days among its many exponents. Today, critical pedagogy has been cross-fertilized with just about every transdisciplinary tradition imaginable, including theoretical forays into the work of Richard Rorty, Nietzsche, Jacques Lacan, and Jacques Derrida. I have been highly critical of much of the post-modernized versions of critical pedagogy, as I am sure you have gathered from much of my recent work.

Marcia: Brazilian educational legislation, for instance, points to the relevance of critical pedagogy but never in a political sense of the term; never as a way to better understand the complexity of our social (dis)organization. Unfortunately, *critical* means

celebrating diversity and being prepared for the work market. After all, each educational law addresses critical pedagogy within a very narrow view.

Peter: While I have been very critical of much that has been going on in the academy in the name of critical pedagogy, I do not see myself as a self-appointed guardian of the term. To echo something I wrote several years ago, critical pedagogy was once considered by the guard dogs of the American dream as a term of opprobrium, but now its relationship to broader liberation struggles seems quite threadbare if not fatally terminated. While its urgency was difficult to ignore, and its hard-bitten message had the pressure of absolute fiat behind it, critical pedagogy seemingly has collapsed into limitations placed on it by its own constitutive limitations. Force-fed by a complacent relativism, it has all but displaced the struggle against capitalist exploitation with its emphasis on a multiplicity of interpersonal forms of oppression within an overall concern with identity politics. It fights capitalism's second-hand smoke without putting out the cigar. I am scarcely the first to observe that critical pedagogy has been badly undercut by practitioners who would mischaracterize or misrepresent its fundamental project. In fact, if "critical pedagogy" is examined in the context of current educational debates and reform efforts, we see the very manifestation of its forms of domestication to which Paulo Freire drew attention. I think it is not useful to try to trace this history in order to try to find the "cause" of how this pedagogy has become decanted of its revolutionary potential; it is more important, at least in this present historical conjuncture, to develop a comprehensive approach to pedagogy that can touch on the central issues around which teachers and students are currently struggling. Critical pedagogy is very much a living tradition, one that needs to be reanimated with each successive generation, who face new and historically specific challenges.

Marcia: How do you conceptualize your work in critical pedagogy?

Peter: For me, that is, in my own work, I employ a concept of critical pedagogy that has Hegelian-Marxist origins to it—critical pedagogy in this regard is essentially a philosophy of praxis, one that acquires its emphasis within the contextual specificity of particular class struggles. Unlike many North American critical educators who are mainly concerned with subjective or discursive manifestations of oppression (which, in themselves, surely are not unimportant), I am more concerned with the structural foundations or conditions upon which various antagonisms take root (racism, sexism, etc.): the exploitation of human labor within capitalism. Whereas between 1985 and 1994 I was primarily concerned with cultural production, since that time I have been concerned with the conditions under which humans materially reproduce themselves.

Marcia: Can you expand on this?

Peter: To make this idea clearer, it is necessary to place the question of praxis within the larger question of consciousness in general and the development of class consciousness in particular. I have recently had the opportunity to read some interesting work on the biological roots of consciousness by Maturana and Varela, work that is making quite an impact among friends and colleagues of mine in Latin America. There is certainly something useful in their approach to human biology as grounded in autopoietic systems. According to Maturana and Varela, we enter into language through our linguistic coupling with others; we know, for instance, those linguistic interactions play a role in the recurrent coordination of social actions. Language arose through the process of socialization, particularly cooperation, as humans continued

to increase their capacity to make distinctions and engage in linguistic reflection, and the appearance of the self is essentially a distinction in a linguistic domain. Surely, it is in language that the “I” or the “self” arises as a social singularity defined by the operational interaction in the human body of the recursive linguistic conditions in which this singularity is distinguished—as Maturana and Varela so presciently note—since this accounts for the way that we are able to maintain linguistic operational coherence by means of a descriptive recursive identity as the “I.” We need to admit, too, that our “linguaging” is a social phenomenon; it is performed as a social coupling within the historical context of human interaction. There is no pre-given consciousness, in other words.

This is very compatible, I believe, with the way I approach the concept of human consciousness/praxis within my practice of critical pedagogy. Language, in this sense, does not reflect knowledge as much as it refracts it. That is, in Maturana and Varela’s terms, language is not a tool to reveal the objectivity of an outside world as much as it is a form of behavioral coordination—a social-structural coupling—that brings forth the world as an act of knowing. Here, it is co-ontogenetic coupling that produces our identities as essentially a “continuous becoming” through a permanent linguistic trophallaxis. In this case, it becomes necessary not to presuppose an objective world with a fixed point of reference in order to adjudicate the descriptions of the world that we continually bring forth in our coexistence with others. I would amend this perspective somewhat. In doing so, I would turn to historical materialist analysis and Marx’s notion of consciousness. Maturana and Varela’s perspective is essentially that “knowing is doing” and that to presume a fixed objective point of view by which to judge our actions is essentially untenable since it is tantamount to assuming a view from nowhere. Here, we see an emphasis on knowing as experience, where experience is in the same sense both a poesis and praxis. Norman Fairclough makes the point that language figures in material social process as an element of these processes dialectically related to other elements; in other words, it figures in the reflexive construction of these processes, which social actors produce as an inherent part of these processes. Discourse analysis can help us to understand how language functions in hegemonic struggles over neoliberalism and how struggles against neoliberalism can be partly pursued in language.

Surely there is some truth to this, but the problem is that many postmodernist educationalists stop here and thus remain mired in the trap of an ethical relativism out of which they find it hard to escape. Too often, they study the representations of the world as if they were the things that they represent. It is not the signs that produce capitalist culture; clearly signifiers are as much the products of capitalist society as they are representations that help shape it. Surely, the whole process of consumption is not the prime mover of capitalism but a result of the forces and relations of production. The fact that all theories of the world are partial and provisional—to cite a mantra of many postmodernists—does not make the world unknowable. Surely, there are approximations of the truth that are invaluable in knowing the world. In my view, critical pedagogy becomes a means not only of acknowledging language as a complex system of mediation through which we glean approximations of the world but also of developing a historical understanding of how social structures work as mechanisms of such mediation.

I agree that social structure mediates—in a multifaceted and multilayered sense—language and consciousness and that modes of production of material life condition the language we use to make sense of our everyday social life. Modes and relations of

production condition all of our social, cultural, and intellectual life, which is not the same thing as arguing that all of social existence can be reduced to them. In this way, I believe we should work towards developing a general theory of social reality by analyzing the process of historical development. It is interesting to note some parallels that Maturana and Varela have with Marx, who believed that knowing was a form of doing, knowing that comes from concrete activity of being in the world.

Marcia: Your early work was already related to Marxism, but now it seems much more connected to it. Some of your works locate the weaknesses of postmodernism and replace them with Marxist perspectives. How would you explain your shift from postmodernism back to Marxism? What were the issues that, let me say, had pushed you back to Marxism?

Peter: In answering this question, let me say that I don't want to reject—in the main, at least—my former work, which was informed by a critical postmodernist perspective. While this work had its limitations, I always attempted to address the importance of struggling against capitalist exploitation, racism, sexism, and homophobia, as well as other issues; neither do I want to denigrate the work of other postmodernists unfairly. I have a new book that I edited with Mike Cole and Glenn Rikowski and Dave Hill that delves into most of the central limitations of postmodernist perspectives. To be fair, postmodern theory enabled me to think through the many and variegated issues of identity construction within the context of contemporary U.S. culture and lifestyle issues. But over the year, I became increasingly concerned that if we are simply little more than an “other” to somebody else’s “other,” staring at each “other” in an endless hall of mirrors, as a surfeit of differences produced in the “tain” of these mirrors as some unending signifying chain that descends from the sky like Jacob's Ladder in the middle of nowhere, we need to do more than affirm our right to difference as a call for dignity and respect.

I began to critique postmodern rebellion as a rebellion without a rationality, without an argument, where signs are set in motion in order to shape consciousness at some “raw” (as opposed to “cooked”) incarnation of unreason, where significations hustle the signifiers for the cheapest (i.e., most simple) meaning, and where social life is reduced to barroom conversations among political drunkards trapped in a sinkhole of slumbering inertia and collapsing heresies. That is not to say that I don't believe there is a place for an aesthetics of rebellion or that we cannot venture into the non-rational (or even the irrational) in order to challenge the system. But we need an overall philosophy of praxis to give our rebellion some conceptual and political ballast. We need to engage in something more fundamental, which I take to be class struggle to create the conditions in which dignity emerges from the material conditions of having enough to eat, a place to sleep, and the possibility of becoming critically literate about the world in which we inhabit, a world where resources such as oil are determining the future of global relations between nations and affecting the lives of millions of innocent people killed in imperialist wars and who are forced to migrate to other countries or who are forced to suffer because of embargoes and other forms of economic terrorism—a place where cowboy capitalism enflames an unprincipled frenzy of economic deregulation causing financial impoverishment and insecurity for the vast majority of the world's poor.

In postmodernism's rejection of grand historical narratives, of central struggles that teleologically define history, of the pure historical subject, and in its argument that knowledge is constituted in diffuse power relations—that is, in discourse (which is for postmodernists the sole constitutive element in social relations)—has helped to

pave the way for important discussions of the role of language in the ordering and regulation and reproduction of power. But the work of postmodernism and its perfunctory vocabulary of “difference” has been in the main insufficient in helping me to understand in a more nuanced way the historical shifts within the globalization of capitalism—and I am talking here about transnational finance capitalist enterprises, those ungovernable and anarchistic capitalist movements, and the permanent structural unemployment—conditions that are cruelly manifesting themselves everywhere today and which are devastating the entire globe. There are some postmodernists who have written with great sensitivity and erudition about issues of globalization but many others who have betrayed an understanding of contemporary capitalism that is, I believe, woefully rife with misconceptions and fundamental errors. Most of them are unable or unwilling to make the connection between globalization and imperialism, which I think is a crucial flaw. For me, it is important to operate from a critique of political economy within an international framework of opposition to U.S. imperialism, an imperialism that is grounded in super-exploitation (especially of colonial and female labor) through economic, military, and political aggression in defense of the interests of the United States “Homeland” (a very Teutonic-sounding word).

For me, the postmodernists all too willingly, but by no means in all cases, detach cultural production from its basis in economic and political processes; that is, culture as a signifying system is all but sundered from its constitutive embeddedness in the materiality of social life. To put it yet another way, the relationship between cultural artifacts or commodities and their material basis is viewed by many postmodernists as little more than epiphenomenal, or only tenuously connected to the production of value. Difference is rendered opaque in that it is often unhinged from its historical embeddedness in colonial/imperialist relations. Signification doesn’t take place in some structural vacuum, frozen in some textual netherworld, defanged of capitalist alienation. It is a process that occurs in historical contexts, through modes of production and circulation tied to specific social relations that produce and reproduce value formations. Anyway, I found that the work by many postmodernists devalued or downgraded and in some instances scuppered altogether the material basis of cultural production.

Of course, Marcia, I agree that culture cannot and should not be reduced to its material base, but neither can it be dis-embedded from it. That is the crucial issue. With this in mind, Marxism is indispensable in challenging the ideology of capitalism—i.e., the imperial hegemonic bloc of the transnational capitalist class—through both counterhegemonic struggle and the struggle for proletarian hegemony, through attempts at creating a united front against imperialist capitalism and the internationalization of slave labor—a united front that has as its goal the redistribution of power and resources to the oppressed. The key here is to understand that capitalism is no longer self-reinforcing; it needs to expand its markets constantly, invading each nook and cranny of the globe through colonization, war, competition, and military aggression. Imperialism is the carotid artery that enables capital to flow to the farthest reaches of profit maximization.

I don’t want to knock everything about postmodern theory since clearly there have been important insights in this work. My overall perspective is that postmodernism often reduces class struggle to a Nietzschean “will to power” which expunges the whole notion of “necessity” out of history, out of temporal progression. Many postmodernists in the United States are engaged in “identity politics” where they cen-

ter their struggle around their racial, gender, or sexual identities. While these struggles can be very important, many of the new social movements based on race and gender identities sever issues of race and gender from class struggle. I find that this conveniently draws attention away from the crucially important ways in which women and people of color provide capitalism with its super-exploited labor pools—a phenomenon that is on the upswing all over the world. Postmodernist educators tend to ignore that capitalism is, according to Eileen Wood, a ruthless “totalizing process,” which shapes every aspect of our lives and subjects all social life to the abstract requirements of the market through the commodification and fetishization of life in all of its myriad dimensions. This makes a “mockery” out of all aspirations to autonomy, freedom of choice, and democratic self-government.

Marcia: How does your version of critical pedagogy situate Marxism?

Peter: As Valerie Scatamburlo-D’Annibale and I have argued, for well over two decades we have witnessed the jubilant liberal and conservative pronouncements of the demise of communism. History’s presumed failure to debar existing capitalist relations has been read by many self-identified “radicals” as an advertisement for capitalism’s inevitability. As a result, the chorus refrain “There Is No Alternative to Capitalism” chimed by liberals and conservatives has been buttressed by the symphony of post-Marxist voices recommending that we give socialism a decent burial and move on. Within this context, to speak of the promise of Marx and socialism may appear anachronistic, even naïve, especially since the postmodern intellectual vanguardist anti-vanguard has presumably demonstrated the folly of doing so. Yet we stubbornly believe that the chants of “there is no alternative” must be challenged for they offer as a *fait accompli* something about which progressive leftists should remain defiant—namely, the triumph of capitalism and its political bedfellow, neoliberalism, which have worked together to naturalize suffering, undermine collective struggle, and obliterate hope.

I make the point here that Marxism is not built upon an edifice of all-knowing totality. It does not offer a blueprint for an alternative to capitalism. It is a form of revolutionary praxis insofar as it explores the contradictions within capitalist social relations, knowing full well that the abolition of class society is not a certainty, it is only one possible outcome of many. Critical revolutionary pedagogy, for me, adopts a perspective that knowledge is praxis; it is transforming action. In this sense, objective truth becomes a practical question. What concerns me more is the value form in which our labor is exercised. How do we produce value? Surely, it is the value form of our labor that produces capitalist ideology—in that the value form of our labor within capitalist social relations is what conditions human thought at its roots. This ideology is fostered by the imperial-sponsored circulation of market ideologies through right-wing think tanks and NGOs (nongovernment organizations). Thinking and consciousness arises from our interactions with the material world, the world in which we labor. Our social existence—embedded as it is in the material world—is what produces our consciousness. Critical agency becomes, then, from this perspective of conscious, a form of revolutionary praxis, knowing the world by bringing it forth and bringing it forth by interacting with it, by changing it. The question is, What direction should we move? And that question constitutes the present debate. Well, it isn’t much of a debate in the U.S. since questions about socialism and alternatives to capitalism are the kinds of questions that are raised by those who are now called “enemies of civilization.”

Marcia: How does all of this factor into your rethinking of critical pedagogy?

Peter: The larger goal that revolutionary critical pedagogy stipulates for radical educationalists involves direct participation with the oppressed in the discovery and charting of a socialist reconstruction and alternative to capitalism. However, without a critical lexicon and interpretative framework to unpack the labor/capital relationship in all of its capillary detail, critical pedagogy is doomed to remain trapped in domesticated currents and vulgarized formations. The process whereby labor-power is transformed into human capital and concrete living labor is subsumed by abstract labor is one that eludes the interpretative capacity of rational communicative action and requires a dialectical understanding that only historical materialist critique can best provide. Historical materialism provides critical pedagogy with a theory of the material basis of social life rooted in historical social relations and assumes paramount importance in uncovering the structure of class conflict as well as unraveling the effects produced by the social division of labor. Today, labor-power is capitalized and commodified, and education plays a tragic role in these processes. According to Rikowski, education represents what he refers to as the links in the chains that bind our souls to capital. It constitutes the arena of combat between labor and capital—a clash between titans that powers contemporary history we know as the class struggle. Schools therefore act as vital supports for, and developers of, the class relation, the violent capital-labor relation that resides at the very heart of capitalist society and development.

Marcia: Can you share your thoughts on your idea of teachers as transformatory intellectuals? What is needed to be done in this regard, and how are we to do it?

Peter: Well, there is a problem with how educators have domesticated the work of Gramsci on the topic of organic intellectuals. Postmodernists overestimate the “partially autonomous” space created by civil society, and while their intentions are often good ones, they have no program for socialist struggle; in fact, many of them abhor the very idea of socialism. They have effectively remade Gramsci in terms more acceptable to the bourgeoisie. It becomes very important in this regard to examine Gramsci’s use of the term “civil society” within his overall analysis of the state. According to educators such as John Holst, Gramsci viewed civil society as part of the “hegemonic” aspect of the state that essentially worked to balance the coercive aspect of the state. Civil society, while clearly a contested terrain, is a site where the ruling class exerts its hegemony over the social totality.

It is not a form of complete control. From this perspective, the most radical elements of civil society must work to build working-class solidarity in a postrevolutionary society. For Gramsci, working-class organic intellectuals are to bring socialist consciousness to the working class, that is, to give the proletariat a consciousness of its historic mission. If there was spontaneous rebellion, then according to Gramsci, this should be an educated spontaneity. Gramsci’s conception of the long struggle for proletarian power is one that mandates organically devised ideological and political education and preparation, including the creation of a system of class alliances for the ultimate establishment of proletarian hegemony as well as the development of workers councils. These developments are part and parcel of what Gramsci called the historical bloc, consisting of organizations and alliances as well as a permanent organization of specialists (organic intellectuals) coordinated by the party who are able to assist the working-class move from a class in itself (the objective class created by relations of production) to a class for itself (a subjective understanding of its position in production and its political mission). So, essentially, revolutionary pedagogy is committed to revolutionary praxis against the power of the state.

Now, I am not saying that the struggle to build organic intellectuals today is identical to the struggle that Gramsci articulated in his day. We inhabit quite different historical and sociopolitical contexts. I see the challenge of transformative (organic) intellectuals today as developing strategic international alliances with anticapitalist and working-class movements worldwide, as well as with national liberation struggles against imperialism (and I don't mean here homogeneous nationalisms but rather those that uphold the principles of what Aijaz Ahmad calls multilingual, multidenominational, multiracial political solidarities). Transformative intellectuals should be opposed to policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank on "undeveloped" countries because such measures are the actual cause of economic underdevelopment. Transformative intellectuals should set themselves against that which the Community/Labor Strategy Center here in Los Angeles links to the systematic cultivation of racist ideology, reactionary nationalism, xenophobia, male supremacy, and misogyny. Of course, racism and sexism spreads independently of the material basis for imperialism.

I elaborate further on your question, Marcia. In discussing responses to the imperial barbarism and corruption brought about by capitalist globalization, James Petras makes some very useful distinctions. For instance, he distinguishes stoics, cynics, pessimists, and critical intellectuals (categories that encompass those who serve the hegemony of empire, from the prostrated academics who bend their knees in the face of capitalism while at the same time denouncing its excesses to the coffee-sipping intellectuals of Soho) from what he refers to as irreverent intellectuals (who serve the cause of developing revolutionary socialist consciousness and a new internationalism). The stoics are repulsed by the "predatory pillage of the empire" but, because they are paralyzed by feelings of political impotence, choose to form small cadres of academics in order to debate theory in as much isolation as possible from both the imperial powers and the oppressed and degraded masses. The cynics condemn both the victims of predatory capitalism and their victimizers as equally afflicted with consumerism; they believe that the oppressed masses seek advantage only to reverse the roles of oppressor and oppressed. The cynics are obsessed with the history of failed revolutions where the exploited eventually become the exploiters. They usually work in universities and specialize in providing testimonials to the perversions of liberation movements. The pessimists are usually leftists or ex-leftists who are also obsessed with the historical defeats of revolutionary social movements, which they have come to see as inevitable and irreversible, but who use these defeats as a pretext for adopting a pragmatic accommodation with the status quo. They have a motivated amnesia about new revolutionary movements now struggling to oppose the empire (i.e., movements by militant farmers and transport workers) and use their pessimism as an alibi for inaction and disengagement. The pessimists are reduced to a liberal politics that can often be co-opted by the ideologists of empire. Critical intellectuals frequently gain notoriety among the educated classes. Professing indignation at the ravages of empire and neoliberalism and attempting to expose their lies, critical intellectuals appeal to the elite to reform the power structures so that the poor will no longer suffer. This collaborationist approach of critical intellectuals creates a type of indignation that appeals very much to the educated classes without asking them to sacrifice very much.

In contrast to all of the above categories, the irreverent intellectual, Petras argues, respects the militants on the front lines of the anticapitalist and anti-imperialist struggles. Petras describes them as "self-ironic anti-heroes" whose work is respected

by activists working for a basic transformation of the social order. He notes that irreverent intellectuals are “objectively partisan and partisanly objective” and work together with intellectuals and activists involved in popular struggles. The irreverent intellectuals admire people such as Jean-Paul Sartre, who rejected a Nobel Prize in the midst of the Vietnam War. Irreverent intellectuals are careful to integrate their writing and teaching with practice, and in this way they are able to avoid divided loyalties.

Marcia: Can the existing schooling system, which prepares selfish capitalist pseudo-humanitarian professionals, lead us to a struggle for social justice?

Peter: For those of us fashioning a distinctive socialist philosophy of praxis within North American context, it is clear that a transition to socialism will not be an easy struggle, given the global entrenchment of these aforementioned challenges. Joel Kovel argues that the transition to socialism will require the creation of a “usufructuary of the earth.” Essentially, this means restoring ecosystemic integrity across all of human participation—the family, the community, the nation, the international community. Kovel argues that use value must no longer be subordinated to exchange value, but both must be harmonized with “intrinsic value.” The means of production (and it must be an ecocentric mode of production) must be made accessible to all as assets are transferred to the direct producers (i.e., worker ownership and control). Clearly, eliminating the accumulation of surplus value as the motor of “civilization” and challenging the rule of capital by directing money towards the free enhancement of use values goes against the grain of the existing capitalist society.

Marcia: Now, I ask you, is class struggle relevant today?

Peter: That depends on what you mean by class struggle. Critical revolutionary educators believe that the best way to transcend the brutal and barbaric limits to human liberation set by capital is through practical grassroots movements centered around class struggle. But today, the clarion cry of class struggle is spurned by the bourgeois left as politically fanciful and reads to many as an advertisement for a Hollywood movie. The liberal left is less interested in class struggle than in making capitalism more “compassionate” to the needs of the poor. What this approach obfuscates is the way in which new capitalist efforts to divide and conquer the working class and to re-compose class relations have employed xenophobic nationalism, racism, sexism, ableism, and homophobia. The key here is not for critical pedagogues to privilege class oppression over other forms of oppression but how capitalist relations of exploitation provide the backdrop or foundation from which other forms of oppression are produced and how postmodern educational theory often serves as a means of distracting attention from capital’s global project of accumulation. I am arguing that capitalism is not inevitable and that the struggle for socialism is not finished—it has barely begun.

Marcia: What are some of your concluding thoughts?

Peter: I would like to comment briefly again on the role of teachers and how it needs to change in a world rife with war and terror brought about by a number of forces that include but are no means limited to religious fanaticism, globalized capitalism, over-production, neoliberalism, and the resource wars engaged in by the leading imperialist powers, with the United States serving as the most carnivorous Alpha Male of all these “civilized hyenas” (Lenin’s term). Because there appears to be no outer perimeter to capital’s destructive overreach, I see the role of teachers as that of transforming the world, not just describing or interpreting the world. It is constantly reshaping it-

self to meet the challenges of harmonizing relations among human beings with each other and with nature in a world convulsing in chaos. Critical educators must increasingly confront at both regional and global levels the crisis of overproduction, the continuing use of surplus value as the key to historical acceleration and social progress, ecocidal development policies and practices, and economic, cultural, and military imperialism that holds much of humanity in the combustible thrall of violence and terror. The role of the critical educator follows Marx's clarion call to transform the world and not be content with describing or interpreting the world from some frozen hinterland of presumed objectivity; his call requires a complex understanding of the ideological dimensions of teacher work and the class-based, racialized, and gendered characteristics of exploitation within the capitalist economy and its educational, administrative, and legal apparatuses. And it demands from us a living philosophy of praxis. What is the use of critical revolutionary pedagogy if it cannot help us to discover ways of feeding the hungry, providing shelter for the homeless, bringing literacy to those who can't read or write, struggling against the criminal justice system to stop it from its war on Blacks and Latinos who are imprisoned in this country in numbers that greatly exceed their percentage of the population—in fact, the prison population of the U.S. is the largest in the world. We need to create spaces and sites for the development of critical consciousness and grassroots social activism both within the schools and outside of them and in both urban and rural spaces where people are suffering and struggling to survive on a daily basis. And we need to discover ways of creating—and maintaining—a sustainable environment.

I have described in recent work critical pedagogy as the performative register for class struggle. (I am using performativity here in a sense different than Judith Butler does). It is praxiological and is occupied with real bodies, toiling bodies, sensuous bodies, bodies bearing the weight of generations of suffering under capital and as a result of imperialist wars. Consequently, revolutionary critical pedagogy sets as its goal the decolonization of subjectivity as well as its material basis in capitalist social relations. It seeks to reclaim public life under the relentless assault of the corporatization, privatization, and businessification of the lifeworld (which includes the corporate-academic-complex) and to fight for new definitions of what public life should mean and new formations that it can take. We need to realize that civic public life (as distinct from the state) itself is in a state of crisis with all kinds of conflicts between workers and their bosses. We can't just exhume some notion of public from the past and apply it to the present. We need to struggle for qualitatively new and different forms of public life, while we gain some sense of direction from past struggles and accomplishments. As we lurch along the battered road towards socialist renewal, we edge closer to the social universe of which Marx so famously spoke. Our optimism may be sapped by literally centuries of defeats, yet we need to keep our spirits alive and our vision of what must be done clear-headed and measured. Of course, my success in this struggle has been modest. I am attempting to refine a philosophy of praxis on groundwork already set by people such as Paulo Freire and Raya Dunayevskaya. I am only trying to walk modestly behind their far-reaching reflections.

I advocate one more point in closing—it is this: As we begin the task of removing Marx from the museum of history, we need to affirm the central role that class struggle plays in the determination of history. We also need to remember that there are no guarantees that socialism will win the day. That will depend upon us.

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