

Imagining the Impossible: Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy Against the 21st Century American Imperium

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Abstract

This article examines some of the major Marxist-humanist themes that animate the revolutionary critical pedagogy delineated by Peter McLaren in recent years. Among these themes are radical universalism, an interrogation of the capitalization and commodification of human labor, and the interrelatedness of American imperialism and neoliberal globalized capitalism. It argues that McLaren's scholarship provides progressive educationalists with an alternative to those "post-alized" and liberal humanist versions of critical pedagogy that have virtually abandoned all forms of class analysis. It contends that revolutionary critical pedagogy offers a much-needed narrative capable of challenging the most recent manifestations of empire, wars of aggression, and exploitative capitalist relations.

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Introduction

The emotion of hope goes out of itself, makes people broad instead of confining them . . . The work of this emotion requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming . . . Hopelessness is itself, in a temporal and factual sense, the most insupportable thing, downright intolerable to human needs. (Bloch, 1995 [orig. 1959]:1, 3)

The impossible must be imagined if it is to be realized, and it is true sanity to do so. (Kovel, 1991, p. 13)

The quotes cited above appropriately capture the two most important lessons that I have learned from Peter McLaren over the years. Those lessons—to always search for a ray of hope even as the world lurches toward barbarism and to imagine new visions of human sociality that counteract the mind-numbing mantra of TINA (there is no alternative)—were gleaned through reading his many works, personal interactions and communications, and through my more recent collaborations with him. They are lessons which also animate the subsequent engagement with his work offered in these pages. However, before embarking on that task, a bit of personal history is in order.

I first met Peter in 1991. I was then a graduate student working on a Masters' degree at the University of Windsor in Ontario, Canada. Even though I was in the early stages of my program, I knew that my thesis would somehow deal with the topic of "political correctness." At the time, of course, one could hardly escape the deluge of hysterical media accounts proclaiming that the academy had been taken over by unruly cabals of "leftists." Conservative intellectuals and media cognoscenti had managed to paint a picture of campus life reminiscent of Hieronymus Bosch's vision of hell. They demonized the "left"—a catch-all phrase that encompassed feminists, multiculturalists, deconstructionists, Marxists, postmodernists, sixties radicals, and virtually anyone who wasn't white, straight, male and conservative—as a coterie of propagandists; as Orwellian dragoons of group-think who were intent on silencing free expression and imposing the edicts of "correctness" on naïve, vulnerable students. I recall laughing at such far-fetched assertions for the only university that had been taken over by leftists was the one that existed in the paranoid minds of right-wing extremists who despised dissent.

In addition to pursuing my studies, I served as the coordinator of a graduate student colloquium series which sponsored lectures by renowned scholars. I had just begun to explore some of Peter's independent work as well as his collaborations with Henry Giroux and was inspired by his scholarship and the passion and intensity he brought to his writing. With the encouragement of a faculty member, I suggested to my fellow graduate students that we invite Peter to speak at our campus as part of the aforementioned colloquium series. He was then housed at Miami University in Ohio and, within days of receiving our request, accepted the invitation.

In September 1991, he came to our campus and delivered a rousing address entitled "Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Political Correctness" that was covered in the local and regional news. After the lecture, over dinner and drinks, I had the opportunity to engage Peter in conversation. He was warm, funny, and self-deprecating. Almost immediately, he asked about my research interests. When I informed him I was working on the very topic that had been the subject of his address, he said he would send me some of the material he had reviewed in preparing his lecture notes. At the time, I thought the intent of his offer was gracious but never expected him to follow up on it. He did. About a week later, a package arrived in my campus mailbox. In it were the materials he had promised and a note inviting me to keep in contact. That was the beginning of a mentorship and friendship that has

grown over the last fifteen years. It was the first day in a life-long curriculum marked by lessons that are still unfolding—lessons in the politics of hope and the possibilities of radical imagination.

Part I: McLaren and the ‘Old Bearded Devil’^{li}

Of course, it is often difficult to maintain a sense of hope in a world that grows bleaker and more dystopian with each passing day. As I write, the situation in the Middle East has grown even more combustible as Israeli bombs are now raining down on parts of Lebanon while rockets fired by Hizballah are targeting Israel. Meanwhile, the bloodbath in Iraq continues unabated. Tens of thousands of Iraqis have been slaughtered and mutilated. And many, many more have been condemned to slow deaths from malnutrition, poisoned water supplies, and the toxic environment created by the “liberators” use of weapons of mass destruction—particularly depleted uranium. More than twenty-five hundred soldiers have lost their lives in Bush’s imperialist escapade only to have their sacrifice trivialized by the likes of former Fox news personality turned White House Press Secretary Tony Snow. Snow, of course, saw fit to mark the gruesome milestone in June 2006 by referring to the number of casualties as “just a number.” Various estimates place the number of U.S. personnel maimed (in Iraq alone) at over seventeen thousand. Many more have been psychologically traumatized, emotionally scarred for life by the atrocities they have both witnessed and perpetrated. And the savagery continues to be legitimated by “stay-the-course” Bush and his media sycophants as an unfortunate but necessary price of “progress” and “freedom.”

And let us not forget the killing fields in Afghanistan where the Taliban (who were, of course, aided and abetted by the CIA for years) have once again emerged triumphant. Despite Bush and Blair’s [whom Arundhati Roy (2004[a], p. 50) has sarcastically labelled as the “twenty-first century’s leading feminists”] back-slapping photo-ops aimed at convincing domestic audiences about their role in “democratizing” Afghanistan and “liberating” women from the grip of fundamentalism and, despite Bush’s 2001 proclamations about establishing “order” and rebuilding the country after it was reduced to rubble by “coalition” bombs, today, Afghanistan is in shambles and there “is little prospect for improvement in the foreseeable future.” The Taliban have all but “reclaimed southern Afghanistan,” reconstruction efforts have been “miniscule” and there has been no “attempt to establish security beyond the capital of Kabul.” The country “continues to languish in grinding poverty” and there is “less clean water and electricity than before the war” (Whitney, 2006, p. 1). Not surprisingly, Whitney informs us that the only notable developments have been the “American military bases which dot the landscape like lesions on a leper and the oil pipelines that snake through the barren countryside” (p. 1).

Both Iraq and Afghanistan are illustrative examples of what McLaren & Martin, rightfully call one of the most “dangerous, corrupt, and oppressive” periods in American history—a period in which “imperialism has assumed its most mature and brutal character” (2005, p. 199). Contrary to the “official” proclamations that emanate from the Bush administration’s propaganda factory about the magnanimous reasons for war (i.e. protecting the ‘homeland’ and indeed the ‘free world’ from terrorism, spreading ‘democracy’ in the Middle East, liberating populations from tyrannical leaders), these are the days of ruthless empire. As McLaren (2005, p. 1) notes, the “Bush Jr. *junta* took advantage of a tragic terrorist attack” on America and has proceeded to create a “climate of fear”—a “culture of intimidation and hostility” that serves as a “smokescreen for its empire building.” While talk of imperialism once elicited shudders on the cocktail circuit inside the Washington beltway, it has been boldly, even proudly, reintroduced into the lexicon of the American government, the mainstream media, and in what apparently passes for intelligent reflection about the role of the United States in the world.

Today, right-wing warmongers and corporate marauders openly talk about the need for a “strong empire to police an unruly world” (Roy, 2004[b], p. 11) and many openly advocate the use of

violence.^[ii] But they are not alone for even self-proclaimed “liberals” and what Herman (2002) has called the “cruise missile left” have adopted the notion of America’s “good exceptionalism”—that is, the conviction that the United States is a “benevolent power in world affairs,” a “force for democracy and ‘civilization,’” with “unique rights and responsibilities” and motivated “not by greed or power but by the greater common good” (Arnove, 2006, p. 39).^[iii] And Bush, who views “American leadership” on the world stage as a “self-evident moral right” (2006, p. 34) and who seems to think he is on a mission sanctioned by the Almighty, has gleefully assumed his role as Emperor. Given the Bush administration’s audacious and brutally aggressive pursuit of global hegemony, it is easy to conclude—as even many critics on the U.S. liberal-left have—that what is necessary is the simple removal of the neo-conservative militarists from office (Mann, 2003, p. 267). That is precisely the sort of conclusion that McLaren’s work—even his recent scathing indictments of “the Bush gang”—cautions us against. For McLaren well understands that the “latest wars of aggression in Afghanistan and Iraq are simply an intensification of the United State’s distinctly neoliberal agenda, which is to impose old-school American values of capitalist exploitation through a policy of ‘peace through strength’” (McLaren & Martin, 2005, p. 192). Indeed, war and free trade are (mistakenly) viewed as “twin solutions to virtually all the world’s problems” (Juhasz, 2006, p. 3).

In identifying recent military action as an escalation of U.S. led neoliberalism, McLaren unflinchingly shines the spotlight on what should be the focus of substantive left criticism—the very system of capitalism itself. Undoubtedly, American empire is being militantly pursued at the current historical juncture, however, the quest and growth of empire is neither the particular province of the United States nor a mere consequence of the policies of particular nations. Rather, it is the “systematic result of the entire history and logic of capitalism” (Foster, 2006, p. 13). McLaren’s work ups the radical ante by refocusing our gaze on the history and machinations of the capitalist world order in all its ugliness and by being unafraid to use an explicitly Marxist lens to do so. This is especially bold given that Marxian theory has been maligned, for years, by the prevailing centers of intellectual power as “totalizing,” “reductionist,” and even “repressive.” This is particularly true among those who identify with the discursive apparatus of “post-Marxism” that was erected to overcome the presumed inadequacies of Marxism. Post-Marxists (who often go by other names including postmodernists, poststructuralists, postcolonialists, radical multiculturalists, etc.) have tried to entomb Marx’s legacy while simultaneously benefiting from it by penning umpteen elegies about its death.

Within the North American academy, in particular, outlandish caricatures of Marx and Marxism abound. It has become quite commonplace to dismiss Marxism as a form of ideological Neanderthalism, an antediluvian memory invoked by those trapped in the mental furniture of a bygone era. Most often this is accomplished by invoking academic buzzwords (i.e. universalizing, totalizing, essentializing, etc.) which have gained such currency and become so pervasive that it is no longer necessary to explain what these terms imply. Some of the post-al critiques are animated by a widespread reluctance to seriously engage Marx’s oeuvre and a preference for relying on the kinds of distortions found in introductory sociology textbooks. Others are particularly confounding and paradoxical. For while many post-Marxists rhetorically celebrate difference, particularity, historicity and the like, they do not bring these positions to bear when they critique Marx and Marxism—that is, they do not put into practice, methodologically, that which they champion in theory. Rather they construct Marxism as a unified phenomenon informed by a variety of erroneous and naïve assumptions and reject it *in toto*.

Despite the desperate attempts to devise the definitive requiem for Marxism, McLaren reminds us that post-Marxists and anti-Marxists alike have never quite managed to drive the irrevocably terminal nail into that legacy’s coffin. The crypt designed for Marx, while reverential in its grand austerity, has never been quite able to contain his impact on history. As Greider (1998, p. 39) maintains, his ghost still “hovers over the global landscape” for as conditions for the many continue to

deteriorate, as human misery escalates under the rule of globalized capitalism, it is increasingly difficult to ignore Marx. Indeed, when Marx and Engels penned their agitational pamphlet—the *Communist Manifesto*—capitalism was still confined to a few countries. Today, the reign of capital is more absolute than ever and in many parts of the world social conditions are reverting back to “those of the 19th century” (Petras & Veltmeyer, 2001, p. 45). Saad-Filho adds that key passages of the *Manifesto* ring truer today than they did in 1848 as “key features of nineteenth-century capitalism are clearly recognizable, and even more strongly developed, in the early twenty-first century” (2003, p.1).

Ours is a world that is internationally connected but ultimately dominated by the whims of the capitalist class and the agenda of corporate “globalization;” a world where the profit motive reigns supreme and where it subordinates every area of society and every corner of culture; a world where the many are oppressed for the benefit of the few. It is a world where ‘free trade’ has become nothing more than coerced compliance, where local control over economies has been superseded by the most powerful global interests and a world in which “half of the world’s one hundred largest economies are corporations” (Starr, 2000, p. 18). It is a world where ‘consumer choice’ has trumped the notion of citizenship as the pre-eminent right and where ‘freedom’ increasingly refers to “the freedom to structure the distribution of wealth and to exploit workers more easily across national boundaries” (McLaren, 2005, p. 29). It is a world where ‘democracy’ has become nothing more than the “Free World’s whore” and “Empire’s euphemism for neo-liberal capitalism” (Roy, 2004[a], p. 54, 56). It is a world where naked imperialism has clearly made a comeback as the belligerent U.S. administration does the bidding for the global capitalist class. A world where resources such as oil are determining the future of global relations between nations and affecting the lives of scores of innocent people caught in the crossfire of imperial wars and the crosshairs of austere “structural adjustment programs;” a world where cowboy capitalism enflames an unprincipled frenzy of economic deregulation that only exacerbates the financial impoverishment and insecurity for the vast majority of the world’s poor.

We are witnessing not what McLaren refers to as “lemonade stand capitalism on steroids” but rather “the most vicious form of deregulated exploitation of the poor that history has witnessed during the last century” (2006, p. 20). As starry-eyed “Apprentice” contestants covet the fortunes of “the Donald” and lend credence to the myth of the American dream, currently in the ‘land of the free’ and the ‘home of the brave’ one in four jobs “pay less than a poverty-level income.” Since 2000, the number of Americans living below the poverty line, at any one time, has risen steadily—now 37 million residents in the United States are “officially poor” (Jeffery, 2006, p. 20). The richest 1% of the American population—the “haves” and the “have mores” whom W. Bush has referred to as his “base”—continue to reap the benefits of his generous tax cut package which represents one of the most brazen redistributions of income to the wealthy that the nation has ever seen. Bush’s tax cuts, which have been extended until 2010, provided an average of \$10 in tax relief to those earning \$20,000-\$30,000 while those earning \$1 million raked in \$42,700 in savings (Jeffery, 2006, p. 20).

In virtually every country in the world, the gap between the rich and poor has widened considerably as we continue to witness with “dismaying regularity an obscene concentration and centralization of social, political, and [most importantly] economic power in the hands of a relatively small number of oligopolies” (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2004, p. 195). The combined wealth of the three richest people in the world exceeds the combined gross domestic products of the forty-eight poorest countries and the combined wealth of the 225 richest people is roughly equal to the annual income of the poorest 47 percent of the world’s population (Ibid, p. 194). The “Nike economy” has ushered in the rebirth of satanic mills—child labor, slave-like conditions, young women working for a pittance in the export-processing zones where they are subjected to sly new forms of indentured servitude and where trade unionists and labor organizers are routinely fired, beaten, or simply “disappeared.” There are about 100 million abused and malnourished “street kids” in the world’s major cities and some estimated two million girls from the ages of five to fifteen have been drawn into the

global sex trade (Cole, 2005, p. 114). Today, as the media boast about the net worth of corporate moguls and celebrate the excesses of the rich and famous, roughly three billion people struggle to sustain themselves on less than U.S. \$2 a day. There are 852 million people across the world who suffer from chronic or acute hunger.^[iv] Everyday, more than 16,000 children perish from hunger-related diseases—one child every five seconds. This despite the fact that a mere fraction of what the United States currently spends on the military could end world hunger as we know it (Galeano, 2003, p. 19).

These are the concrete realities that exist in our world—tales of desperation, destitution and despair. Why are so few telling their stories? Where is the outrage? Could it be that many self-proclaimed “left” academics serve as diversionists rather than political interventionists? Are they so enamored with their “discourse radicalism,” so preoccupied with deconstructing texts that they have failed to confront the broader context of globalized capitalism? On this matter, it is worth quoting McLaren in his own words and at length:

As the poor grow in numbers, as the homeless flood the streets of our cities, they are seen more and more as disrupting the ‘natural order’ of capitalism. And facing this unravelling historical matrix we have, in the Western academy . . . the avant-garde celebration of cultural hybridity; the incommensurability of discourses; pastiche, indeterminacy, and contingency . . . textual burlesque . . . parody . . . paraded as dissent . . . where one can avoid putting political commitment to the test. The academy is a place where Marxism is dismissed as innocent of complexity and where Marxist educators are increasingly outflanked by fashionable, motley minded apostates in svelte black suede jackets, black chinos, and black ‘50s eye-glass frames with yellow-tint lenses, for whom the metropole has become a riotous mixture of postmodern mestiza narratives and where hubris shadows those who remain even remotely loyal to causal thinking. For these voguish hellions of the seminar room, postmodernism is the toxic intensity of bohemian nights, where the proscribed, the immiserated, and the wretched of the earth simply get in the way of their fun (2000, xxiv-xxv).

In this remarkably provocative statement, McLaren clearly throws down the gauntlet in challenging those who have turned the “text” into the marionette theatre of the political. For many self-proclaimed “cultural radicals” textual analysis has been raised in their imaginations “to the same system-shaking level as revolutionary action.” Safely sequestered in their seminar rooms “but still playing at resistance,” “their ‘discourse radicalism’ has led them into a dead end dalliance that fetishizes language” (Harvey, 1998, p. 29). Here, the revolution is “largely a textual one,” one “reduced to waging war against the literary canon and other forms of discursive authority” while the “concrete world of labouring subjects” is left “largely on its own” (McLaren, 2007, p. 13). In such a context, McLaren’s work reminds us of the living, suffering, bleeding, and breathing subjects of history, the poor and the dispossessed written out of history. And he reminds us of the political implications of “theory” which refuses to confront capitalism, which strips knowledge of its emancipatory possibilities, and which relegates the link between theory and practice to the domain of inconsequentiality.

In doing so, McLaren echoes the concerns of another Marxist humanist—E. P. Thompson—who, writing almost three decades ago, was equally repulsed by “unmeasured” assaults on Marx and historical materialism. Thompson, of course, penned his polemical book, *The Poverty of Theory*, largely in response to what he perceived to be a fundamental distortion of Marx by Althusser and his academic disciples. But Thompson (1978, p. 4) was also perturbed by those intellectuals who had been caught in the “web of scholastic argument” and he had little patience for would-be radicals who regularly engaged in harmless “revolutionary psycho-dramas” while at the same time “pursuing a reputable and conventional intellectual career” (p. 251). Consider the following raucous passages:

Althusserian ‘Marxism’ is an intellectual freak—but it will not for that reason go away. Historians should know that freaks, if tolerated—and even flattered and fed—can show astonishing influence and longevity . . . This particular freak . . . has now lodged itself firmly in a particular social *couche*, the bourgeois *lumpen-intelligentsia*: aspirant intellectuals, whose amateurish intellectual preparation disarms them before manifest absurdities and elementary philosophical blunders . . . while many of them would *like* to be ‘revolutionaries’, they are themselves the products of a particular ‘conjuncture’ which has broken the circuits between intellectuality and practical experience . . . and hence they are able to perform *imaginary* revolutionary psycho-dramas (in which each outbids the other in adopting ferocious verbal postures) while in fact falling back upon a very old tradition of bourgeois elitism for which Althusserian theory is exactly tailored. Whereas their forebears were political interventionists, they tend more often to be diversionists (enclosed and imprisoned within their own drama) . . . Their practical importance remains, however considerable, in disorganising the constructive intellectual discourse of the Left, and in reproducing continually the elitist division between theory and practice (Thompson, 1978, pp. 3-4).

And,

today’s Western Leftist intelligentsia is distinguished by its lack of political experience and judgement. But this is not offered in any sense as an accusation of sin. It is a necessary consequence of the determinations of our time. We cannot remedy it by wishing it was otherwise. But it provides, nevertheless, the necessary ground within which the ideological deformations of our time are nurtured. Isolated within intellectual enclaves, the drama of ‘theoretical practice’ may become a *substitute* for more difficult practical engagements. Moreover, this drama can assume increasingly theatrical forms, a matter of grimaces and attitudinising, a game of ‘chicken’, in which each theorist strives to be ‘more revolutionary than thou.’ Since no political *relations* are involved, and no steady, enduring struggle to communicate with and learn from a public which judges, cautiously, by actions rather than professions, the presses may reek with ideological terror and blood (Thompson, 1978, p. 249).

Thompson’s caustic condemnation of Althusserianism, written more than twenty-five years ago, initiated one of the most impassioned and bitter debates (not to mention some of the best intellectual theatre) in the British Marxist tradition. And while it is certainly the case that Thompson’s invective was directed mainly at Althusser and his anti-humanist intellections, *The Poverty of Theory* was, in many ways a clarion call to reassess the status of the Left at the time. It was also a plea for a humanistic Marxism that was explicitly internationalist in its orientation (Palmer, 1981). If he were alive, what would Thompson say today if he surveyed what currently constitutes the “leftist” intelligentsia dominated as it is by theories which have little, if any connection, to the concrete material realities in which we live? A definitive answer, of course, cannot be provided for the dead cannot speak for themselves. Yet their ghostly memories can be given a degree of materiality and invoked to evaluate the present.^[v]

In my estimation, at some level, McLaren’s work is haunted by the ghost of Thompson. This, I would argue, is as it should be for many of Thompson’s scathing critiques are relevant today albeit in a different form. The set of constitutive principles that have come to define the “leftist” intellectual terrain are not, in the most general sense, that different from those which were the targets of Thompson’s wrath. Human agency is a chimera for today’s “subject”—while interpellated by ideology in Althusser’s narrative, contemporary post-al theory posits the subject as constructed in discourse while those of communitarian persuasion posit a rigid pre-modern conceptualization. Consequently, “human subjects rarely speak: instead, they are presumably ‘already spoken’ or culturally inscribed by

historically sedimented discourses and linguistic traditions” (McLaren, 1994, p. 195). In this regard, both post-al intellectuals and self-avowed communitarians seem to have little concern for the real, living, historical agents that so preoccupied Thompson and that continue to preoccupy McLaren.

Another common denominator that links Thompson’s critiques to contemporary theoretical trajectories is the theme of anti-humanism. While Thompson referred to Althusserian-inspired anti-humanism as an intellectual freak, he understood that even freaks could survive among the academic bourgeoisie. Thompson’s observations were undoubtedly prescient—today anti-humanism has become one of the dominating motifs in current social theory that advertises itself as “radical” and/or “progressive.” It doesn’t matter that humanism is not, nor has it ever been, a monolithic discourse and that the revolutionary humanism of Marx differs significantly from that of liberal humanism. Humanism is just another universalizing, totalizing narrative that is best buried in the graveyard of modernist history.

Thompson might ask: what about ethical commitments informed by revolutionary Marxist humanism. Nothing more than poppycock would be the likely reply from today’s pseudo-radicals. There are no universal standards from which to judge anything. The name of the game is indeterminability and undecidability; relativism and anti-foundationalism are all the rage. Historical materialism? The importance of interrogating capitalism? Historical materialism is too dogmatic they say—its pretension to the status of a “totalizing” master narrative is a gesture of domination and coercion and concomitantly a subordination of multiplicity and difference. Furthermore the concept of class so central to historical materialism is antiquated, intellectually passé, reductionist, and horror of all horrors, too closely aligned with Marx whose figurehead has, for the most part, been burned in effigy at the altar of Nietzsche or, in some cases, Aristotle. What about the link between theory and practice, of intellectual discourse that takes as its starting point the politically pressing issues of the day; a link so forcefully defended by Thompson? Nonsense! According to contemporary commandoes of the cultural left “it is a mistake to conflate academic and political work.” What’s more, “to constrain thought to what has immediate political application, is to constrain our imaginations” (Brown, cited in Wray, 1998).

The excesses of Althusserianism once prompted Thompson to remark that should Althusser’s formulations mark the “logical terminus of Marx’s thought” he “could never be a Marxist” (1978, p. 254). If the logical terminus of the progressive “left” consisted of nothing more than the fetishization of language, what Harvey (1998) calls “discourse radicalism,” the production of theory (with a capital T) as an end in and of itself, the *tout court* dismissal of Marxism and historical materialism, the abdication of ethical responsibility, and above all the surrender of revolutionary political praxis, McLaren would have certainly ceased in identifying with the “left.” But he hasn’t for he does not think that what passes for “radicalism” in the academy today is the logical terminus of progressive leftist thought. If he did, the words, the carefully crafted phrases, the voluminous arguments which he has put forth over the years would have never materialized. He would have exorcized the ghost of Thompson which—albeit tacitly—so profoundly haunts him.

Indeed, McLaren has never explicitly written about Thompson and there are undoubtedly aspects of his work with which McLaren would likely disagree. But, what has prompted me to invoke Thompson’s memory in my reflections on Peter’s work is the spirit which inspired Thompson to write his polemical text. McLaren’s thought—particularly his more recent Marxist-inflected writings—resound with an apodictic familiarity. They remind us that many of the concerns voiced by Thompson more than a quarter-century ago—particularly the political pusillanimity of theoretician, idealistic, trajectories; the disjuncture between theory and practice; the offensive against historical materialism and; the negation of human agency—still have something to teach us.^[vi] Moreover, I agree with Lears (2006) who laments the contemporary neglect of Thompson by the intellectual avant-garde, whose

verbal and discursive callisthenics impress other academics but bear little or no relation to the lived experiences and struggles of most of labouring humanity.

We find ourselves ensconced in the brutality of imperial wars and the injustices unleashed by globalized capital, squinting nervously toward the horizon for a glimpse at what the future may hold in store. In this context, McLaren has refused to concede that the insights of thinkers working within the broad parameters of the Marxist tradition have been eclipsed by today's fashionable apostasy of transformative political agendas and socialist visions (cf. McLaren, 2006, p.viii). He recognizes that amidst the cracks and fissures of capitalist hegemony, their voices can be faintly heard and that their ghosts provide a disturbing reminder that something must be done.

Marxist Humanism and Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy

. . . the Left continues to be braver in its philosophy than in its politics . . . anti-humanism may look well on one's office door while the university enjoys civil liberties and good salaries in exchange for its responsible academic irresponsibility. But where the political consequences of anti-humanism are practiced by soulless bureaucracies and state machineries of confinement, censorship, and torture—such a notice would merely mark one's own disappearance (O'Neill, 1995, p.17)

Like Thompson, Peter is “neither neutral nor amorphous” (Casali & Freire, 2005, p. 22). Like Thompson, McLaren is not a “thinker providing exploitation and manipulation services for the bourgeoisie” and, like Thompson, he “knows how to choose courageously the side he wishes to be on: the side of life, close to those who are oppressed . . . and deprived of justice” (Ibid). Like Thompson, like Freire, like Guevara, a humanist impulse pulsates through the heart of McLaren's work. That humanist impulse, not surprisingly, has been the object of scorn and derision among ‘post-al’ anti-humanists.

To admit to humanist allegiances or to invoke humanist rhetoric is tantamount to revealing oneself as insufficiently “radical” according to the “hellions” of the seminar room. In many contemporary narratives, humanism has come to stand for the “kingdom of darkness” and is used by its critics to identify everything that is awry in the modern world (Bernstein, 1992). It is castigated as an ideological smokescreen for the barbarous mystifications of modern society and the marginalization and exclusion of masses of human beings in whose name it pretends to speak. There has been the acknowledgement (though this aspect of the critique of humanism was initiated by the humanist Karl Marx and continued within the tradition of socialist thought) of the partial, limiting, and excluding quality of the supposedly universal “we” which characterized liberal humanist discourse (Young, 1990).

Humanism has been criticized as both an epistemological and an ethico-political position. As an epistemological position, humanism has been attacked for its view of human nature as a static, eternal quality; for its essentialism and universalism, and its ‘metaphysical’ postulates. It has also been castigated for its complicity in the history of European colonialism (Said, 1978). As an ethical and political narrative, the ideal of humanism, which proclaims an emancipatory message, is said to be nothing more than an ideological vessel through which certain values, norms, and experiences are constructed as universal and imposed upon individuals with “normative” force. In short, the discourse of humanism is, according to its critics, theoretically moribund and politically bankrupt. The aforementioned dimensions of anti-humanist critique are undoubtedly intertwined but some of the more ardent anti-humanist tracts are both intellectually disingenuous and politically suspect for a variety of reasons, not least of which is the tendency to create a caricature of humanism and treat it as though it exists, or existed, as a monolithic discourse. This homogenizing representation of modern humanism

as simply a repressive, totalitarian construct suggests a one-dimensional interpretation for as Malik (1997, p. 12) notes, humanism has expressed itself “in a variety of political forms, from liberalism to Marxism.”

McLaren is primarily concerned with rescuing critical pedagogical work from the clutches of “bourgeois humanism that has frequently made it functionally advantageous to existing social relations, the employer class, and the international division of labor” (McLaren, 2000, p. xxvi). His formulations clearly attempt to enliven the liberating potential of Marxist humanism by bridging the gap between the individual and the collective through a revived theory of praxis or what McLaren (2005, 2007) calls “revolutionary critical pedagogy.” Revolutionary critical pedagogy seeks to generate new ways of thinking about the “possibilities for human agency” as “humans are conditioned by structures and social relations just as they create and transform those structures and relations” (McLaren, 2005, p. 9). But McLaren is careful in noting the constraining “effects of capital as a social relation” on such agency (Ibid). Here, not surprisingly, he echoes Marx.

Marx, of course, was one of the first “modern” thinkers to attack the conceptualization of the subject within Enlightenment-inspired bourgeois humanism. In the *Grundrisse* he argued that abstract formulations of the “subject” were highly problematic for they neglected the specific, malleable determinants of the *self*.^[vii] Hence, Marx regarded the subject of liberal humanism as nothing more than an “illusion” derived from the “Robinsades” of eighteenth century prophets” (Marx, 1973, p.83). Furthermore, the seeming freedom and autonomy of the liberal subject was something which Marx emphatically repudiated for one was always circumscribed by the material and historical conditions or “circumstances” (as Marx deemed them in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*) over which the individual had little control. However, it should be noted that the *potential* to transform oppressive circumstances by embodied agents located in history was a recurring theme in Marx.

The agenic human self that animates revolutionary critical pedagogy is a corporeal, living, real, sensuous being that is always understood in relation to what Marx called the “ensemble of social relations” that condition each individual and change historically (Marx, 1978, p. 115). Contrary to what many have claimed, Marxist humanism rejects the essentialism of liberal formulations. And Marx himself rejected Hegelian notions of transhistorical human nature. When Marx discussed “human essence,” he did not imply a form of ahistorical and unchanging human nature, but rather basic human characteristics that distinguish human beings from animals and that evolve and change historically (Marx, 1978, p. 150). Marx insisted that “the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual” (1978, p. 145). Marx’s revolutionary humanism was grounded in an understanding of the self as a historically contingent entity which could not be divorced from the lived, material, and hence, concrete manifestations of embodied selfhood.

Radical anti-humanism tends to deny any genuinely human qualities and/or features. Marx (1978, p. 149) noted in the *German Ideology*, that “the first premise of all human history” is that “men *{sic}* must be in a position to live” in order to make history. But life involves before everything else certain basic necessities—food, a habitation, clothing, and many other things (Marx, 1978, p. 156)—these needs are universal features of the human condition which seem to be undermined within anti-humanist narratives. Moreover, in a hurry to escape the rut of “essentialism,” far too many post-al theorists conflate “human nature” which is an historical problematic with “human attributes” that include a variety of qualities such as affective responses, capacities for abstract thought, the capacities to experience joy, pain, etc, and the capacity for self-reflection. As Eagleton notes the

capacity for critical self-reflection belongs to the way the human animal belongs to the world—that this is not some phantasmal alternative to our material embeddedness but

constitutive of the way that humans, as opposed to beavers or beehive hairdos, are actually inserted in their environs (1996, p. 36).

Acknowledging the existence of such human attributes *does not* constitute a totalizing form of essentialism. The distinctive character of this affective dimension and the capacity for self-reflection is central in thinking about the issue of agency for while it is necessary to interrogate notions of an unchanging and timeless ‘human nature’ as such, it is nonetheless imperative to acknowledge that there are ‘human attributes’ that must necessarily factor into discussions of political agency. In other words, political agency begins to emerge when distress that may be either personal or felt through emphatic recognition prompts people to come together, share experiences, and perhaps (but not necessarily) mobilize. As McLaren has repeatedly argued, post-al anti-humanism pulls the proverbial rug out from under discussions of human liberation by undermining the very notion of human agency and capacities of self-reflection, self-determination and self-making.^[viii] Indeed, any form of theory which denies the efficacy of human actors upon history and which treats them as mere supports for relations created quite independently of their actions is literally “forced to look outside of humanity for the agency of salvation” (Malik, 1997, p. 122). What is objectionable about such formulations is not the assertion of the structured nature of experience, but the conceptualization of individuals as no more than social or discursive effects, as little more than entities which float aimlessly in a sea of ever-proliferating signifiers. After all,

if we play no part in the formation of the structures that dominate us, what sense is there in trying to alter them? If, moreover, the experience of individual men and women is viewed as inessential to their existence, then the category of the ‘concrete individual’ ceases to have any reference to *human* beings . . . one can no longer speak of individuals as ‘dominated’ by social structures or in need of ‘liberation’ from them, since they are not thought of as beings with ‘interests’ to be affected (Soper, 1986, p. 106).

With respect to this issue, McLaren has attempted to reveal a debilitating lacuna in many anti-humanist formulations—the simple dismissal of experience as a remnant of humanism.^[ix] McLaren’s work seeks to retain the centrality of experience as a referential standpoint from which peripheralized and historically marginalized peoples deconstruct the mystifications of the dominant social order. However, he has been careful to avoid the kind of uncritical fetishization of ‘experience’ that tends to assume that experience somehow guarantees the authenticity of knowledge and which often treats experience as self-explanatory, transparent, and solely individual. Rather, his work advances a framework that seeks to make connections between seemingly isolated situations and/or particular experiences by exploring how they are constituted in, and circumscribed by, broader historical and social circumstances (McLaren, 2000, p. 200). As we have (Scatamburlo-D’Annibale & McLaren, 2004, p. 189) recently argued, “experiential understandings, in and of themselves, are suspect because, dialectically, they constitute a unity of opposites—they are at once unique, specific, and personal, but also thoroughly partial, social, and the products of historical forces about which individuals may know little or nothing (Gimenez, 2001).” In this sense a rich description of immediate experience in terms of consciousness of a particular form of oppression can be an appropriate and indispensable point of departure. However, such an understanding can be limiting unless it transcends the immediate point of oppression, confronts the social system in which it is rooted, and expands into a complex and multifaceted analysis (of forms of social mediation) that is capable of mapping out the general organization of social relations.

Revolutionary critical pedagogy recognizes that the embodied self (as opposed to abstract philosophical concepts like the “subject”) is a practical knowledgeable actor in the world; it recognizes that “the actions of human beings are what shapes history” and not “abstract categories” (McLaren, 2006, p. 19). As such, it does not relegate human agency and the category of experience to the

netherworld of discourse or textuality. However, its materialist situating of human agency “teaches us that people make history within, against, and through systems of mediation already saturated by a nexus of social relations, by a force-field of conflicting values and accents, by prior conventions and practical activities that constrain the possible (McLaren, 2006, p. 266). This conceptualization clearly poses a challenge to the voluntaristic, autonomous subject of bourgeois liberal humanism and it draws our attention to the forces of capital for in the present-day world the “nexus of social relations” are historically specific to capitalism. But more than this, it reminds us that no emancipatory narrative is possible without some form of humanistic perspective (Malik, 1997, p. 122).

Radical Universalism

All universalisms are dirty. And it is only dirty universalism that will help us against the powers and agents of still dirtier ones (Robbins, cited in McLaren, 2005, p. 42)

Intrinsically related to the critique of humanism is what Ahmad (1998) has called the “problem of universality.” And, Heller and Feher (1991, p. 5) have astutely noted that philosophical/theoretical anti-humanism “*ipso facto* implies the total rejection of (political) universalism”—that is, as a referent which seems necessary to a revolutionary theoretical and political project. Such a statement does not imply that we ignore the atrocities which have been committed in the name of universalism, nor that we refrain from interrogating the false universalism of liberal humanism. Rather, it suggests that the complete and utter denunciation of universalism is, in many respects, politically debilitating and can easily lead willy-nilly down the path of ethical relativism. This is a message which is effectively communicated by McLaren (2000; 2005) who maintains that one of the most important and enduring insights of Marxist humanism is the acknowledgement of the continuing relevance of a form of radical universalism.

Contemporary critiques of universalism derive from a variety of quarters and vary in their form and intent. But for the most part, for those working within a post-al paradigm, universalism is upbraided for its insensitivity to difference; indeed, difference has been the central category deployed in narratives which have sought to reveal the oppressive and exclusionary underbelly of Enlightenment humanism. Derrida (1981), Foucault (1973), Lyotard (1984, 1988) as well as a host of postmodernists, poststructuralists, and postcolonialists who incorporate the work of such thinkers have all castigated universalism for its hostility to “otherness” and for its Eurocentric attempts to impose “Euro-American ideas of rationality . . . on other peoples” (Malik, 1997, p. 112). Various theoretical trajectories have, in fact, exposed the false claim of universality inherent in the European particular—a point which McLaren (2006, p. 48) readily acknowledges and which he accepts as an important criticism. Yet, there is also a paradox at the heart of several post-al attempts to reveal the European particular insofar as the Western, “First World,” postmodern intelligentsia has mistaken “its own very local difficulties for a universal human condition in exactly the manner of the universalist ideologies it denounces” (Eagleton, 1997:25). The post-al preoccupation with the “crisis of humanism” also tends to forget that it is not everyone’s crisis (not even in the West). Hence their projection of it as somewhat universal, is ironically quite universalist, not to mention Eurocentric, for it is hard to deny that several of these theoretical pronouncements have taken place with “backs turned to the Third World” (Nederveen Pieterse, 1990, p. 51) and that they have failed to acknowledge that many third world struggles of the post-war era all drew upon the “emancipatory logic of universalism” and that it remains crucial in many parts of the world still struggling for emancipation (Ahmad, 1997; Kang, 1992).

Furthermore, when many critics of humanism and universalism point out the prejudiced and exclusionary character of notions such as “common humanity,” they adopt an immanently critical posture—in other words, they use the discourse of universalism to critique the exclusionary nature of the humanist enterprise. In their efforts to reveal and contest old shibboleths which encrust the main

formulations of the ideals of modern humanism—including Marxist humanism—much of post-al theory reveals its own silence about the radical potentiality of humanist value ideals and the concept of universalism for as Ahmad states, universalism itself can be “put to coercive purposes as well as to revolutionary ones, depending on the politics of the women and men who take hold of it” (1998, p. 16).

While the critique of false universalism is vital and, indeed, warranted, McLaren (2000, p. 197) implores us to acknowledge the necessity of preserving the validity of a “nonabstract and nonhomogeneous” form of universalism as a *political* referent. He points to the importance of distinguishing between an abstract universalism that dissolves important differences among diverse phenomena and a concrete universalism that carefully draws such distinctions while upholding conditions that are binding for all. He writes:

Clearly the limitations of the Enlightenment project of universalism need to be problematized . . . The restricted and often dangerously destructive Western bourgeois character of Enlightenment universalism is a worthy and necessary object of critique, but to attack the idea of universalism itself is not only foolish but also politically dangerous . . . the politics of postmodern pluralism—that is, providing voice to those marginalized social groups who have been denied political participation—[is] only a partial solution that itself needs to become an object of critique. The belief that an increased diversity of marginalized voices will automatically ensure that marginalized social groups will gain social, political, and economic demands and interests is politically naïve . . . the struggle for diversity must be accompanied by a transnational revolutionary socialist politics (McLaren, 2005, p. 42-43).

McLaren illustrates how, in conflating universalism with uniformity, far too many critics have failed to recognize that universals can be both various and locally diverse, and hence they have been unable to grasp that some human values might be universally worth living and dying for, regardless of whether some people might pervert those precarious ideals and turn them into weapons. McLaren’s dedication to a radical form of universalism echoes the sentiments of Aijaz Ahmad who writes:

Contrary to prevailing fashions, I am a shameless advocate of the idea of universality. This is so despite the fact that colonialism has been intrinsic to the kind of universality that we have had so far and that the only universal civilization that exists today is the capitalist civilization. I think that human beings are perfectly capable of waking up to the barbarities of this civilization and making a far better universality—for which my word continues to be “socialism,” but you are welcome to use some other word so long as you mean the same thing. As an idea, universality cannot be given up . . . No struggle against . . . any kind of collective oppression is possible without some conception of universality (Ahmad, 1997, p. 57).

The notion of a concrete, radical universalism or socialism, as Ahmad calls it, is crucial within revolutionary critical pedagogy for it reminds us that “universals are not static; they are rooted (routed) in movement. They are nomadically grounded in living, breathing subjects of history who toil and who labor under conditions not of their own making” (McLaren, 2005, p. 42). Moreover, it challenges us to think about how the incurably iniquitous organization of capitalism is systematically incompatible with universality in any meaningful sense of the term—in short, “there can be no universality in the social world without substantive equality,” particularly economic equality (Meszaros, 2001, p. 11).

McLaren (2006, p. 48) contends that a more useful alternative to “dismissing universalisms as masked particularisms” is to side with Eagleton who makes the following observations and is worth quoting at considerable length:

It is difficult for us to recapture the imaginative excitement which must have burst upon the world with the concept of universality. What could have sounded more scandalous to a profoundly particularist culture, one in which what you were was bound up with your region, function, social rank, than the extraordinary notion that everyone was entitled to individual respect quite independently of these things? This outlandish new doctrine was of course launched into philosophical orbit from a highly specific position, that of a wing of the European bourgeoisie, but so is every doctrine, universal or otherwise . . . The exotic new thesis was abroad that you were entitled to freedom, autonomy, justice, happiness, political equality and the rest not because you were the son of a minor Prussian count but simply on account of your humanity . . . It was not at all true in practice that everyone—women, for example, or non-Europeans or the lower peasantry—was accorded equal respect. But everyone’s freedom mattered in theory, and ‘in theory’ is a sizeable improvement on its not mattering even as that . . . it was by virtue of our shared humanity that we had ethical and political claims upon one another, not for any more parochial, paternalist or sheerly cultural reason. These matters were too important to be left to the tender mercies of custom or tradition, to the whim of your masters or the tacit codes of your community . . . Socialists, or at least Marxists, are often hotly upbraided with being universalists. But . . . one is a socialist, among other reasons, precisely because universality *doesn’t* exist at present in any positive, as opposed to merely descriptive or ideological, sense. Not everyone, as yet, enjoys freedom, happiness and justice. Part of what prevents this from coming about is precisely the false universalism which holds that it can be achieved by extending the values and liberties of a particular sector of humankind, roughly speaking Western man, to the entire globe . . . Socialism is a critique of this false universalism, not in the name of cultural particularism . . . but in the name of right of everyone to negotiate their own differences in terms of everyone else’s (Eagleton, 1996, p. 113, 118).

Here Eagleton, like McLaren attempts to rescue the concept of universalism from the post-al abyss and to place it in the service of a reinvigorated socialist politics against capitalism. This does not imply a substitution of moralism or mere ethical protest for class struggle—the two need not be mutually exclusive for as McLaren & Farahmandpur assert, we cannot evade “the moral issues surrounding neoliberalism’s scandalously unbalanced assault on and treatment of the world’s poor and aggrieved communities” (2004, p. 212). It does, however, accept that the left, “now more than ever, has need of strong ethical . . . foundations” (Eagleton, 1996, p. 134-135). As McLaren further argues (2006, p. 49) capitalism is not “justifiable on ethical or political grounds” and what is imperative is a relentless challenge to the most universal grand narrative of them all—global corporate capitalism.

PART II: Contesting the Nattering Nabobs of Neoliberalism, or Socialism Without Apologies

The globe spins, but as they cross the campus to the next committee they don’t notice any movement. The conventions of their ideologies hem them in but they have lived inside there so long that they don’t know it. The world of politics chunters on from one unprecedented danger to the next, but the salary still gets paid in to the Bank, and promotion (if one keeps one’s nose clean) may be round the corner (Thompson, 1979, p. 70).

. . . none of the New Social Movements . . . can confront capitalism on its own terms . . . they have all foundered on the barrier reef of class . . . In fact, many of those swept up in the politics of identity have made their peace with capital and have prospered accordingly . . . these masters of theory-in-and-for-itself engage in the hollow puffery of introspection, creating occupationally safe crusades, and demanding bad faith reforms that deftly side-step the enduring conundrums of class struggle . . . A decade ago they contested socialism’s privileging of the producing classes and promoted their own alternative theory of liberatory politics. Now they are reduced to the

role of supplicants in the most degraded form of pluralist politics imaginable . . . the class war rages unabated as liberals and radicals alike seem either unwilling or unable to focus on the unprecedented economic carnage occurring around the globe . . . What is needed at this juncture is a cadre of engaged intellectuals who can speak the . . . voice of . . . socialism (Harvey, 1998, pp. 29-31).

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 (McLaren, 2006, p. 126).

Over forty years ago, the renegade sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) complained about the retreat of the intellectual and the failure of scholars to ask the “big” questions. Of course, Mills was then lamenting the methodological inhibition and fact fetishism of positivist social science which provided insular intellectuals with “busy work” by counting more and more about less and less. Twenty years later, Thompson (1979) in his tribute to Mills (cited above) bemoaned the loss of political nerve among so-called radical academics and objected to their strident anti-Marxism (Palmer, 1981, p. 2). And almost two decades after that Harvey indicted much of what falls under the rubric of post-al theory and identity politics as superficial and esoteric; little more than academic exercises of nominalism and excessive discursivism.

In varying ways and on many different levels, McLaren’s scholarship strives to address the concerns articulated by Mills, Thompson, and Harvey. Even a passing engagement with McLaren’s writings demonstrates that he has been undaunted in pointing out that equal amounts of “busy work” are carried out by many present-day “radicals” in the form of a flighty theoreticism which bears little connection to the realities of the existing world under the brutish and inhumane rule of globalized capital. The voguish postmodern brigands no longer ask nor explore the “big” questions because they’ve painted themselves into a corner of particularisms, fetishized concepts of difference, tropicity, and rhetoricity of discourse.^[x] More starkly, they have also sought to expunge questions of class, the interrogation of capitalism, and any memory of Marx and socialism from the theoretical and political canvas.

Given such a context, it may appear anachronistic, even naïve, to speak of the importance of Marxism and the promise of socialism. Yet, the trajectory of McLaren’s work—particularly in the last 8-10 years—has unabashedly sought to resuscitate Marx’s legacy within educational circles in light of the terror unfurled by the forces of free market fundamentalism and imperialist wars. Against the chorus refrain of TINA chimed by liberals and conservatives alike and buttressed by the symphony of post-Marxist voices recommending that we give socialism a decent burial and move on, McLaren has marched along the path of *most* resistance, ducking the slings and arrows directed his way by right-wing rodomonts and rabid anti-Marxists. He has done so because he stubbornly believes, as do I, that the chants of TINA must be challenged for they offer as a *fait accompli* something about which progressives 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. Some time ago, Amin (1998, p. 151) urged committed progressive constituencies to combat the TINA syndrome as “absurd and criminal” and he put that challenge unambiguously: humanity may let itself be led by capitalism’s logic to a fate of collective suicide or it may pave the way for an alternative humanist project of global socialism. Eight years later, the choice is ever more urgent as Amin’s comments have taken on a new and chilling significance as we survey the global social, political and economic landscape.

Three Cheers for the American Imperium?

Especially since September 11, 2001, the United States has been acting more and more like a nation-state pushed to the limits of imperial expansion, where permanent war has become the preferred *modus operandi*. Three days after the tragic attacks of 9/11, the *New York Times* proclaimed that the Bush administration “gave the nations of the world a choice”—“stand with us against terrorism . . . or face the certain prospect of death.” Such a doctrine—“the right of the mighty to decide who shall live and who shall die” has been, as McNally (2002, p. 148) notes, “a cornerstone of imperialism throughout history.” Mahajan (2003, p. 181) has suggested that it is already passé to call the Bush administration’s foreign policy a new form of imperialism—a statement echoed by Roy (2004[b], p. 11) who conceded that the “New Imperialism”—while a remodelled, streamlined version of what once was—is “already upon us.” Of course, the history of American imperialism is a long and inglorious one but for the first time in history,

a single empire with an arsenal of weapons that could obliterate the world in an afternoon has complete, unipolar, economic and military hegemony. It uses different weapons to break open different markets. There isn’t a country on God’s earth that is not caught in the cross-hairs of the American cruise missile and the IMF checkbook . . . Poor countries that are geopolitically of strategic value to Empire, or have a ‘market’ of any size, or infrastructure that can be privatized, or, God forbid, natural resources of value—oil, gold, diamonds, cobalt, coal—must do as they’re told or become military targets (Roy, 2004[b], p. 11).

The message is clear—surrender to the might of the military-industrial-corporate machine or war, by any means necessary, will be waged. This drive towards global empire or what some neoconservatives have called “the American hegemon” may not constitute a classic imperial mission for control over another territory. It may not be about establishing a set of colonies around the globe. But, it does reflect the use and projection of political and military power on behalf of a radical, pro-corporate, anti-government, free market fundamentalism that mainly benefits the global economic activities of the capitalist elite and multinational corporations—all the while cloaked in the rhetorical garb of “democracy.” This posturing, of course, is not exclusive to Bush’s bellicose band of PNAC thugs or to far-right crackpots.^[xi] Consider the hubristic musings penned by the relatively sane (and so-called liberal) journalist Thomas Friedman who, in 1999, wrote the following:

We Americans are the apostles of the Fast World, the prophets of the free market and the high priests of high tech. We want “enlargement” of both our values and our Pizza Huts. We want the world to follow our lead and become democratic and capitalistic, with a Web site in every pot, a Pepsi on every lip . . . (p. 4)

But of course,

The hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist—McDonald’s cannot flourish without McDonnell Douglas, the builder of the F-15. And the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley’s technologies is called the United States Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps . . . Without America on duty, there will be no America Online (p. 13, 15).

Friedman’s manifesto which starkly spelled out, in bone-chilling explicitness, the program for a new imperialism was the featured article in a March 1999 edition of the *New York Times Magazine* whose cover displayed a colossal clenched fist festooned in the stars and stripes motif of the US flag above the words “What the World Needs Now: For globalization to work, America can’t be afraid to act like the almighty superpower it is.” Of course, the phrase “what the world needs now” was a play on a tune famously belted out by chanteuse turned psychic network spokeswoman Dionne

Warwick. The lyrics of that classic song suggested that what the world needed was “love, sweet love.” There was no mention of Pepsi or Pizza Huts or the use of military force to buttress the profit margins of American multinational corporations. Nonetheless, that it is what it came down to. And there is no longer any pretence about the fist being hidden—today it is out in plain view pummelling the hopes of many into the dirt.

As previously noted, American imperialism has a long and tortuous history but it has become even more naked in the last decade or so, especially since the fall of the Soviet Union which, in effect, dissolved any formidable obstacles to the universalization of capitalism. Since the early 1990s, a more cruel form of capitalism pushed aggressively by the United States has evinced itself on the world stage to the detriment of workers everywhere and especially those living in countries occupying the lower rungs of the global hierarchy. Indeed, from the perspective offered by a historical-materialist critique of capitalism, “the direction that would be taken by U.S. imperialism following the fall of the Soviet Union was never in doubt” (Foster, 2006, p. 19). Hence, the prescription for more rigid forms of neoliberal economic policy—backed by American military might if necessary—dosed out by Friedman, who is typically in the know when it comes to the backroom machinations of the U.S. ruling class and the national security establishment, wasn’t all that surprising. And yet, the audacity with which the prescription is now being promoted—particularly after “9/11”—is profoundly disturbing and alarming (McLaren, 2005).

Just four years after the aforementioned “What the World Needs Now” cover, the *New York Times Magazine* (presumably a bastion of liberalism according to many on right-wing of the American political spectrum) ran another issue with a similar theme. On January 5, 2003, the phrase “The American Empire (Get Used To It)” was emblazoned on a glaring red, white and blue cover. This time, the featured article was authored by Michael Ignatieff, who essentially urged Americans to face up to their country’s imperial role in the brave new post-9/11 world and to lovingly embrace the “burden” of empire. The 21st century American imperium is not, he thundered, “like empires of times past,” rather it is a “new invention in the annals of political science,” a “global hegemony whose grace notes are free markets, human rights and democracy, enforced by the most awesome military power the world has ever known” (Ignatieff, cited in Foster, 2006, p. 99). It should be noted that Ignatieff had previously conceded (in the July 28, 2002 issue of the *New York Times Magazine*) that “America’s entire war on terror” was and is “an exercise in imperialism.” Besides providing obvious boosterism for the Bush administration’s war without end strategy, Ignatieff’s comments also implied that TINA should now be read as “there is no alternative to American empire” in the age of “terrorism.” Indeed, the empire builders of the Bush regime and their media and intellectual toadies would like the world to believe that their only choice is between their version of empire and the axes of “evildoers.” Apparently, the United States has been called upon to defend the “hopes of all mankind” (this proclamation, I should add, from a president of the only country in the world to have used nuclear weapons against a civilian population) and the saving grace of humankind is presumably to be found in the religion of neoliberalism and faith in free markets.

Such proclamations must be interrogated unrelentingly at this crucial juncture in history and we must work towards revealing the specious nature of the aforementioned “choice.” For what such logic fails to grasp is that for many around the globe, the real source of terror comes from the “market” itself as Galeano (2003) has aptly noted. Despite all the fanfare surrounding the promises of free trade, it remains the case that both advanced and developed countries have been traumatized by globalization—only a few metropolitan centres and select social strata have benefited, and it is no secret who those select occupants are. As previously noted, in virtually every country of the world, the era of free market fundamentalism has ushered in more and more forms of social disintegration as revealed by a rise in abject poverty, inequality, un- and underemployment and devastating environmental destruction. The euphoria of the former communist countries has given way to disenchantment—in

1989 they envisioned capitalism as a cornucopia of consumer goods and freedom; several years later they began to see how free market reforms brought with them a drop in living standards, dramatic increases in hunger, and ill-health (Singer, 1999).

Friedman, Ignatieff, Bush and other nattering nabobs of neoliberalism tend to conflate American style consumerism with nirvana, freedom with free markets, and capitalism with democracy. But the globalization of capitalism has not in any sense been held accountable to democratic interests despite the best efforts of its cheerleaders to hide its diabolical nature behind the non-sequitur claim that the free market promotes democracy. In fact, the “free market”—one of the hallmarks of neoliberal ideology—is one of the most dangerous forms of economic and political organization we face today. As McLaren argues, the free-market revolution, “driven by continuous capitalist accumulation of a winner-take-all variety, has left the social infrastructure of the United States in tatters.” Through “policies of increasing its military-industrial-financial interests, it continues to purse its quivering bourgeois lips, bare its imperialist fangs, and suck the lifeblood from the open veins” of regions across the globe (McLaren, 2005, p. 23). He adds, that

Millions from aggrieved populations worldwide stand witness to the law-governed process of exploitation known as capital accumulation, to the ravages of uneven development called “progress,” and to the practice of imperialism in new guises called “globalization.” Exploitation is not an aberrant deviation but a constituent and durable form of capitalist democracy. Capitalism constitutes the absolute negation of humanity, personhood, and freedom and, as such, represents the limit of the logic of domination (McLaren, 2007, p. 18).

Under the direction of international bodies such as the IMF, the World Bank, and the WTO (largely beholden to corporate interests), what has been called the “race to the bottom” has manifested itself not only in the standard of living and in the denigration of environmental, labor and health safeguards, but in democracy itself. At a time when corporations have more rights than people (Bakan, 2004; Hartman, 2004), at a time when the pathological pursuit of profit and power undermines the every essence of what McMurtry (2002) calls the “life economy,” it is ludicrous to suggest that capitalism and democracy are compatible, except on the most superficial of levels. Neoliberalism is “the immediate and foremost enemy of genuine participatory democracy, not just in the United States but across the planet, and will be for the foreseeable future” (McChesney, 1999, p.11).

The Boy Emperor and his minions would have us believe that our only choice is to embrace the manic logic of American imperialist capitalism disguised as “democracy.” But as concerned citizens, activists, educators, workers, and students, we must vigorously challenge such an assertion. While they would like to have the citizens of the United States (indeed, the whole world) sit back and let them take care of “democracy,” we need to remind ourselves that democracy is not a spectator sport. It cannot exist in a context where corporations rule the world and where the fruits produced by labouring humanity are hoarded by the global capitalist elite. It cannot exist when anyone who opposes the policies of the IMF, the World Bank, and/or the WTO or any nation which rejects the “Washington consensus” runs the risk of being tarred and feathered with the label of “terrorist.” It cannot exist when governments lie to their citizens and when wars are fought to increase the profit margins of multinational corporations at the expense of innocents slaughtered and bodies mangled on battlefields strewn with limbs lost and dreams dashed. Democracy cannot exist when entire populations are being obliterated through genocide, when people are starving, when human rights are being trampled upon both at home and abroad. Capitalism, in short, cannot be “rescued for democracy” for “capitalism is beyond salvation” and so is the very notion of democracy “so long as it looks to capitalism to support it” (McLaren, 2007, xvii). At this point in history, McLaren (2005; 2006; 2007) urges us to expose the inner workings of the so-called “benevolent” imperialism of Pax Americana in all its social ugliness

and to emphasize that the agenda of neoliberalism and its concomitant militarism is driven by corporate interests that are fundamentally at odds with the interests of working people. We need to start asking and exploring the “big” questions. We need a new vision of human sociality and we need to dare to speak the language of socialism. To that end, McLaren’s revolutionary critical pedagogy can offer us some valuable insights.

Against Capital

This is definitely not a postcapitalist world, nor is it a post-Marxist one (Foster, 2002, p. 43).

Cutting ourselves off from Marx is to cut off our investigative noses to satisfy the superficial face of contemporary intellectual fashion (Harvey, 2000, p. 12).

[i]mperialism has, from the beginning, been part and parcel of capitalism and will not be eliminated until capitalism itself is ended (Foster and McChesney, 2004, p. 11).

McLaren points to a development that has troubled many progressive educators over the years, namely, the domestication of critical pedagogy within the academy. Once a fierce critic of U.S. imperialism and capitalist exploitation, critical pedagogy has become so “conceptually psychologized, so liberally humanized, so technologized, and so conceptually postmodernized that its current relationship to broader liberation struggles seems severely attenuated if not fatally terminated” (2005, p. 33). In light of such domesticating gestures, critical pedagogy seems to have lost its potential to serve as a trenchant challenge to globalized capital and U.S. imperialist aggression. As such McLaren’s attempts to revivify the political roots of critical pedagogy by reintroducing the language of class struggle and Marxist-humanism (under the rubric of revolutionary critical pedagogy) come at a much needed juncture.

Since we live at a time when capitalism has become an unrepentant universal system, the basis of our struggles, of our resistance, of our revolutionary praxis must be grounded in an equally universalist narrative—that of socialism. We must transcend the deconstructive dalliances of those post-al theorists who have abandoned metanarratives—particularly those of Marxism and socialism—for in all of their deconstructive posturing they have ignored the most “meta of all metanarratives”—namely, the “creeping annexation of the globe for the dominance of capital over labouring humanity” (Ahmad, 1997, p. 364). It seems that in recent years, the only “ism” which hasn’t garnered the interest of many self-proclaimed radicals is that of capitalism.

McLaren vividly calls our attention to this problematic void within so much of contemporary theory and urges us to utilize the tools of Marxist analysis to contest current social relations linked to the globalization of capital. He cautions us, however, that Marxist educationalists must also avoid the numbing altitudes of abstract cogitation that seldom touch political realities here on earth. Rather than speaking to one another in self-referential code, engaging in scholastic rituals, and navigating “theory for its own sake or for academic jollification,” they must demonstrate the utility of Marxism by applying it to political actualities and by working towards creating the “conditions for a social revolution” (McLaren, 2006, viii). This task has assumed an even greater importance in light of current conditions for as Jameson (1998, p. 136-137) reminds us we seem to be returning to “the most fundamental form of class struggle.” In this regard, the line of thought derived from Marx is far from obsolete.

Given the entrenchment of neoliberal globalization practices and the global dominance of U.S. military might, McLaren (2006, p. 19) reminds us that class struggle is as important as it ever was, perhaps even more so. And as more and more of humanity faces the ravages of capitalism’s totalizing impulses and the savagery of wars fought on behalf of capital, his revolutionary critical pedagogy

points to the need to understand and confront the “antagonistic relation between labor and capital” that “constitutes the essence of capitalism” (Ibid, p. 95). This entails a much different conceptualization of class than that offered by post-al theory which tends to view class as simply about habits and behaviour, cultural status, or social prestige, or that suggests that class is merely a language sign whose meaning is overpopulated with referents and therefore “undecidable.” Rather, class must be understood as both a lived culture and an objective entity.

As an objective phenomenon, class is directly connected to where a person is located within the capitalist division of labor and it is labor that is the source of value. Capitalism is a system based on the imposition of “universal commodification, including centrally, the buying and selling of human-life time” (Dyer-Witheford, 1999, p. 9). Within capitalist forms of organization, human labor itself is a commodity which can be bought and sold just like any other. Such an arrangement reduces the creative capacities of humans and relegates them to the status of mere cogs in the machinery of various forms of production. Alienation, oppression, and the dissolution of democracy are inherent features in such an arrangement where labor-power is capitalized and commodified (McLaren, 2006). For these reasons and many others, it is imperative to work towards the de-commodification of human labor in ways that would reinvigorate its status as a form of meaningful, creative activity. This entails moving beyond a mere reformist agenda—one which calls for a friendlier, less brutalizing form of capitalism—to questioning the very nature of capital as a social relation rooted in the selling of human labor power. As McLaren (2006, p. 319) asserts, “we need to move towards a *new social humanity* . . . we need to work towards the goal of becoming associated producers, working under conditions . . . where the measure of wealth is not labor-time but solidarity, creativity, and the full development of human capacities.”

This struggle, against a specific form of social being as a capitalized and commodified life form—the very struggle to be “human”—situates revolutionary Marxist-humanism “at the core of any project to implode capital’s social universe” (McLaren, 2006, p. 314). Contrary to those who have sounded the death knell of Marxism, Marxist-humanism is not straining against the boundaries of a closed ontology. Rather it is a set of living ideas that can help us better understand the world—and more importantly—can provide a point of departure on how to change it. Marxist-humanism can guide us in working towards the creation of a social universe outside of capital based on socialist principles and practices not just in the sense of negating today’s economic and political realities but of developing new human relations. It is after all capital that imposes on our lives certain forms of doing, certain forms of relating to one another, certain forms of *being*.

Marxist-humanism can also educate us about the importance of class consciousness and class struggle in attempting to overcome the brutal and barbaric limits to human liberation set by capital.^[xii] After all, the most powerful force on the planet is the working class—without their labor, the wheels of the machine would cease in turning. The only force that the capitalist class cannot do without is the working class that produces the food, processes the raw materials, educates the young, tends to the sick and the infirm, builds the arteries, moves the goods, and so on. Contrary to the conventional political wisdom and the post-al declarations that we live in an age without classes, the transnational working class is in fact growing—there are increasing numbers of people who “now depend—directly or indirectly—on the sale of their labor power for their own daily reproduction” (Panitch et al., 2000, p. ix). Although it is certainly apparent that there have been major changes in the class structure, they have not been in the direction that post-Marxists point to. In fact, the major changes have reinforced class differences and capitalist exploitation. Petras notes that there are now more “temporary wage workers than in the past” and that there are many more workers toiling in “unregulated labor markets (the so-called informal sector today) than in the past.” This issue of “unregulated exploitation” points not in the direction of “post-capitalism” but rather represents a return to “nineteenth century forms of labour exploitation” (1998, p. 5).

That said, it is important to bear in mind that the bodies of work and the concepts produced by Marx to assess the intricacies of capitalism in the nineteenth century are not completely adequate for analyzing contemporary conditions. Any historical concept carries in itself specific historical indices and the structure it analyzes is an historical structure. Therefore, it is necessary to avoid the reification or “petrification” (to use of line from Marcuse, 1972) of Marxian concepts since that would violate the very core of Marx’s work—namely, the unity of theory and practice in relation to specific configurations of capitalism. Moreover, revolutionary praxis, is brought about by “approaching Marxism not as an inert body of ideas for contemplation but as a motive force for remaking society” (McLaren, 2007, p. 35). As such, it still provides the most powerful conceptual apparatus from which to construct a critique of contemporary capitalism and envision an alternative to it.

The legacy of Marxist humanism and the revolutionary critical pedagogy espoused by McLaren remind us that contrary to TINA, there are always alternatives. As a form of emancipatory critical knowledge that offers a systematic way of making sense of contemporary social life, the current configuration of imperial global capitalism, the alienating aspects of commodified human labor and their interconnectedness, revolutionary critical pedagogy simultaneously serves as an agent for changing the conditions which it condemns. It reminds us that whatever misunderstandings or confusion surrounding the notion of socialism—largely bound up with a mistaken identification of Marxism with its opposite, Stalinism—that the *democratic* and *internationalist* principles of socialism need to be reinvigorated among those serious about resisting the domination of capital. It reminds us—to paraphrase the words of Luxemburg (1971)—that the struggle for socialism must be created by the masses of labouring humanity who must break the chains of capitalism wherever they are forged. And above all, it reminds us that we cannot abandon hope.

CONCLUSION: Hope Dies Last

In the preface to the fifth edition of his landmark text, *Life in Schools*, McLaren declares that the “unfulfilled” democracy which he envisions is “unashamedly socialist.” In so doing, and in speaking as a “Marxist humanist who advocates a revolutionary praxis” (2007, p. xvii), he encourages us to think about a new humanism for the 21st century—one that is *unrealized* in any profound sense; one set against the 21st century American imperium; one which we can aspire to. This new humanism would confront the *actual* conditions of capitalist oppression, imperialism, neo-fascism and colonialism and not merely the texts of colonialism, imperialism and the like. It would give expression to the pain, sorrow, and degradation of the oppressed and the wretched of the earth as well as to their dreams of social change. This new humanism would recognize the creative potential of people to challenge and change collectively the circumstances which they inherit. It would be predicated on a firm commitment to human emancipation and the extension of human dignity and freedom to all people—a commitment to really *universalize* such values in concrete, practical and economic terms. It would go beyond calls for social justice that are embraced by liberals yet too often “antiseptically cleaved from the project of transforming capitalist social relations” (McLaren, 2007, p. 29). Rather, a new humanism would call for the transformation of those oppressive social arrangements, institutions and relations that have prevented the bulk of humankind from fulfilling its potential.

The task of even imagining, let alone struggling for, such a new humanism may seem daunting but we must find our inspiration and strength in the emotion of hope.

Hope is the freeing of possibility, with possibility serving as the dialectical partner of necessity. When hope is strong enough, it can bend the future backward towards the past, where, trapped between the two, the present can escape its orbit of inevitability and break the force of

history's hubris, so that what is struggled for no longer remains an inert idea frozen in the hinterland of "what is," but becomes a reality out of "what could be." Hope is the oxygen of dreams, and provides the stamina for revolutionary struggle. Revolutionary dreams are those in which dreamers dream until there are no longer dreamers but only the dreams themselves, shaping our everyday lives from moment to moment, and opening the causeways of possibility where abilities are nourished not for the reaping of profit, but for the satisfaction of needs and the full development of human potential (McLaren & Jaramillo, 2004, p. 89).

In this passage McLaren beckons us to rescue the principle of hope from the abyss of cynicism, complacency, and apathy and to apply it to imagining something resembling a democratic form of socialism. He challenges us to safeguard the embers of hope smoldering amidst the rubble of war and to fuel even further the fires of hope wherever they may burn. And he challenges us, above all, to keep hope alive—whatever the circumstances—and to ensure, in the words of the legendary American historian, scholar, and activist Studs Terkel, that hope dies last.

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Notes

[i] The “old bearded devil” is a phrase which McLaren has often used to refer to Marx.

[ii] Typical of this posturing is the stance taken by Max Boot, a “scholar” funded by the conservative Olin Foundation who proclaimed that the U.S. government should embrace the practice of imperialism and impose American “values” on various populations “at gunpoint if need be” (Boot, 2003).

[iii] For a critique of this notion of America’s “good exceptionalism,” see Rieff, 2006. For an example of “liberal” narratives about America’s benevolence, see Beinart, 2006.

[iv] This according to the State of Food Insecurity in the World 2005.

[v] I should caution my readers that I do not attempt anything resembling a full-scale treatment of Thompson’s life work. Rather, I draw upon Thompson in relation to a discussion of Marxism and political commitment and more importantly, the spirit which motivated Thompson to write *The Poverty of Theory*.

[vi] The accusation of theoreticism is not intended as a form of anti-intellectual posturing. Rather, it is to raise the issue of the inadequacy of those forms of theorizing that so monolithically reject any theme even remotely associated with the legacy of Marxism and humanism.

[vii] For an elaboration on the distinction between the ‘subject’ and the ‘self,’ see Scatamburlo-D’Annibale & Langman, 2002.

[viii] In his critique of postmodern criticism, Jeff Noonan sheds light on this problem. He writes:

But what can freedom mean in a philosophy that deconstructs the necessary presupposition of any concept of human freedom, i.e., the principle that humans are defined by a self-determining or self-making capacity? If human beings are not essentially self-determining then no sense can be made of the terms oppression and freedom. To be oppressed means to be determined by dynamics and structures that are imposed from without and enforced by a ruling group opposed to the freedom of the group that is called oppressed. But postmodern criticism contends that everyone is always determined by external forces and consequently never self-determining, and if human beings are not in essence self-determining, then the ground of contrast necessary for a coherent understanding of oppression is lost (2003, p. 6).

[ix] See, for example, McLaren & da Silva, 1993.

[x] For an elaboration of this line of argument, see Scatamburlo-D’Annibale & McLaren, 2003.

[xi] PNAC stands for the Project for the New American Century. For a brief discussion of PNAC’s aspirations of American global rule, see Scatamburlo-D’Annibale & McLaren’s (2003) “Operation Human Freedom.”

[xii] For an extended discussion on Marxian formulations of class, see McLaren & Scatamburlo, 2004.