

Traveling the Path of Most Resistance: Peter McLaren's Pedagogy of Dissent

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Ken McClelland: *In the wake of the kind of confusion and horror generated by the recent attacks on the United States, its leaders have responded with confidence – their answer, among other things, involving the forceful display of democracy abroad in what we might assume will be an expanding web. It seems to me that this brash confidence belies the real confusion that can be the only result of such terror tactics. To your thinking, do confident answers in this case represent the easy way? How might those who are attempting to profess education in the wake of such traumatic events start coming to terms with the questions not being asked, and what might a few of those questions be?*

Peter: Thanks, Ken, for offering me an opportunity to put a few of my ideas on the table for your readers to consider. Long before the Bush gang took power (illegally, in my view) in January 2001, the present architects of U.S. foreign policy at the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), recognized the need to maintain the dominant position of U.S. capitalism by advancing such American values through a policy of 'peace through strength.' It has turned out to be more like peace through war. Permanent war.

Americans like to plump for the Bush gang's tough stance against terrorism while forgetting that transnationals who are flooding the market with cheap and subsidized food are forcing millions of farmers into bankruptcy, including thousands per week in the U.S. Forgotten are the million of urban homeless and unemployed and those cannot afford medical insurance. Forgotten is the environmental degradation in the Homeland, and the toxic waste we are dumping not just on Native American lands but also exporting to developing countries as the solution. Forgotten is California's energy crisis that was stage-managed by Kenny Boy Lay, the darling of Bush W., who still runs free even after the collapse of his company, Enron. Well, the corporate media helps us, forget. And FOX-News virtually *commands* us to forget. As I have tried to document with Valerie Scatamburlo-D'Annibale, Ramin Farahmandpur, Greg Martin, Noah DeLissovoy and Nathalia Jaramillo in a torrent of articles over the past year, ultra-right wing mouthpieces have been busily trying to craft George W. Bush as a fraternity brother version of Ronald Reagan, while labeling critics as un-American and unpatriotic. Recently, pro-war columnists

and radio and television gas bags have begun a testosterone-driven campaign to have anti-war dissidents arrested by invoking the Sedition Act of 1918. It has become dangerous to think, to ask too many questions, or to look beyond the surface of whatever commentary is served up to us by politicians, the military, and the infantilizing screeds of talk-radio pundits.

As far as linking Bush military strategy to neo-liberal economics, my focus, Ken, has been on monopoly capital theory which traces the developments in finance capital, the concentration and centralization of capital as part of a new phase of neo-liberal globalization, stagnation tendencies in the capitalist center and imperialist exploitation in the countries located on the periphery (developing capitalist economies).

Well, we know that all the talk by the U.S. ruling elite about exporting democracy really boils down to exporting neo-liberal free market ideology, policy, and practice. In my view, neo-liberal economics is incompatible with democracy, and later on I'll try to give you a rather technical answer directly from Marx—*Capital*, volume 1 to be precise—that speaks to why I feel this to be the case. Occupied by the military forces of the U.S. and British coalition, Iraq is slowly being turned into a vassal state—a protectorate, if you will—of its conquering imperialist powers. The Security Council of the UN granted these occupying forces full powers to control the economy and the future politics of Iraq which it is doing by virtue of a campaign designed to terrorize the population into submission. We've already read about the thousands of civilians who have been—and continue to be—killed. We have seen what happened to Iraq's cultural heritage in the mass lootings, likely encouraged by the US administration, and now its national wealth—i.e., oil—will be sold in order to pay US corporations, who, without bidding, have been granted huge reconstruction contracts. If, in Iraq, citizens decided by free election to keep their oil socialized, then the US would never permit that election to stand. The US occupying powers are saying that the Iraqis must take 'baby steps' toward democracy before they will be permitted to govern themselves in full (the US has such a colonial view of the Iraqis it is sickening, and it reminds me of the patronizingly pathetic way the Anglo-Europeans viewed the Indians or African slaves: as underdeveloped children).

The US is prohibiting elections until the conditions are ripe for a government to be elected that will favor the institution of free-market capitalism. They need to propagandize first, and get their ideological machinery institutionally in place. And they need to build a loyal capitalist class, with the help of their imported Iraqi exiles (Iraqi workers are already complaining that their wages were higher when Saddam's state tightly controlled the economy). And, of course, they need to purge the socialists and communists. Then, when the occupying powers are assured that the government will remove any impediments to letting the US and other developed democracies exploit their cheap labor and natural resources, then—and only then—will they be given a green light to hold elections. And God forbid it if the Iraqis wish to elect an Islamic fundamentalist government. (Of course, the US helped to cultivate the most reactionary Islamic fundamentalists possible when it worked with bin Laden and Pakistan's secret service to help expel the Soviets from Afghanistan.) And what will happen when Iraqi citizens start to press for the right to organize independent unions and to collective negotiation? History has shown that the US will militarily pummel or covertly destabilize any country that refuses the great dream of free-market capitalism, because, frankly, the US needs the markets (it is trying its best to topple Venezuela and it has failed for decades to finish off Cuba). Anything considered remotely socialist is linked to the evil of the gulag. The key point here is that whether they opposed the war or not, all countries that are at the mercy of the international institutions that are devoted to neo-liberal capitalist globalization (G-8, World Bank, IMF, European Union, or "free-trade" agreements like the FTAA on the American continent) are forced to implement policies of "structural adjustment" and counter-reforms that are totally directed against rights that have been gained through courageous and relentless struggle by workers over decades.

Even the United Nations (although it had a minor revolt by the Security Council over the war in Iraq) is perceived by many in the US as a feral socialist body that attempts to impede the will of the United States, even though historically it has genuflected to the interests of U.S. imperial policy-making on nearly every occasion.

One thing to keep in mind is that the US has always acted militarily to pursue its imperial interests and maintain its economic hegemony. As the philosopher Hobsbawm (2003) has pointed out, the imperial reach of the U.S. differs from that of Britain a century ago in that the U.S. does not practice colonialism but relies on dependent and satellite states, resorting to armed intervention when the natives get restless and start refusing to buckle down. Whereas the British empire was based on a singularly British purpose, the U.S. is based on a universalist

conviction that the rest of the world should follow its example of free market capitalist democracy.

But the Bush Doctrine has relegated the notion of just war to the realm of absurdity. There is, as Ellen Meiksins Wood argues, no more real aim to war, since its results can never be achievable. The means—attack by the most powerful military ever known—are no longer proportionate to the ends—eliminating evil-doers. The economy, just like evil-doers, is boundless. It's not just that the means are disproportionate to the ends—attacking countries like Afghanistan whose GNP amounts to less than a B-52 bomber—but when you have an open-ended declaration of perpetual war, what achievable goals can you hope to postulate in order to justify it? And Meiksins Wood argues how this notion of perpetual war, this war without end, *answers the needs of this new imperialism, by the universality of capitalist imperatives*. Anyway, suffice it to say that the Bush gang has emerged as an indispensable guarantor of 'super-profits' for drive to world economic domination. [Think about this, Ken, in the context of education for a moment. We now have the concept of "life-long learning" that is designed to replace the principle of a basic public school education before entry into the workforce. This reduces workers to human resources designed to serve the new flexibility of the corporate sector and the internal needs of individual companies. In other words, the concept of lifelong learning means that workers could be compelled to work at any job, at any age, and under any conditions that the employer saw fit. This is paving the way for NGOs to take over the business of education, as it has already done in places such as Haiti. Education must be de-linked from the IMF, the World Bank and the international financial institutions since the multinationals see a potential market in education of US\$2.2 trillion dollars a year. Given the crisis in world capitalism, corporations cannot afford to lose this potential market. Thus, one of the battles we are fighting is the privatization and dismantling of education in any form: private teaching; subcontracting or externalization of public school and university work to private companies, associations, or non-governmental organizations (NGOs); transnational "free-trade" agreements; decentralization and the fragmentation of public services; the establishment of voucher systems and the substitution of "competencies" for "qualifications." (These points were made at the recent International Conference Against War and in Defense of Public Education was held in Paris, on June 14-15, 2003.)]

For a while it seemed that capitalist imperialism could do the work of what formerly was accomplished by military means by imperial states and colonial settlers. This is no longer the case. The new imperialism needs a doctrine of war, but the doctrine of the former 'just war' is no longer sufficient. It needs a new doctrine of war—a doctrine of

endless war, of war without boundaries. It needs a new model of imperialism, so watch how the US rebuilds Iraq—with particular emphasis on how it restructures public services, education, labor codes, etc.

You are familiar, I am sure, with the frequently invoked quotation made famous by Prussian military officer, Karl Marie von Clausewitz (1780-1831): “war is the continuation of politics by other means” (cited in Meszaros, 1993, p. 18). However, Istvan Meszaros notes that this definition no longer is tenable in our time. This is because such a definition “assumed the *rationality* of the actions which connect the two domains of politics and war as the continuation of one another” (2003, p. 18). For this definition to hold, war had to be winnable—winnability in war was its absolute condition, for even a defeat in war would not destroy the very rationality of war between competing nation states. This absolute condition for Von Clausewitz’s definition no longer exists, maintains Meszaros. If we consider that today, the objective of a winnable or feasible war is tied to the objective requirements of imperialism, which is “*world domination* by capital’s most powerful state, in tune with its own political design of ruthless authoritarian “globalization” (dressed up as ‘free exchange’ in a U.S. ruled global market)” (2003, p. 18). This situation is clearly unwinnable and could not be considered a rational objective by any stretch of the imagination. War as the mechanism of global government is untenable because the “weapons already available for waging the war or wars of the twenty first century are capable of exterminating not only the adversary but the whole of humanity, for the first time ever in history (2003, p. 19). Meszaros warns that Bush’s National Security Strategy “makes Hitler’s irrationality look like the model of rationality” (2003, p. 19).

Once Iraq, for instance, is made sufficiently vulnerable to the rules of the imperial marketplace, the US no longer needs to rule by military occupation. But Iraq must always be threatened by military force if it no longer complies. The smashing of Iraq was also a lesson for other countries who defy free-market imperatives. The cruel irony here is that US military and economic imperialism is most certain to promote more terrorism than it is able to prevent. The US is after total war as a form of unilateral world domination. Now if we want to talk about the world system today, then I would follow again the arguments made by Enrique Dussel and argue that we can locate the dependency of less developed countries at the level of competition and the distribution of surplus value. Were it not for space limitations, I would focus here on Marx’s notion of the fall of the rate of profit as a result of the growth of monopoly capitalism or as simultaneous with the growth of the mass of profit, which will take us into the whole arena of overcapacity or overproduction – a

situation that I hold in large measure responsible for driving the recent imperialist hegemony of the United States. That might be a good discussion for another interview.

It is important for any educator to spend time with real people, in real life struggles, to understand how they engage with society from the bottom up. It is important to be part of struggles outside of the seminar room. My own activity as a revolutionary socialist is premised on the notion that democracy as a set of discourses or principles or political philosophy is simultaneously re-functioned at the level of everyday social relations as an instrument of exploitation. And where I have become the most outspoken is in my critique of liberal reformism. It seems obvious to me that most of the educational left speaks from a discourse of reformism. However, in my own work, I refrain from dogmatically posing an either-or option of reformism or revolution but rather take a both-and dialectical position. Dialectics is about mediation, not juxtaposition, most surely, and I approach the reform versus revolution question dialectically. Of course we have no choice but to act within capitalist social relations but my position is that while we are living and struggling within the belly of the beast we need to develop a vision of working towards a society outside of capitalism’s value form of labor. I don’t offer a blueprint, but a glimpse of some possibilities. My work on developing a post-capitalist society is mostly in the subjective “what if” mode and not the imperative “it must look like this” mode. However, in my critique of capitalism I am less tentative. In fact, it has been described as downright ruthless. We need to be clear that we don’t have on the agenda in the United States a revolutionary perspective, especially in education. We have militant movements in the US, true, but most of these operate within the larger optic of reformism. Approaching reformism from the perspective of the classical distinction posited between reformism and revolution by Luxemburg and Lenin (in the era of the Second and Third Internationals), Alex Callinicos has written some insightful commentaries on the dangers of reformism (reformism used here as the gradual improvement of capitalism rather than the revolutionary transformation of society) that I believe need to be rehearsed. Now I know I make a lot of people in the field of education nervous—especially in a post-9.11 environment—when I talk about the revolutionary transformation of the state. I am not talking about armed revolution here but rather the ability of workers to take control of society through means other than its violent overthrow. I am reminded of the revolution that occurred in Paris in late February 1848, triggering revolutionary activity throughout most of Europe. During this time Marx had returned to Paris from Brussels to help organize the communist movement and

he was adamant in discouraging armed resistance as reckless adventurism. He urged winning a democratic, political revolution with a view towards pushing ahead to achieve socialism. When I talk about revolutionary transformation, I am talking about education, the development of revolutionary social consciousness as a direct challenge to reformist consciousness, a critique of political economy rather than tinkering with capitalist redistribution, resistance that at times would surely constitute civil disobedience and protracted class battles, but I am not talking about armed revolution, so let's be clear on that. And I have always taken a strong stand against terrorism, whether that is state terrorism or individual acts of terrorism. Well, back to the concept of reformism. Even militant anti-capitalist movements can be reformist if they attempt to redress neo-liberalism by strengthening the state, but at the same time do little to challenge the basis of the inter-imperialist rivalry we are seeing throughout the globe (in contrast to the insights of Hardt and Negri, I might add, in their world bestseller, *Empire*). To defeat reformism, we need patience, obviously, and we need to move in a number of directions. As Callinicos notes, we need to create a united front, which means winning the working-class base of the electorate over to the struggle for a socialist alternative to capitalism. We need to build our struggle around demands and through organizational forms that can be shared by diverse political forces. This means increasing efforts at radicalizing the labor movement, which works overwhelmingly within a reformist logic. Struggles along this line have never been easy in the United States. Since the Battle of Seattle, there have, however, been promising signs. The anti-war movement, especially the ANSWER (Act Now to Stop War and End Racism) coalition, was able to bring together divergent groups that took a strong stand against the war, and against US imperialism, although it did take a lot of media hits for its association with the Workers World Party. Strategically, it makes little sense to work toward the construction of a mass revolutionary party here—the objective conditions just don't exist. I favor the notion put forward by Callinicos, which is that of regroupment, which means revolutionary Marxists working on a non-sectarian basis in which there exist multiple interpretations on what revolutionary socialism might mean but which takes seriously the concept of building an anti-capitalist movement within the context of the notion of a permanent revolution. In other words, any effective anti-capitalist struggle needs to be international in scope. Now, within education, my role is singularly more modest. My goal is simply to educate teachers and teacher educators about Marx's ideas and the Marxist tradition, and dispel the lies and distortions that have crusted over Marx's legacy since the United States emerged victorious from the Cold War. This was never an easy task, and has become more difficult

now in the United States since 9.11. I am also committed to the notion that teachers need to become part of the united front in their personal lives. When you see the country—and nearly all countries of the world, in fact—ruled by a small cadre of the capitalist class, serving the neo-liberal agenda which has led to the virtual impoverishment of working-people and the destruction of the planet's ecosystems, and the superexploitation of women throughout the globe, how is it possible to remain, as an educator, detached from larger social movements struggling against this?

Ken McClelland: *It is assumed that certain pre-conditions are necessary for intelligent criticism of existing social conditions. Those who profess education can play an integral part in deciphering and establishing some of these pre-conditions. Can you speak to what some of these pre-conditions for intelligent criticism might be, and what challenges do today's Professors of Education face when so many of society's associations seem bent on taking arms against such efforts?*

Peter: Preconditions for generating a critical pedagogy that can address the world situation today—and thereby avoid its current domesticated incarnations in college classrooms—means a lot of things, obviously. I can catalogue a few of them. Especially after 9.11, it means a societal commitment to freedom of speech, a willingness to challenge the current Bush regime's definition of patriotism (where an analysis of the root causes of terrorism is tantamount to aiding and abetting the enemy), a willingness to permit open investigations of the U.S. government which means its connection to its intelligence agencies, what these agencies were willing to share with the United Nations, an open examination of U.S. attempts to destabilize foreign governments, its links to transnational corporations, and a commitment to critical self-reflexivity and dialogue in public conversations. Greater efforts must be made to enforce the separation church and state in principle as well as more pressingly as a means of countering the Likudites in the Bush administration as well as Bush's own rabid brand of Christian fundamentalist beliefs (Bush is trying to turn the US into a covert theocracy). It also means struggling for a media that does not serve corporate interests. How can you have a democracy when you have the ideological state apparatuses in the hands of the corporations, which in turn are connected to the military industrial complex, etc.? Which in turn, develop monopolies, which in turn shamelessly take up the agenda of the Bush regime (FOX TV and Clear Channel are just two examples). I could talk about any one of these, and more, but I want to concentrate on another pre-condition: Understanding the fundamental basis of Marx's critique of capitalism. Since I am well aware that Marxism is fairly marginalized in the academy—and especially the revolutionary critical

pedagogy that has come to inform my work as a Marxist humanist—I will take the time to situate my first answer with a bit of a theoretical overview. Since critical pedagogy’s current phase of theoretical gestation does not deal adequately with the issue of class as a social relation, I feel it necessary to dispatch the reader for a couple of paragraphs into the very technical and, for those who are not accustomed to it, the sometimes esoteric and off-putting language of Marxist theory, but I don’t see any way to avoid that. I hope that your readers will bear with me for a few paragraphs. Answering this question will serve to form the basis of the position that I have been taking in my work since coming to California and grounding my work in Marxist humanism. It might seem at first blush that I am trying to avoid the specifics of your question but this background information is crucial for subsequent answers. In other words, I believe this concept of value linked to the exploitation of labor-power—something British educationalist, Glenn Rikowski has written about in powerfully nuanced ways—is a crucial precondition for having an extended discussion about educational transformation. Without it we are stuck in what I have called the logic of ‘reformism’ which I will discuss later on in the interview.

About a decade ago I decided to revisit Marx to get a better grasp of how capitalism works at its roots. Much of this was due to frequent visits to Latin America and spending time with Marxist activists there, and from conversations with British educationalists such as Paula Allman, Glenn Rikowski, Mike Cole, and Dave Hill as well as US educationalists such as John Holst, Wayne Ross and Rich Gibson. Rikowski encouraged me to revisit Marx’s *Capital*, vol. 1, and especially the labor theory of value and to explore the distinction between labor and labor-power. So I dusted off my volumes of Marx, and Marx and Engels, and began a new journey into Marxist theory. Well, let me get started. Casting aside for the moment current debates on the whole question of the ‘knowledge economy’ and ‘fictitious capital’ and related issues of ‘cyber-capitalism’ aside (after all, our space is limited) I have come to the conclusion, along with many Marxists, that capital as a form of exploitation takes place fundamentally at the level of production, not at the level of circulation or exchange or in the sphere of consumption (which is not to say that these other spheres are unimportant in our analyses). It is to be aware of Marxist fundamentals—what Marxists and liberation theologians and others have been saying for decades—that the worker does not sell his or her labor to the capitalist, but rather he sells his labor-power or his labor capacity (that is, his skills, level of education, competencies, etc). The worker sells this labor-power as a commodity at a price or money equivalent of the value of his or her labor-power, and the value or price paid by the capitalist is determined by the

quantity of labor required to produce and maintain the worker’s existence (whatever it takes to educate the worker in the required skills and whatever is necessary to raise children who can replace the worker on the labor market, etc.). The worker in return gets no real wealth or power over commodities in general, but only power over the commodities that are needed to maintain him and perpetuate the class of laborers of which the worker belongs. The key point here—and really, this a very fundamental idea known as the labor theory of value—is that human labor-power expends more time than is necessary for its maintenance, and this labor power creates no value for the worker, but does create surplus value for the capitalist, for, in other words, private interest. Profit, or surplus value, is the result of living labor-power, or the exploitation of the living labor of workers. The value of labor-power is measured by the amount of labor required to reproduce itself as labor-power. The value of this special commodity known as labor-power is concretized in a certain amount of consumer goods that enable workers to sustain themselves and reproduce their offspring. When the value of consumer goods diminishes, the value of labor-power also diminishes and this remains the case even though the physical quantity of good consumed by the worker remains the same. Likewise, if the productivity of the worker increases, the value of labor-power may decrease. Living labor produces all value, including the surplus value that valorizes capital, or that turns capital into a profit for the capitalist. The wages received by workers is only part of the value that they actually produce. The capitalists appropriate as their surplus value or profit the other part of the value produced by the workers. Living labor is subsumed by capital. That is, the labor-power of the worker is the source of all value in capitalist society. Capital, therefore, is not a self-sufficient totality, but exists only by incorporating living labor outside of itself. In fact, a good argument has been made by the philosopher Enrique Dussel that all forms of surplus value (profit, interest, rent, etc) are derived from the surplus value of workers. The value of a commodity, because it is realized in circulation, gives the illusion that it arises from the process of circulation, and not production. In effect, labor-power produces nothing (its use value is that it produces exchange value), but when it is exercised through the act of laboring, it produces value. Put another way, labor power is a commodity, but of a special kind. Its use value is the act of laboring itself and the creation of value. This commodity is purchased by the employer. The secret of capitalism is in the use that is made of this commodity by the capitalist after its purchase. Here is the key. Before anything is actually produced by the worker, the worker is already paid for his or her wealth-creating capacity or the availability of his capacity to labor. So that the proportion of the values which the worker produces by the actual act of laboring is more than the

values he or she receives as equivalent to the availability of his or her labor-power. But this unpaid labor takes the semblance of an equal exchange. In other words, surplus value is uncompensated labor. In effect, it is what the wage worker gives to the capitalist without receiving any value in return. Surplus value, then, is the difference between the value created by work, and the amount the worker needs in order to subsist.

The point I want to stress is that once you understand capital as a social relation—the subsumption of concrete labor by abstract labor, the negation of concrete/particular labor time by abstract/general labor time—well, then you need to consider irrefutably that this social relation is one of exploitation and it presupposes or characterizes all social relations within capitalism. This is the ironclad logic of capital. I mean, if it really is a matter of improving the level of consumption in materialistic terms of all workers, then there is no reason to get rid of capitalism. A worker's standard of living would continue to improve without marking any lessening of the degree of exploitation! In reality, workers cannot prevent the value of their own labor-power from diminishing or the theft of their surplus value from increasing exponentially. In other words, capitalism is given ballast, or bolstered by a corrupt morality, or by a set of ideologies that perpetuates the false notion that relations between capitalists and workers is one of free and equal exchange, that what in fact the workers receive in terms of wages is equal to their contribution to production. Similarly, it is a lie to assume that capitalists receive as surplus value or profit, a contribution equal to their role in production given the factories and machines that they own and control. All of capitalist society is a theft of the surplus value of workers. Society becomes an independent, alienated entity from humankind precisely through the process of commodity fetishism. Workers hallucinate their labor as a property of the products themselves and the value form of labor that is produced. And of course, the corporate media help to perpetuate this mass hallucination.

The point I wish to underscore, Ken, is that the standard of living of workers can rise without this representing any diminution of their degree of exploitation, just as an improvement in the economy can actually result in greater numbers of people fired from their jobs.

The point Marx is making is that capitalism is a system of slavery. Workers are not allowed to reproduce themselves unless they agree to labor for free for a certain number of hours during the day in order to provide surplus value for the capitalist. The workers need the permission of the capitalists to feed themselves and their families. This permission will be denied unless the workers agree to these terms, to work a certain length of time for the exclusive benefit of the capitalist. Now I have deliberately not addressed the issue of bourgeois property relations as

they emerged on the basis of the development of commodity production as the shape by which the laws peculiar to commodity production assert themselves. But I don't want to get more technical here than I have already. Well, many educators today are writing about global capitalism, and that's a good thing. But not enough of them are looking at Marx's central premises surrounding the commodification of human labor and its value form.

Ken McClelland: *Democracy as a form of Government and democracy as an ideal for the guiding of one's conduct in life represent two different aspects of what democracy might be about and for. Can you speak briefly to what this means for Professors of Education, to the notion that teaching for intelligent and effective citizenship might involve criticism not only of the external political sphere, but also of one's own personal sphere of conduct?*

Peter: Let's look at the epistemological and axiological basis of democracy, just for a moment. I very much oppose judging a society as more just or less just primarily on the basis of maximizing minimal well-being for the poor and the powerless. Relative improvement in conditions for the subaltern, for society's poor and powerless, for the castaways, for "los olvidados", does not cut the mustard for me. Nor did it for Marx, from whose work I draw my inspiration. Your question gives me an opportunity to explain why, I the main, I shy away from the concept of education as social justice when the concept of social justice generally is reduced to the redistribution of material wealth. I think to understand my position, I need to address this issue. My own work has moved away from a liberal, Rawlsian or Habermasian conception of social justice premised on the idea of a democratic society preoccupied by the logic of reformism, to, as I mentioned earlier, the idea of a socialist society actively engaged in revolutionary transformation. Let me give you the conceptual basis of the reason that my work has taken this shift. When the production of inequalities begins to affect the weakest, only then does capitalist society consider an injustice to have occurred. Daniel Bensaid, following Marx, points out the irreconcilability of theories of justice—such as those by Rawls and Habermas—and Marx's critique of political economy. Liberal theories of justice attempt to harmonize individual interests in the private sphere. But Bensaid points out, correctly in my view, that you can't allocate the collective productivity of social labor individually; the concept of cooperation and mutual agreement between individuals is a formalist fiction. You can't reduce social relations of exploitation to intersubjective relations. In the Rawlsian conception of the social contract, its conclusions are built into its premises. Bensaid elaborates on his Marxian critique of Rawls by arguing that within political theories of justice,

the concept of inequality is tied to the notion of creating a fair equality of opportunity and that these conditions of equal opportunity are to serve the greatest benefit to the least advantaged in society. It is possible for inequality to exist as long as such inequalities make a functional contribution to the expectations of the least advantaged. Bensaid puts it thusly: “This hypothesis pertains to an ideology of growth commonly illustrated the ‘shares of the cake’: so long as the cake gets bigger, the smallest share likewise continues to grow, even if the largest grows more quickly and the difference between them increases.” The political conception of justice, be it Rawls or Habermas, doesn’t hold in the face of real, existing inequality premised on the reproduction of the social relations of exploitation. The political theory of justice only makes sense in a world devoid of class conflict; in a world primarily driven by intersubjectivity and communicative rationality. Here, class relations and property relations are dissolved in a formal world of inter-individual juridical relations. This viewpoint accepts a priori the despotism of the market; the whole question of production—and I would return you to the technical explanation of the labor theory of value in my previous question in which I start with Marx from production in order to ground reproduction—is displaced, in fact, is evaded. Let me quote Bensaid again, who writes: “Capitalist exploitation is unjust from the standpoint of the class that suffers it. There is thus no theory of justice in itself, only a justice relative to the mode of production that I proposes to improve and temper, sharing the old and false commonsensical view that it is pointless to redistribute the wealth of the rich, as opposed to helping them perform their wealth-creating role better, with a view to increasing the size of the common cake!” (2002, p. 156). As long as you focus one-sidedly on distribution, you create a cover, an alibi in fact, for the social relations of production, for the exploitation of workers by capitalists. Privatization, denationalization, and schools subjected to the guidelines of the private sector – promoted by the OECD, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and the European Union – are the logical result of the logic of profit maximization that drives capitalism. There is talk now of developing a world market of education in the framework of the General Agreement on Trade of Services (GATS). The privatization of education is becoming generalized to the degree that it is being perceived as fundamental to democracy.

If you want to talk about the distribution of objects of consumption—and education certainly has become one of them—then I would, after Marx, urge you to talk about the distribution of the conditions of production, and, of course, we could now enter into a conversation about NAFTA, and the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, and development and underdevelopment.

But these arguments are now significantly established in the radical educational literature so let’s stop here.

Ken McClelland: *Some have proposed a new paradigm for the left that is much more Darwinian in its approach to understanding and changing those conditions that afflict the poor, the oppressed, and the otherwise disadvantaged within society. It appears to maintain the core of those things that are and have been integral to a genuine left bearing (fighting unnecessary suffering of the weak and poor, of the exploited and the cheated), yet offers a Darwinian rationale for cooperation that takes seriously both competitive self-interest and altruism. Peter Singer’s short, but provocative book dealing with this theme is a case in point, and it offers a kind of counter-narrative to Marxism. For those who profess education from a traditionally left perspective, but who recognize that a certain ennui and impotence has befallen the left in recent times, what is your take on the possibility of a revitalized cooperative left emanating from a more genuinely Darwinian perspective? Is there a real, and perhaps more realistic, alternative here to Marxist and neo-Marxist thinking or will it just become the plaything for old fashioned social Darwinist demagogues?*

Peter: Well, you are referring here to the book, *A Darwinian Left*, by Peter Singer. I’m familiar with that book but not especially familiar with left Darwinism as a contemporary movement. Robert Wright’s book, *Nonzero*, is on my list for future reading, despite a glowing endorsement by Francis Fukuyama. Let’s look at Singer’s conception of left Darwinism for a moment. On the one hand, I like the fact that Singer condemns the dangers of a reactionary sociobiology but on the other hand, I seriously question Singer’s notion of utilitarianism as the basis of the principle of human nature. Not to mention that Singer really has presented an underdeveloped and in many respects misguided critique of Marxism. His notion that Marx got it wrong because of the history of failed communist governments is puerile. It’s too silly even to debate this notion. Singer also goes on to claim that Marx’s most serious sin is his idea that there is no fixed human nature. Human nature supposedly changes with every change in the mode of production. And Marx supposedly committed another serious sin when he worked from the perspective of the perfectibility of humankind. According to Singer, Marx and Engels claimed to have discovered the laws of human historical development that would lead to communist society and that according to these laws, the victory of the proletariat was ensured. Singer is critical of Marx’s notion that social existence determines consciousness. Whereas a Darwinian sees greed, egotism, personal ambition and envy as a consequence of our nature, the Marxist would see these as the consequence of living in a society with private property and the private ownership of the means

of production. Without these social arrangements, Singer believes that, according to Marx, the nature of people would be transformed such that people would no longer be concerned with their private interests. Darwinians believe that the way in which the mode of production influences our ideas, our politics, and our consciousness is through the specific features of our biological inheritance, and that if we want to reshape society, we need to modify our abstract ideals so that they suit our biological tendencies. According to the Darwinian perspective, all those who profess to be guided by motives other than self-profit—what Marx would call ‘gross materialism—are the unwitting victims of an idealist illusion. Prescinding from this enfeebling yet all-too-familiar interpretation of Marx, let’s examine that famous sentence of Marx’s (in Marx’s Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*) of which Singer is so critical: “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.” As far back as 1980, Jose Miranda pointed out that Marx’s notion of determination must be understood in a way that is not deterministic because the German verb *bestimmen* is all too often translated as “to determine” and this verb means a lot of things unrelated to determinism. (Miranda notes that this major mistake in translation can be linked to translations into languages derived from Latin, where the basic word appears as a form of *determinaire*.) In Marx’s use of this term he in no way excludes the concept of human freedom or contingency; in fact, he uses the term dialectically. Marx makes a fuller explanation of what he meant by consciousness in *German Ideology*. Marx never forgot that just as circumstances help to form human beings, human beings also help to form circumstances. In contrast to what many critics of Marx claim, human beings for Marx are far from the passive actors of historical processes. Marx did not believe that there was no such thing as human nature. He argued that humans are biological, anatomical, physiological and psychological beings. He argued that an individual’s human nature must be addressed, but must also be understood in terms of how it has been modified in each historical epoch. In fact, Marx went so far as to contrast constant or fixed drives (such as hunger and the sexual urge) which are integral and can be changed only in form and cultural direction and the relative appetites (which are not an integral part of human nature and which owe their origin to conditions of production and communication). Humans were species-beings whose natures were clearly trans-historical and relatively unchanging in many respects (see Fromm, 2000). Marx distinguishes clearly between the laws of nature and the result of humans making a choice. Clearly, human beings produce their social relations just as they produce material goods; they are their own products as

well as the products of history. And of history, it is quite clear that Marx did not view history mechanically, as if it was some wind-up sequence of causes and effects Marx is interested in the laws of tendency within economics, not history’s predictive capacity or laws of historical inevitability. History for Marx was always pregnant with possibility. Marx did not reject the notion of human nature so much as a universal and timeless concept of human nature. Marx clearly could identify human characteristics that are universal and historically invariant and which set limits to the plasticity of human nature. This contrasts with the view of Rorty, who believes there are no biological or metaphysical limits on human plasticity. My friend Richard Litchman presciently notes that “the very notion of human nature as a tabula rasa is self-contradictory. Even a blank slate must have such properties as will permit the acceptance of the chalk, as the wax accepts the stylus, the inscribing tool. The issue is not whether there is a common nature, but what precisely that nature is” (cited in Sayers, 1998). When human beings make themselves their own creator by producing their own means of subsistence, then this signals the beginning of human history. The act of production creates new needs, something that Marx referred to as the first historical act. It is important to see Marx’s understanding of human nature within the dialectical relationship of needs and productive powers. New needs are created through the productive activity we engage in to satisfy our universal needs, and this activity has to be seen in terms of the social relations which are themselves ultimately determined by such needs (Sayers, 1998). New forms of productive activity may result, and, indeed, new productive powers. Needs never arise in a vacuum. That is why in concrete conditions, human nature *in general* does not exist. Marx is interested in the social development of needs, beyond those necessary only for biological survival. Singer’s left Darwinism is not very helpful as a ground for social explanation without understanding, for instance, how jealousy, or selfishness has been realized in social individuals who are the products of a specific mode of production or particular historical period. From a historical materialist point of view, nature is a precondition of human development and not an explanation of it. You can’t explain the social in terms of the concept of the natural. The laws of natural evolution can’t be transferred to social evolution. For Marx, social and moral development is judged on how they impact on the growth of human nature in terms of the creation of powers and capacities. The stress in Marx is the development of new needs. As Sean Sayers notes: “Paradoxical as it at first seems, the ideal is the human being ‘rich in needs’. For on Marx’s view this is equivalent to the development of human powers and capacities, the development of human nature” (1998, p.

164). True wealth, for Marx, lies precisely in the development of human nature. That is why I prefer Marx's Hegelian historicist approach to human nature over Singer's utilitarian and consequentialist approach to human nature. When Singer claims that the Russian revolution failed because the revolutionaries failed to consider the invariant need on the part of human beings for power and authority, such an argument is as specious as Yak dung. Now what I like about Singer's work is his interest in the evolution of human co-operation. And he claims that most human beings won't co-operate unless it serves their own interests to do so. His notion of reciprocal altruism based on an evolutionary view of human psychology certainly is worth investigating. I like the fact that he wants a less anthropocentric view of our dominance over nature, and to cease our exploitation of non-human animals (something that appeals to my commitment to animal rights), and his commitment to stand on the side of the weak. My commitment is that the development new and creative vital powers will be best served in the struggle for socialism.

Ken McClelland: *I just finished a book on American Progressivism by Roberto Unger and Cornel West, and in it they make what might seem a few radical suggestions. One is that voting should be made mandatory (much like jury duty) with the penalty of a fine to those who do not vote. The other is that the major commercial television networks should be required to grant ample and equal free time to candidates campaigning for office. This would be a condition of their licensing rather than a service paid for by taxpayers. Certainly, one might anticipate grumbling about protection of rights from the 50% plus of the population who presently do not vote, and from CEOs of the television networks who might deem such a measure unfair market interference. Is there a broader democratic good that might be served by enacting such measures that might lead to more genuine education of and for the people?*

Peter: At some level, ensuring that all the people will vote, that the entire *vox populi* will be heard, could be beneficial—I would like to think that if more Americans voted in the last election, that we wouldn't have the Bush administration. But of course, we have voter fraud in the United States, and what happened in Florida with the Bush mafia is a good example. What happened there—especially to ensure thousands of African-American votes would not be counted—was a shameful moment in U.S. history. But what good is voting—except as a mere formalist gesture—when the options are so perversely narrow? When you are really making a choice between a hard neo-liberalism and a harder neo-liberalism, between a benevolent imperialism and a more pernicious one under the imperial imperative of the Bush Doctrine of endless and boundless war. Tens of millions of protesters

expressed throughout the world, for example on February 15th, with the rejection of the war on Iraq. It was the most unpopular war in history. And yet elected officials ignored the will of the people. It takes a fortune to win elections and they say the United States has the best democracy money can buy. It has the best media money can buy, too. And monied interests are linked to the military industrial complex—just take a look at who owns the major television stations and then see what else is produced by these companies—well, you can trace it all to the killing machines used to support the genocidal activities of Latin American dictators and of White House administrations who have carried out military strikes throughout the world fairly regularly, ever since the end of WWII. Of course, there are some real differences between the Republicans and the Democrats, and some important ones, such as a woman's right to choose, etc. And, yes, I don't want to trivialize that. So having two options I guess is better than having none, even though the two options you are given are still cut from the same imperialist cloth.

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