

Book Review

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Understanding Critical Pedagogy at the Age of Global Capitalism and the New Imperialism

We have four reasons for agreeing to review this book. First, we have long been interested in Critical Pedagogy, a field in which Peter McLaren is among the outstanding authors. In 1999, one of the reviewers, Changyong Yang, researched Critical Pedagogy in his dissertation *On the Evolvement of the New Sociology of Education*. This work is now published in Chinese as *The New Sociology of Education: Its Continuous and Rupture History*. (Yang, C., 2004) Secondly, as a visiting professor in the Center for East Asia and Pacific Studies in the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Yang's research project is *Sociology of Education: A Postmodern Practice and Its Theory in America*. So Peter McLaren and Ramin Farahmandpur's (2005) book *Teaching against Global Capitalism and the New Imperialism* falls with our scope of research. Thirdly, Junrui Chang, a young scholar and a doctoral candidate, is now trying to apply the theory and method of Critical Pedagogy to do her research on art curriculum in Chinese rural society. Fourthly, as educational researchers in China, we are very much interested in Peter McLaren and his coauthor Ramin Farahmandpur's effort on a socialist pedagogy that follows Marxism. We are glad to accept the new book for review.

Globalization in the past decades, as an unavoidable historical phenomenon, has increased the interdependence and communication in the world, while causing serious conflicts between and in different countries, areas and races at the same time. Peter McLaren and Ramin Farahmandpur made significant contributions in their book not only to Critical Pedagogy that intends to raise learners' critical consciousness for the struggle to challenge and transform oppressive social conditions in order to create a more egalitarian society, but also to a new globalization theory that intends to help the conscious people who strive for the struggle to gain global justice and world peace. By connecting capitalism, globalization and state-sponsored terrorism, they move from Marxist theory to critical revolutionary pedagogy, making suggestions about what teachers as transformative intellectuals should do in public schools and especially in colleges of education. By connecting globalization, imperialism, terrorism and American foreign policy, they remind teachers and students how to keep their rights in educating and learning. Furthermore, they remind the many conscious citizens how to apply democratic pressure to the

government. In general, by connecting of these elements in a proper way, they opened a new perspective and initiated a new dimension for Critical Pedagogy.

Peter McLaren and Ramin Farahmandpur's book is composed of nine chapters, with an introduction, a "Foreword" by Professor Roberto Bahruth, and an "Afterword" by Professor Juha Suoranta. By revisiting and revising their recently past published essays, they wrote this new book, which systematically organizes their thinking and rethinking about global capitalism and the new imperialism from the perspective of Critical Pedagogy. The following points are especially significant.

1. Exploring the central characteristics of U. S. imperialism

Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Critical Pedagogy are not merely theories and reforms of teaching and teaching methods. They are philosophically, sociologically, and psychologically constructed theories of education and society, intended for social reform in practice. In recent years, Critical Pedagogy has developed an international perspective by exploring the central characteristics of U.S. imperialism and attempts to develop a philosophy of praxis and some strategies of action.

Disagreeing with those who have such opinions: capitalism is the highest form of society and humanity; along with the arrival of postimperialism, empire follows imperialism; the world has now entered an era of "peaceful capitalist coexistence" in which the state power has become obsolete or its role has significantly diminished, Peter McLaren and Ramin Farahmandpur agree with Lenin's theory of imperialism and Abu-Manneh's analysis of the latest imperialism. Instead, they believe that "the state continues to play a key role in advancing the U.S. imperial project of global dominance by means of two interlocking processes: globalization and neoliberalism" (p. 3). Globalization is used in the book as a euphemism for critique of imperialism. The authors point out the different performances of the U.S. imperialism. They maintain global supremacy and dominance from the Cold War (Reagan administration) to the Iraq War (Bush administration). The U.S. foreign policy of "unilateralism" caused it to become the one and only uncontested imperial power in the world. It is dangerous for both the U.S. and the other countries in the world. Generally speaking, the New Right holds a political and ideological viewpoint of neoliberalism pursuing decentralization, privatization, marketization, and liberalization. The result of neoliberalism is that those who control material production also control spirit production. They induced the present condition which is politically democratic but socially fascistic. Yet, in international competition, the political democracy withers under the tough and bloody military force, which often use a "humanitarian" pretext but sometimes under the cover of evident lies. So the authors claim that

We would be remiss to dismiss the transformation of the United States that we are currently witnessing under the Bush administration as merely a form of low-carb fascism, when there may, in fact, be something considerably more potent brewing. (p.6)

2. Reflecting the research principles of "objectivity" and "neutrality"

The authors clearly state that they explore the central characteristics of U.S. imperialism and then put them in a special problematic so that they can logically express their academic, political and ideological opinions. The research principles of "objectivity" and "neutrality" are evident in their research. "Objectivity" and "neutrality" as normally accepted research principles have their legislation and rationality. Yet abiding by the research principles should not prevent the critical scientists to pursue truth and social justness, and to take moral and ethical responsibility. In fact, social sciences and researches, including educational theories and research, exist in social context that maintain purpose, commitment, and political values.

According to the logic of neoliberalism, the market should be and is realistically the patron of education and educational reform, and private interests should be attained in the market process. The fact shows that the very few rich controlled the public and social life. In this condition, some educators protect themselves by withdrawing back into the ivory towers of academia for fear of facing the political and ideological contradictions. Yet, some Marxist educators are bravely facing the realistic condition.

But for a number of untenured Marxist educators, who have opened up a new front in university classrooms by teaching against global capitalism and the new imperialism, it has become increasingly dangerous to *problematize* let alone *unmask* the relationship between imperialism and education (p. 7).

Peter McLaren and Ramin Farahmandpur also criticize that some educators divorced political and ideological questions from pedagogical questions. Some teacher education programs failed to engage students in dialogues about class exploitation and oppression. And many progressive teacher education programs too often divorced the causes of culture, racial, and gender oppression from class oppression. The authors passionately call on Critical Pedagogy to raise the political consciousness of students and teachers and make a fruitful praxis.

3. Reconsidering Marxism in the new imperialist times

At the end of 1980s, a series of events such as the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the breakup of the Soviet Union, changed the academic and political atmosphere all over the world. From then on, the public paid little attention to Marxism. Some Marxist scholars changed their standpoint or withdrew back to “objective” research. Marxism was fallen into the low tide of history. The world stepped in a new era of capitalist globalization, and the U.S. entered a new imperialist phase—the times of “unilateralism” hegemony. The problems of the new imperialism became more serious than ever before. Yet, some scholars currently are striving to reintroduce Marxism into education. The work of Peter McLaren and Ramin Farahmandpur are necessary, effective, and significant. As they say, “never before has a Marxian analysis of capitalism been so desperately needed than at this particular juncture in history, especially since the global push toward finance and speculative capital” (p. 15).

The authors note that a group of Marxist educational scholars, though very small in number, have formed a challenge force not only to neoliberal free market imperatives, but to post-Marxist solutions that most often take the form of social movements grounded in identity politics. These Marxist critical scholars include Mike Cole, Dave Hill, Tony Green, Glenn Rikowski, Andy Green, Henry Giroux, and Peter McLaren and so on.

The authors use Marxism as an analytical framework. Just as Marx exposed the characteristics of early capitalism through the analysis of “bloody and dirty” capital, Peter McLaren and Ramin Farahmandpur expose the characteristics of the global capitalism through the analysis of the present “inhumanity” capital and the new form of capital—multinational corporations, considering that the late capitalism has become more uncontrollable than ever before. They say that

We follow Marx (especially his value theory of labor) in asserting that the primary antagonism in capitalist economies exists between labor and capital, between the owners of the means of production and workers who are forced to sell their labor in exchange for wages. These contradictions are further visible in the yawning disparities between the wealthy and the poor. (p.45)

Just as Lenin analyzed the characteristics of imperialism as “moribund capitalism” through the contradictions of capitalist social relations of production, the authors analyze the characteristics of the new imperialism—global imperialism or “globalization” —through the new forms of the contradictions of capitalist social relations of production. They consider that the new imperialism is “a combination of old-style military and financial practices as well as recent attempts by developed nations to impose the law of the market on the whole of humanity itself” (p.40). They say Lenin’s “writings constitute some of the most important analyses of the state and the politics of imperialism ever produced” (p.62).

Peter McLaren and Ramin Farahmandpur remind us that Marxism is not dead, although it appears to have lost its epochal footing and is marked by a depleted vitality in educational research and criticism. Yet, it appears to be making a comeback and Marxist analysis will have a roborant effect on Critical Pedagogy. Their attitude to Marxism and their application of Marxism can surely be useful for the people both in and out of the capitalist countries.

4. Criticizing postmodern educational theories

It was in 1980s that postmodernism had an evident influence on education research. Some educators—including the Left and the Right, Marxist educators, critical educators, radical educators and progressive educators—accepted postmodern theory and method to analyze, understand, and criticize the capital society. From then on, postmodernism has become fashion in educational circle. But, the postmodern educational scholars differentiated into several directions and have their own perspectives and standpoints (Hill, D., et al., 2002).

In general, as the authors note, postmodern theory has made significant contributions to the education field in many ways. Even so, postmodern theory has its crucial shortcomings and has hampered educators' research and practice. Just as there are many Marxisms, there are many postmodernisms. The authors' criticism of postmodern theories is that they do not sufficiently challenge capitalism.

Not only have postmodern theorists been woefully remiss in explaining how cultural representations and formations are indentured to capitalism, they have often confused socialism with, at worst, the history of Stalinism and, at best, the welfare state reformism often associated with Scandinavian countries such as Denmark and Sweden. (p.18)

Postmodern educators have accepted a market economy and have failed to challenge the neoliberal economic viewpoints and the capitalist relations of exploitation. In their bewildered eyes, social development has wildered its direction and possibility. Their social strategies are full of insoluble contradictions. They are in a position to slip into an individualistic educational consumerism that closely resembles the New Right's ideology of free market economics.

Many postmodernists have dismissed Marxism as an outdated dogmatism. They cannot understand the capability of social analysis and explanation of Marxist historical materialism and dialectic. They cannot understand what is desperately needed today is to develop Marxist concepts, theory and practice, especially to carry out class struggle for social justice and global peace.

Postmodernists stress micropolitics overvalue discursive struggles in language, discourse and culture. Instead, they refute social struggle in the view that no class or group can do any effective collective action to transform the existing social relations of production in capitalism. Both Marxism and postmodernism acknowledge the interconnection between class, race, and gender, but their political and ideological inclinations are very different. In Marxism, history is the concrete activity in which people pursue their goals in their social context. The goal of Marxist theory is not only to explain the world but also to change the world.

The criticism of postmodern educational theory is important, because as early as the 1980s, the evident characteristics of postmodernism such as decentering and deconstruction help educators understand and criticize the existing society. As a result, postmodern educators have a critical and radical appearance that resembles radical educators, critical educators, progressive educators, and Marxist educators. Even so, postmodern educational theory is closely tied to neoliberalism and the New Right in political and ideological inclination. The authors' criticism separates Critical Pedagogy from postmodern educational theories, and states the differences and specialties of some progressive educators who use postmodern theory and method in their writings. These educators include Stanley Aronowitz, Henry Giroux, William Doll, Joe Kincheloe, Robin Parker Usher, Richard Edwards, Andy Hargreaves, Richard Smith, and Philip Wexler, and so on (pp.33-34). More importantly, their criticism shows the difference between Critical Pedagogy and postmodern educational theories in political and ideological inclination.

5. Developing a Marxist multiculturalism

Despite the fact that multiculturalism has had a progressive meaning since it was coined, in the globalization of capitalism era, the original intention of multiculturalism has been reversed. The cause of this reversal is complicated. For Marxists, the culture is a signifying system that deeply embedded in its

material base. Along with the reproduction of the capitalist social relationship of production, the social issues such as oppression and identity in class, race, and gender occurred. White supremacy and the western-centered culture always tend to dominate of the world. The myths of “new order of the world” and “equal opportunity”, which was advocated by neoliberalism and connived by the restored neoconservatism, seems to be really a void commitment to most of human world but is just propitious to the hegemonists.

McLaren and Farahmandpur used two chapters to discuss multiculturalism that emphasized the role of multicultural pedagogy in the anticapitalist struggle. In chapter four—“Critical multiculturalism and the globalization of capital: some implications for a politics of resistance”, they explain how capitalism survives and forces a deepening moral and ethical decadence “through the barbaric overaccumulation of wealth and the economic and cultural exploitation of working-class and minority groups in Third world countries as well as in Western industrialized and postindustrialized nations” (p.99). As a result, “We do not believe that the free-market system enables the pursuit of democracy, nor do we hold that globalization is innocent of political machinations” (p.101). Based on this critique of both neoconservatism and neoliberalism, the authors construct a critical multiculturalism which functions as the basic of a critical multicultural education.

We believe that in order to mount any effective social, political, and economic struggle against capital, we must first locate, identify, interrogate, and transform the ideological sites of oppression in the form of a unified multiracial/ethnic oppositional politics. This suggests making ideology critique a fundamental component of multicultural education (p.109).

In chapter five, which is entitled “Globalization, class, and multiculturalism: fragments from a red notebook”, McLaren and Farahmandpur provide a deeper and incisive critique of globalization of capitalism in the whole sense which include global economy, politics, and culture so as to develop a Marxist multiculturalism or revolutionary multiculturalism. It “opens up social and political spaces for the oppressed to challenge on their own terms and in their own ways the various forms of class, race, and gender oppression that are produced and reproduced by dominant social relations” (p.147). Only in this way can people facilitate the establishment of social and economic equality.

6. Pursuing revolutionary pedagogic practice and educational practice

The subjects of pedagogic practice are educational scholars and scholarly educational workers. Pedagogic practice mainly refers to the theoretical construction in education. We can briefly divide pedagogic practice into such four categories: professional pedagogic practice, participatory pedagogic practice, and persuasive pedagogic practice, and attentive pedagogic practice. The subjects of educational practice are educational workers, especially teachers. They accept a pedagogic theory as their ideal, and consciously apply it in their everyday professional educational jobs. As for Critical Pedagogy, the subjects of pedagogic practice and educational practice are or should be transformative intellectuals.

Critical Pedagogy now has so many synonyms such as revolutionary pedagogy, revolutionary critical pedagogy, critical revolutionary pedagogy, revolutionary working-class pedagogy, socialist pedagogy, Marxist pedagogy, and “contraband pedagogy”. The synonyms show not only the characteristics of Critical pedagogy, but also the dimensions of its theoretical construction and practical intention and orientation. The authors say that

We believe that theory must serve practice, and vice versa, for questions raised in practice must be answered by theory, which underscores the dialectical relationship between theory and practice. However, the theoretical and the practical dimensions of pedagogy can never be reduced to each another. This is because they exist in dialectical tension” (p.7-8).

The objective of Critical Pedagogy is the emancipation of both humanity and labor from the shackles of capital. As for implementing the pedagogical practice, a very important step is that the critical educationists reaffirm Marxism as the foundation of their educational theory and research. They must use Marxism not merely to understand and criticize social oppression and the exploitation of society, but to

reflect on the starting point and objective of Critical Pedagogy, to breed and develop a social action in the new times.

We believe that the human is not only a creature of environment and education, but also a creator of environment and education. Education is determined and controlled by society, whereas education also changes society. Education helps the human life be continuous, and at the same time endows human the ability to change. Education praises and reinforces the instinct of the human to seek after good, while it suppresses the evil impulses of the human. The core of pedagogic practice is the construction of a certain kind of “rationality”. The competition among different “rationalities” in society is both social phenomena and educational phenomena. The criticism and the vindication of a certain kind of “rationality” can be considered a social practice or/and a pedagogic practice. The dialectical tension within the education, the society and the human causes social progress, the social development, freedom, and the self-fulfillment. Social change, whether to be a sudden mutation or a gradual revolution, moving forward or backward, is determined by the concrete social historical condition, by the exertive degree of the human agency, and by the degree it matches social historical regulation (Yang, C., 2004, p.239).

It is really a hard task for Critical Pedagogy to breed and develop an emancipative power in the new imperialist times for the struggle against the new imperialism. For the strategies, some critical educationists have articulated some important principles (Brandt, D., 1991), and some critical educationists have had some precious practice (McLaren, P. 1998). Yet what is the new advance in this book? You can yourself read it and find out.

Peter McLaren and Ramin Farahmandpur have written a book which is thoroughly sensitive to the national and international situation. It is full of compassion for the poor, the deprived and the oppressed. It's really a book worthy of intensive reading by everyone, not only those involved and interested in education. This book prompts readers to continue to think about the social problems and social development in the new imperialist times.

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