Book Review

Peter McLaren.
Capitalists & Conquerors: A Critical Pedagogy against Empire.
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The world is getting smaller, and changes are happening faster. It took Christianity almost three centuries to take over the Roman Empire. The Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, on the other hand, required little more than a century each to display their full effects. In the past hundred years, however, we have witnessed the rise and fall of official fascism, the formal decolonization of the European empires, extraordinary advances in particle physics and cosmology, the parsing of the human genome and revolutionary developments in medicine, several incarnations of rock & roll and, of course, occasional genocides. Moreover, in roughly the last quarter-century, we have beheld the collapse of the Soviet Union accompanied by the loud boasts of triumphal capitalism, the rise of television, computers and the information society, the sudden awareness of ecological degradation and the current enthusiasm for a clash of civilizations that seems to pit fundamentalist Islam against fundamentalist Christianity with no end in sight at least as long as fossil fuels play large in the world energy mix. Each of these and numberless other examples of significant change has involved fundamental shifts in beliefs and behaviour.

As ideological, political, economic, social, cultural, scientific and technological shake-ups occur, they have impacts on the institutional structures, the manifest and latent functions, the content, the expressed purpose and the methods of education. For the most part, teaching and learning are conservative activities in the very best sense of the word. Whether gathering around a fire to listen to the stories of the elders or taking an on-line course for promotion or pleasure, the task of instruction is mainly allocated to those with the special knowledge necessary to maintain cultural continuity and physical survival. We teach and we learn in order to preserve a way of life and to protect our personal places within it.

For almost all of human history and pre-history, education was a communal activity. Lacking much of a division of labour, surplus economic products, differential distribution systems and rigid social stratification—except, perhaps, to establish and maintain gender role specialization—it was assumed that all members of our relatively small communities would be at least minimally skilled in a variety of everyday jobs.

Once our species was effectively domesticated during the long and possibly seamless process of moving from scavenging, gathering and hunting into sedentary agriculture, the nature of education changed mightily.

Special training was needed to equip artisans, orators and gladiators with the particular skills of their craft or vocation and, in time, special institutions of higher learning were constructed in

the form of monasteries and universities to house intellectual elites with their arcane knowledge and esoteric codes of expression and behaviour. Thus, formal education with attendant written texts, examinations and certifications was born, and it was reserved only for the few.

Fast forward to the twenty-first century and formal education has been utterly transformed. Through some shifting combination of the necessity of imparting at least literacy and numeracy to make people minimally competent to participate in a modern political economy, the growing need for proficiency in the management of sophisticated tools, the democratic impulse to allow those with the wit and the will to acquire certificates, diplomas and degrees and, sometimes even the hint that it was both good and useful to encourage as many people as possible to enjoy personal development through knowledge and cultured judgment, the number of educational institutions and the number of children, adolescents and adults who find themselves in a classroom (virtual or otherwise) have grown almost exponentially. Now, technologically advanced urban societies pride themselves on the fact that many of their citizens are still taking lessons in their late teens and twenties, and a number are returning to school again and again as the lifelong learning takes greater and greater hold on our imaginations and leisure time.

Cultural continuity, skills transfer, socialization and indoctrination in the dominant ideology of the time and place are all factors that sustain the educational industry and it would no doubt please established powers that this was the end of the story.

As Marx observed, however, modern economies depend on “constant revolutionizing of production.” Technological, organizational and cultural innovation are all apparently essential in our age. Change, whether vague or well-defined, is the mantra of politicians and producers of goods and services. Moreover, change is now regarded as both good (it implies progress) and necessary (for progress cannot be stopped). Indeed, those who would urge an occasional time-out for reflection or who would counsel adequate discussion of the possible unintended consequences of a new policy or a new product are easily dismissed as dinosaurs, Luddites or saboteurs.

As a result, an important element of education has been limited if not lost. For Plato and Aristotle alike, the disinterested pursuit of knowledge for its own sake was among the highest activities of human life. It was available as a privilege only to those whose wealth and position had released from the necessity of labour. Such necessarily philosophical pursuits did not necessarily impart or transfer useful knowledge, nor did it ensure intergenerational cultural conformity. Sometimes, it could be harshly critical of existing arrangements. Sometimes, it could be revolutionary. It was, in any case, the preserve of the governing class.

Theological, social, political, economic and artistic criticism has long been a consistent current in the broad stream of education. Rarely, however, has academic sniping constituted a genuine threat to the established order; but, rarely has a successful religious, political or metaphysical revolt or insurrection taken place without some sort of grand theoretical scheme proffered with the intent of destroying the legitimacy of what is and legitimating what has yet to be. Whether material or ideational causes are chiefly responsible for momentous transformations remains a matter of controversy, but it is plain to materialists and idealists alike that every material

transformation is accompanied by immense change displays both objective and subjective components.

Without Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence*, the American Revolution would have been a much poorer thing; absent the colonial relations manifest in the mercantile system of trade and commerce, no truths concerning life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness would have been believed.

Today, unless we take seriously the cries of outraged post-feudal associates of Osama bin Laden, there is no coherent opposition to the state and fate of late capitalism. Cries for reform are loud, of course, but few in the Western world contemplate going beyond special pleadings wholly within the framework of existing assumptions about possessive individualism and private property. So, most of us are willing to welcome (or at least to tolerate) reforms that afford equal opportunity to people who have faced discrimination because of race, gender and sexual orientation and therefore the lives of some minorities have improved some. There is a little less rigidity in Western social norms as we learn to accommodate special needs. There are, however, few articulate voices that are being heard which offer a deep and comprehensive critique of the currently dominant societies in the global political economy. If calls for revolution are in the air, they come only from those who are fighting a rear-guard action against modernity itself on behalf of ancient and historically doomed ideologies. In the end, the high-rises of Abu Dhabi will almost certainly prevail over the forces of the Taliban.

Ever since the words of Ronald W. Reagan echoed through Berlin as the Wall came a'tumblin' down almost twenty years ago, the preferred postulation has been that neoliberalism has triumphed, that socialism is dead and that all of the several varieties of Marxism have long since been buried. All that is necessary is to mop up occasional guerrilla hold-outs in a few tropical jungles and outwait the remnants of the trade union movement in the industrial hubs. The workers of the world have united, and they have become consumers like everyone else. To quote the Hon. Bob Rae, the social democratic apostate and possible future prime minister of Canada, "the question is not whether we are to have capitalism, but what kind of capitalism we are to have."

So it is that I come to praise Peter McLaren's book, *Capitalists and Conquerors*. It is an ardent, opportune and imperative critique of the path that the world is taking and of the people who are taking us down, far down, that path. Both a *cri du coeur* and a trenchant analysis of power and society today, it refuses to go quietly into the questionably good night of Wal-Mart nation. It hollers words of protest, paints images of injustice and lays well-deserved blame on those who have brought us to the present moment. Peter McLaren uses strong language to articulate strong ideas. He holds a combination of politicians, business and industry leaders, and advocates of an inflated military culpable for the powerful global attack on liberty and equity. He implies that it is past time to quote President Eisenhower in full when he presciently warned about the "military-industrial-congressional complex." In fact, I'd even add another term to it, and speak of the "military-industrial-congressional-ideological complex." I would include schools and cable news channels and situation comedies on television in the ideological complex. Churches and service clubs too.

Peter McLaren came of age in Toronto, Canada. He is old enough to remember city life in the 1950s and student life in the 1960s. He is currently professor of urban education at the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at the University of California at Los Angeles. That town has lots of people involved in the military and the arms industries, politics, business, education and the mass media. That alone should give him a vast enrolment pool. I doubt if many dive in.

One of the reasons that I would be surprised to see a General or a Senator or a corporate CEO or Tom Cruise in his classroom is that people of that sort are not usually attracted to Marxists. A few students are, and UCLA is large enough that I'm sure McLaren's classes are mostly full.

I say McLaren is a Marxist. I probably shouldn't. He doesn't wrap himself in the scarlet banner and sing the "Internationale," but he does sub-title his chapter on terrorism, "a Marxist Riposte." He also insists that Marx's thought is important, and he is not overly generous to anti-Marxists who dance upon his grave hoping to keep his spirit safely under ground. I still shouldn't say he is a Marxist, though, because it won't get him many more students, or win him many fans among the readers of *The Innovation Journal* or, more importantly, help anyone to understand him better. Moreover, even if he *is* a Marxist, saying so won't help much. There are many, many sorts of Marxists in the fragmented post-Soviet political world, and the movement is becoming patchier all the time. As for McLaren, I also have no idea what sort of Marxist he might be. So, I will abandon the labeling project, and point out the kind of things that he is inclined to say.

Capitalists and Conquerors is important for our purposes because it approaches the critical examination of the domestic and the global political economy from a decisively educational perspective. Pedagogy matters, both in terms of how we teach and how we try to relate our disciplines to the real and the experienced world of students.

True, the essays in this volume (some written in collaboration with Paula Allman, Donna Houston, Nathalia E. Jaramillo, Gregory Martin, Glenn Rikowski and Valerie Scatamburlo-D'Annibale) contain sustained and coherent polemics on such obvious matters as imperialism, war, class conflict and propaganda. More than a few pages are directed to President George W. Bush. McLaren's argument, while familiar, is one of the best examples of its genre. It describes and explains why and how it is that Mr. Bush, with the eager assistance of Vice-President Cheney (or is it the other way around?), contrived to bring imperial political ambitions, neoliberal economic theories, cultural conservatism and a bizarre element of apocalyptic theology together to produce what will be long remembered as one of the most singular administrations in American history, and all before the much-ballyhooed financial crisis of his final year in office. This much, however, would merely amount to a radical assessment of current events.

McLaren goes further. He laments but does not give in to "the ominous resignation produced by the seeming inevitability of capital … even among the most progressive educators." His mission is to build a robust basis for a return of critical pedagogy. He is certainly not content to play in the romper room of capitalism with other children who have subsumed their critique of political economy and are now content to carp about lifestyles, deconstruct television commercials and indulge in postmodern irony—not, at least while billions live on less than two

dollars a day, genocide remains an active political strategy and even the once comfortable industrial middle classes are facing the loss of their privileges and undergoing structural proletarianization.

In McLaren's schematization, the instruments of Marxian analysis and the crucial continuation of concern about "the labor-capital dialectic, surplus value extraction, or the structure of property ownership." These, after all, are not outmoded ways of thought but ongoing principles according to which power is ultimately distributed and powerlessness endured. He is especially interested in the problems of the American academy where "few contemporary critical educators are either willing or able to ground their pedagogical imperatives in the concept of labor in general, and in Marx's labor theory of value in particular." He is eager to rebuild a "critical pedagogy [that] has collapsed into left liberal attempts by progressive educators to remediate the educational enterprise." At stake is the question of whether teachers and students can go beyond establishing a measure of compassion for the underprivileged and dispossessed as part of the emotional arsenal of malcontents, or whether deep and sustained thought can restore genuine praxis.

Peter McLaren is in this for the long haul. He understands and explains well the current malaise on the left. He refrains from chastising those who "take refuge in a sanctuary of assertions devoid of reflection," while demanding the restoration of the concept of labor which, he argues, "axiomatic in theorizing the school/society relationship." Indeed, the classroom itself, offers a stream of teachable moments, for the labor process of the larger society is replicated each day in the labor process of the classroom.

The language is sometimes dense. The internal dialectic of steely analysis and moral outrage is sometimes hard to endure, if only because it discloses how much of our energy we waste on trivialities. At the end, there is a strong message that some may take for inspiration. Reflecting almost whimsically on a precious moment with his granddaughter on a rocky shore, McLaren thinks simultaneously of the "acute 'wasting' among Iraqi children my granddaughter's age [that] has become epidemic" in a land where, "under the banner of democracy, the U.S. military has not become the harbinger of freedom, but the midwife of a new generation of jihadists."

McLaren may not turn the attentive reader into an overnight Marxist, but he will perhaps stir an "excess of life that cannot be commodified or codified, controlled or captured [that can connect] us to our collective struggle." The price to be paid for that consciousness is large, as is the realization (despite the frenzied and furtive pace of the change we can see all around us) that, "echoing Raymond Williams, it will be a long revolution."

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