

Critical Pedagogy Reloaded

An E-Interview with Peter McLaren

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Glenn: It's great to have this opportunity to interview you for *Information for Social Change*. I would like to start off with the change of emphasis in your most recent books, principally *Capitalists and Conquerors* (2005) and *Teaching against Global Capitalism and the New Imperialism* (with Ramin Farahmandpur, 2005), where you have moved towards framing a critical pedagogy specifically *against empire*. Thus, compared to your earlier *Che Guevara, Paulo Freire and the Pedagogy of Revolution* (2000) it appears to be a kind of 'critical pedagogy reloaded' with the sights set on the empire of capital in general and American imperialism in particular. In some respects, post 9/11 I guess this is not a surprising shift. I am intrigued regarding how you see it, Peter.

Peter: It's good to have this chance to dialogue with you again, Glenn. I agree that the shift toward a discussion of imperialism is not so surprising for those that have been following the trajectory of my work, from a preoccupation with Deweyan critical pragmatism, the Frankfurt School, post-structuralism and then on to a Marxist humanism. My recent book, *Red Seminars*, chronicles my collaborative work over the past 15 years. You can detect the moments where it arches toward a Marxist humanism yet still see where it is lodged in postmodern theory. Yes, I have joined the ranks of the Marxist educationalists (who number but a handful in the US)! That shift has marginalized my work even more (notably within North America, but not within Europe or Latin America). That's partly because there's little discussion of empire and imperialism in the education journals. Whilst there has been a ramp-up of *generalized* critique of the Bush administration, it hasn't led to many substantial treatments of US militarism and empire by educationalists.

Glenn: Which is where your most recent work enters in?

Peter: Yes Glenn, in my recent work I characterize the era directly preceding our neo-liberal dispensation as a time when the US was a creditor nation. Now it's a debtor nation. The globalization of capital marks the internationalization of capitalist relations of exploitation, entailing the subjection of national capital by international capital. Its main concomitant is the astounding flexibility of capital and markets, making it seem unassailable. The overall objective of American strategy in this 'Age of Globalization' is deregulation combined with absolute minimal levels of expenditure for governments. Nevertheless, capital still needs the protection of nation-states; it can be challenged by groups in transnational struggles. Of course, there is a plethora of views regarding relationships between imperialism by territorial conquest and by market power, and how nation-states fit into this picture. I don't have space to go into these here. In my recent work, I don't attempt to resolve the differences among these perspectives on imperialism. I offer them as theoretical weapons for educators to wield in their struggles to understand contemporary geopolitics in the context of capitalist crisis.

Glenn: You have written a lot about the significance of class in recent years. What can critical pedagogy do to problematise class relations in research and writing, but also in work with students?

Peter: Well, one contribution that my work in critical pedagogy has tried to achieve has been to introduce your work, Glenn, to a wider North American audience, and of course that of Paula Allman, Dave Hill, and Mike Cole, and other British Marxist educationalists. Don't forget, the criticisms of my work by you and your *camaradas* in the 1980s and early 1990s were greatly responsible for overturning my orientation to postmodern theory and for my revisiting Marxist theory, leading to my eventual embrace of Marxist humanism (through the additional work of Peter Hudis and the *News & Letters* collective whose work revolves around the writings of Raya Dunayevskaya). It was your 'Scorched Earth' writings, primarily in the mid-nineties (Rikowski, 1996 and 1997), that helped to resurrect Marxist educational theory; a theory that had languished in a state of inertia since the early 1980s. One contribution that your work, and those of your *companera/os* cited above, achieved, was to reveal the perils of the dominant Weberian conception of class; a perspective that woefully reduces class to a 'mode of social differentiation' or a feature of lifestyle or identity where 'superstructural' differences are reified, and with reduced social tensions or contradictions that exist largely at the level of culture and subjectivity. Critical educators who operate within a Weberian class perspective are often driven by a politics that is gradualist and evolutionary and limited to reforming the polity through careful increments (more democratic decision-making, etc.) without

fundamentally altering the market and commodity-exchange. Your work on education and the value theory of labour (particularly the discussions on aspects of labour-power) constitutes a major breakthrough for the development of a distinctly Marxist educational theory. What I like about your current work on this is your emphasis on capital as a mode of being, as a unified social force that flows through our subjectivities, our bodies, our meaning-making capacities. Schools serve as a certain 'habitus' that nourishes labour-power. They are a medium for its constitution and its social production. But schools do more than nourish labour-power. Schools additionally *condition* labour-power in the interests of the marketplace through an emphasis on application for specific capitals. That is, through generating practical education and training that is related to both aspects of labour-power and attributes of labour-power. You break this down even further, Glenn, to sectors of capital, national capital, fractions of capital, individual capital, and functions of capital (Rikowski, 2001). Schools trade in educating for these various capitals. But because labour-power is a living commodity, and a highly contradictory one at that, it can be re-educated and shaped in the interests of *building socialism*. Labour-power, as the capacity or potential to labour, doesn't have to serve its current master: capital. It only does this when it engages in *the act of labouring for a wage*. Because individuals can refuse to labour in the interests of capital accumulation, labour-power can therefore serve another cause: the cause of socialism. Critical pedagogy tries to find ways of wedging itself between the contradictory aspects of labour-power creation and, among students, creating different spaces where a de-reification, de-commodification, and decolonization of subjectivity can occur. And, at the same time, where the development of a Leftist political subjectivity can occur (recognizing that there will always be socially-and-self-imposed constraints). Revolutionary critical pedagogy (a term coined by Paula Allman) is multifaceted in that it brings a Marxist humanist perspective to a wide range of educational issues. The list of topics includes the globalization of capitalism, the marketisation of education, neo-liberalism and school reform, imperialism and capitalist schooling, and so on. For me, revolutionary critical pedagogy also offers an alternative interpretation of the history of capitalism and capitalist societies, with a particular emphasis on the United States.

Glenn: How does this operate, Peter?

Peter: It works within a socialist imaginary. A revolutionary critical pedagogy operates from an understanding that the basis of education is political and that spaces need to be created where students can imagine a different world outside of the capitalist law of value, where alternatives to capitalism and capitalist institutions

can be discussed and debated, and where dialogue can occur about why so many revolutions in past history turned into their opposite. It looks to create a world where social labour is no longer an indirect part of the total social labour but a *direct* part of it, where a new mode of distribution can prevail not based on socially necessary labour time but on actual labour time, where alienated human relations are subsumed by transparent ones, where freely associated individuals can work towards a permanent revolution, where the division between mental and manual labour can be abolished, where patriarchal relations and other privileging hierarchies of oppression and exploitation can be ended, where we can truly exercise the principle 'from each according to his or her ability and to each according to his or her need', where we can traverse the terrain of universal rights unburdened by necessity, moving sensuously and fluidly within that ontological space where subjectivity is exercised as a form of capacity-building and creative self-activity within the social totality. This is social space where labour is no longer exploited and becomes a striving that will benefit all human beings, where labour refuses to be instrumentalized and commodified and ceases to be a compulsory activity, and where the full development of human capacity is encouraged. It also builds upon forms of self-organization that are part of the history of liberation struggles worldwide, such as those that developed during the civil rights, feminist and worker movements and those organizations of today that emphasize participatory democracy. Generally classrooms try to mirror in organization what students and teachers would collectively like to see in the world outside of schools: respect for everyone's ideas, tolerance of differences, a commitment to creativity and social and educational justice, the importance of working collectively, a willingness and desire to work hard for the betterment of humanity, a commitment to anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-homophobic practices, etc. Drawing upon a Hegelian-Marxist critique of political economy that underscores the fundamental importance of developing a *philosophy of praxis*, revolutionary critical pedagogy seeks forms of organization that best enable the pursuit of *doing critical philosophy as a way of life*.

Glenn: 'Race' has been another topic that you have written extensively on for many years. What are the special challenges that those on the Left face when teaching 'race' in the US today?

Peter: My frequent co-author, Valerie Scatamburlo-D'Annibale and I just penned the following lines as an opening to an article we are writing: "One of the most taken-for-granted features of contemporary social theory is the ritualistic and increasingly generic critique of Marxism in terms of its alleged failure to address forms of oppression other than that of 'class'." Marxism is considered to be theoretically bankrupt and intellectually *passé* and class analysis is

often savagely lampooned as a rusty weapon wielded clumsily by those mind-locked in the jejune factories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. When Marxist class analysis has not been distorted or equated with some crude version of 'economic determinism,' it has been attacked for diverting attention away from the categories of 'difference' – including 'race'. Marxist analysis is often seen as hostile to race, as positing the reality of class as more important. This may be true for some versions of Marxism. But very often the hostility to Marxism from those whose priority is anti-racism or anti-sexism is a lack of understanding of the race/class/gender problematic that Marxists utilize in their understanding of the social totality of capitalism. Regrettably, to overcome the presumed inadequacies of Marxism, an entire discursive apparatus sometimes called Post-Marxism has arisen to fill the void.

Glenn: So how would you see things, Peter?

Peter: When we claim that class antagonism or struggle is one in a series of social antagonisms – 'race', class, gender, etc. – we often forget the fact that *class sustains the conditions that produce and reproduce the other antagonisms*, which is not to say that we can simply reduce racism or sexism to class. In other words, class struggle is the specific antagonism – the generative matrix – that helps to structure and shape the particularities of the other antagonisms. It creates their conditions of possibility. The unwillingness of many educators to understand this relationship (class as a social relation) has caused the educational Left to evacuate reference to historical structures of totality and universality. Class struggle is a determining force that structures 'in advance' the very agonistic terrain in which other political antagonisms take place.

Glenn: And what is the significance of this for you, Peter, in relation to progressive social transformation?

Peter: Well, for me it is important to bring educational reform movements into conversation with movements that speak to the larger totality of capitalist social relations and which challenge – to use a Rikowskian term – the very matter and anti-matter of capital's social universe. We need to keep our strategic focus on capitalist exploitation if we want to have effective anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic struggles. We need to challenge global capitalism universally, which does not mean we ignore other social antagonisms and forms of oppression, the horizon of which capitalism functions to sustain.

Glenn: How would you approach the general relation between learning for democracy and critical pedagogy, Peter?

Peter: Much work on democracy and education is grounded in a Deweyan, Rawlsian or Habermasian conception of social justice. I have tried to apply a Marxist critique to liberal and Left-liberal conceptions of democracy as a way of inviting educators to think of the forces and relations of production. Here I have been influenced by the work of Daniel Bensaid (2002). Bensaid underscores what is essentially the irreconcilability of theories of justice (such as those by Rawls and Habermas) and Marx's critique of political economy. In the Rawlsian conception of the social contract, its conclusions are built into its premises since it never leaves the pristine world of inter-individual juridical relations. For instance, liberal theories of justice attempt to harmonize individual interests in the private sphere such that an injustice only occurs when the production of inequalities begins to affect the weakest members of that society. But Bensaid asks a crucial question: How can a society allocate the collective productivity of social labour individually? He concludes that the concept of cooperation and mutual agreement between individuals is a formalist fiction that excludes the messy world of class exploitation and the social division of labour. For liberals, inequality is permitted to exist as long as such inequalities make a functional contribution to the expectations of the least advantaged. Bensaid likens this situation to a conception of economic growth commonly conceptualized as 'shares of the cake'. The idea is as follows: so long as the cake gets bigger, the smallest share, *pari passu*, continues to grow, even if the largest grows more quickly and the difference between them dramatically increases. Yet such a conception of justice breaks down in the face of real, existing inequality premised on the reproduction of capitalist social relations of exploitation. This theory of social justice does have some sense to it, but only if we believe that we live in a harmonious world of decision-makers minus class conflict. But we don't inhabit a world primarily driven by inter-subjectivity and communicative rationality. There is an *a priori* acceptance of the despotism of the market in liberal theories of justice. Liberals view as pointless the idea of redistributing the wealth of the rich. They prefer helping them perform their wealth-creating role better, because this increases the size of the common cake. In fact, it echoes the famous words of George W. Bush: 'Make the pie higher!' Yet critiquing this point does not justify inertia: Freire, for example, was very critical of 'militant Marxists' who argued that little could be done to democratize education until class society was abolished. While I am frustrated sometimes with what appears to be an insufficient critique of political economy in his later work, I am a steadfast admirer of Freire. He is undoubtedly one of the most important influences in my work.

Glenn: Your recent writings indicate that 'all is not well' with American democracy (and indeed democracy in all of the most developed capitalist economies): how do you see the role of 'critical educator' in the struggle for democracy, Peter?

Peter: When Bush says that 'the past is over', that 'this is still a dangerous world' filled with 'madmen and uncertainty and potential mental losses' he is speaking in apocalyptic terms that resonate with evangelical Christians who are not known for their appreciation of nuance. When he describes himself as 'misunderestimated' we know that he is intent on following through on his plans. When he affirms that 'families is where our nation finds hope, where our wings take dream' and when he exclaims that we must 'Vulcanize society' or 'make the pie higher', or when he assumes the role of the 'education president' and asks, 'is our children learning' we know that these malapropisms help to endear him to potential voters in America's heartland. He has often been described as somebody most Americans would love to have a beer with in a local bar. So when his administration chooses to rule by the Big Lie, by carefully selecting bits of information to be disseminated by the media, these lies carry considerable credibility; they are credible lies. This has always been the case with respect to the manufacturing of consent by means of the ideological state apparatuses in the US. Teachers become an easily breached conduit for the official narratives of the state because they want to help their students develop a coherent worldview and provide them with an enduring stability, especially in these times of crisis. Faith in the unique moral destiny of the United States seems to increase during times of national crisis along with an intolerance of conflicting views; today, those held by secular humanists or Muslims. So we have school boards in various states offering creationism or intelligent design as credible explanations of the origins of human life that they insist should be offered alongside scientific theories of evolution. In *Capitalists and Conquerors*, Nathalia Jaramillo and I write about this civil religion that serves to frame and define the Manichean Universe of good and evil, the moral universe within which George W. Bush loves to operate.

Glenn: This leaves little critical space for secular humanists, then.

Peter: Yes, it's amazing, Glenn, how secular humanists have become the enemy. Any criticism of Bush by the Left is seen as the work of a Satanic force, or at the very least the work of weak-minded liberals who not only are responsible for the decline in America's moral values, but who also are unwilling and incapable of protecting the United States from terrorists who 'hate our freedoms' and Christian values. Now couple this with the fact that educational Leftists here in the US are largely reluctant to consider

Marxist analyses of political economy in their research and the result is that you get little discussion of how to transform the capital relation itself in the educational literature. That is simply off limits.

Glenn: Then in what ways do US Left educationalists relate to arguments about social change?

Peter: The most that such Left liberal reformists can do is talk about how to reconstitute and revitalize the social contract, how to deepen democratic decision-making and make it more participatory, and to struggle to make civil society more responsible in a bottom-up manner to the needs of the people. In short, you have the Post-Marxist emphasis on radical democracy. Because Left liberals, or radical democrats, fail to recognize class as a matrix that generates the totality of social and political relations, then the liberal-democratic horizon that provides the scope for their pedagogies permits no room to imagine a world outside of the capitalist law of value, outside of capital as a social relation and social force that invades the whole of our existence. Reformers of this ilk seek, at best, a reassertion of productive capital over financial capital in the global economy or call for a global redistributive project, but rarely do they call for transcending the very value form of labour that gives life and lie to the social universe of capital.

Glenn: Right Peter: what kind of educators *do* we need then?

Peter: We need critical educators to help us confront the hydra-headed depredations of capitalism and to analyze how the social power of the popular classes is to be reconstructed. We need to extend to the state those very counter-hegemonic spaces of resistance that are occurring with social movements at the level of civil society. Further, social movements need to transnationalize those struggles. Here is where the progressives in the United States are at a stalemate. I believe, along with Marxist humanists, that we need to become *philosophers of praxis*; that we need to build organizations that both reflect and serve as a medium for the construction of socialism.

Glenn: You've spoken in Latin America regularly since the late 1980s, you've recently done work in Venezuela, met President Chavez, and have conducted seminars on critical pedagogy frequently in Mexico. Twenty years later, education scholars and activists have approached you in various Latin American countries and asked if they could set up foundations and institutes in your name centring on advancing critical pedagogy throughout Latin America. How do you see this development? Is it a final vindication of your work?

Peter: You are referring to the recent creation of La Fundacion McLaren de Pedagogia Critica in Tijuana Mexico, and the forthcoming Instituto Peter McLaren in Cordoba, Argentina. Yes, these were initiated by scholars and activists whom, I suspect, are drawn to the Marxist humanism that undergirds my work in critical pedagogy. I would like to emphasize that these foundations and institutes are not about engaging my work in isolation from the work of other critical educators, but about developing cross-border collaborative work in the general field of critical pedagogy. If my work can serve as a flashpoint in this regard, and in developing a broader anti-imperialist pedagogical movement that is directed at creating socialism, then I look forward to a future of struggle on the streets as much as in the classrooms.

Glenn: Thank you, Peter.

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