

Interview

An Interview with Peter McLaren: Comments on the State of the World-2005

Michael F. Shaughnessy, Ph.D.
Eastern New Mexico University

An Interview with Peter McLaren: Comments on the State of the World-2005

1) One of your most recent books is “Capitalists and Conquerors: A Critical Pedagogy Against Empire” What are the top five points that you tried to make in this book?

Ever since writing *Life in Schools* and *Schooling as a Ritual Performance*, my books have mostly been collections of articles that I have published, sometimes modified to various degrees for the book I am putting together. So I don't set out to make certain points, I see what points are there after the book is put together. I produce a lot of written work, so much so that somebody once remarked that I have never had a thought go unpublished. Putting my articles together gives me a chance to revisit recent articles and make clarifications and to guide my thoughts to a precision they don't always have the first time around. And more recently I have sought out students and young scholars to work with in a collaborative fashion, which I think is something sorely lacking among scholars—even leftist scholars—these days. But yes, there are always underlying themes to my books that can be traced back twenty years or more. In my work dating back to the mid-eighties, I have always tried to fathom the ways that capitalism functions in North American contexts, and more recently, in global contexts, with a special emphasis on Latin America. The structural crisis of capitalism in the 1970s was a watershed moment for world capitalism, and current developments such as neoliberalism can be directly traced to this crisis. I want to underscore with a white heat that capitalism is not the best possible way to organize the social universe of human beings. In fact, it has transmogrified into a behemoth that, in a ferocious hunger for self-expansion, feeds off the commodification of social life that it creates. It is auto-copulatory. Worse, it ingests the detritus of humanity that it creates. More recently, since I began working from a Marxist humanist perspective in the late 1990s, I have tried to show the crucial role played by revolutionary social movements in the reclaiming of our humanity.

At the same time I have been arguing that totalitarian regimes, such as the former Eastern Bloc police states, are not the necessary outcomes of Marxist revolutionary movements. Instead of retreating from Marx, educators need to rediscover the totality of his work. I have also exercised an uncompromising critique of liberal, centralist governments, such as the Clinton administration. In fact, I have tried to unpack the most central and ubiquitous contradictions at work within liberal democracies. I encourage educators to move beyond the liberal/conservative dyad and view the social universe of capital more critically. I am no more reluctant to critique a democratic administration than a republican one. I am not invested in favoring either one.

I am invested in building a better society and I think its time Americans stop exercising their possessive allegiance to one party or the other like they do their favorite sports team. It's time that educators especially invest in the fight against imperialist parasitism, poverty, war, and what my friend Henry Giroux calls 'the terror of neoliberalism'.

I greatly value Marx's critique of political economy—in fact it is now central in my work—and know enough about Marx's work and the history of class struggle to be able to say that much that has happened in world history under his name has no doubt caused him to turn over many times in his grave. I also want to reveal, especially to my readers in the United States, that the history of the United States is far from unblemished. In fact, the United States has a bloody imperialist history of conquest, economic and military, that would shock most Americans if they knew it even in the most superficial sense. This bloody past, so full of presage, continues and goes on unchecked, especially now that the United States has achieved sole world superpower status.

But it is impossible for Americans to know about this bloody past unless they actively search for it outside the hegemonic precincts of the corporate media and visit the books, articles, and reports of dissident writers who publish outside of the mainstream. And this has been made very difficult since 9/11, because to do so puts curious Americans who have opened themselves up to the possibility that their country is the alpha-rogue nation among the main imperialist countries at serious risk of being labeled "America haters" and unpatriotic.

I also try to encourage my readers to think 'outside the box', not just in terms of social theory or political history, but also in terms of how they would like to transform society. Do they want to continue the dream of bringing democracy via cluster bombs, attack helicopter gunships and fighter jets to countries that refuse to allow US dominated corporations to exploit them, or do they want to investigate the marriage of democracy to the beast of capital (the pro-imperialist state apparatus that also goes under the name of the military industrial complex), and what that might mean to the majority of human beings around the world struggling to eke out an existence with some measure of dignity.

Or do they want to struggle for another world where racism, sexism, homophobia and all objectified and alienated social relations are abolished? I would say that the themes in *Capitalists and Conquerors* are more urgent than in any of my previous work. That is because the foreign and domestic policies of the United States have become more transparent, the bloodstains across the planet have become more visible to the naked eye, and our ability to trace crimes against humanity (not just to the White House but to the capitalist system itself that is the pilot light that keeps the engines of military industrial complex grinding) has improved with the advent of alternative media, the internet, etc. Our 'miliaristic messiah' has lost his clothes (including his shiny groin-enhancing flight suit with salacious diagonal straps) and we have been brought face-to-face with major political choices. The first choice is whether or not we are willing to look at the nakedness of our leaders, to stare directly at them in their unvarnished duplicity. And while there has been a significant ramp-up among those willing to criticize the Bush administration post 9/11, the majority of Americans still shield their eyes, refusing to hazard even a glance, lest their motivated amnesia grind to a halt and their world collapse. It is one thing to be a happy idiot, or to soak up for hours on end the somniferous advice of television gurus, it is quite another to refuse actively to seek the truth, especially when it stands shivering before you. Instead of condemning their leaders, many Americans remain beholden to them; they rush to cover up their nakedness, to drape the quivering, shaking bodies of their Bible-thumping Ayatollahs in the flag.

While they believe they are protecting their leaders from a vile liberal onslaught, an attack by ungodly secular humanists, they are only protecting themselves from seeing the truth. I am not just trying to 'out' a shameful White House administration that is reviled by most populations around the world. That's too easy and it largely misses the point. My message is that while we challenge the Bush administration we have also to look beyond connecting examples of social dislocation to any one governmental administration and to see them as structurally rooted in the nature of global capitalism.

I am trying to give readers some conceptual and theoretical armature that will help them to refocus their imaginations. I think it was Mark Twain who said something like: You can't depend on your

judgment when your imagination is out of focus. I am trying to exhort my American readers to look, to stare, and then to refocus through a new conceptual imaginary, to rethink the marriage of democracy to capital. Is there another bride, another bridesgroom more compatible for and less inimical to democracy? I think there is. It's called socialism. You can give it another name, so long as you mean the same thing. And finally (I am not sure here that I have talked about five points exactly), I am trying to develop a much more interesting style of presenting my ideas. I've even considered doing political film and theater in the future.

2) After George Bush's term in office is up, what do you think will be the "legend of the Bush gang"?

The Bush gang—a term that my camarada and colleague Gregory Martin and I used in our chapter—refers to nothing short of a cabal of duplicitous thugs with corporate credentials and impressive political portfolios—will try to take credit for shifting the tectonic plates of the world's political landscape, especially in the Middle East. They will sell it as bringing freedom and democracy to former sink holes of human depravity. They know that many Americans will want to believe this. Of course, this is a reprehensible lie. But lies—the bigger the better—are what oil the right wing propaganda machines, it's what steadies the ideological rudder and gives ballast to the reproductive function of the neo-liberal state, especially when the state tacks too far from the agenda of the neocons.

I worry about the Bush legacy. Why? Look at Ronald Reagan. Under the cover of the Reagan Doctrine designed to stop communism from spreading (apparently domino-style beginning with Nicaragua's Sandinistas—a brazenly ludicrous assumption but it worked to conjure sufficient fear within the US population, like the fictitious missile gap between the US and the Soviets during the Cold War) to the doorsteps of the U.S.-Mexican border, the United States illegally supplied the Contra rebels in Nicaragua (who waylaid Sandinista supporters and attacked civilian farming cooperatives with 88-mm mortars and rocket-propelled grenades--even those populated by pacifists who refused to bear arms) and this clearly made the United States an accomplice in terrorism.

Yet the US media refused to castigate them. Remaining defiant in the face of the International Court of Justice's (1986) condemnation of the United States for "unlawful use of force" and illegal economic warfare in its attacks on Nicaragua, the U.S. vetoed a UN Security Council resolution that called on all states to obey international law. The U.S. was determined to carry out the Reagan Doctrine and ignore both international law and opinion. And still Reagan is glorified in the national media upon his death as an indelible orator and avuncular leader who won the Cold War, and we haven't even touched on his domestic policies and his war against the poor people of the United States.

And now, under Bush, we have the ominous figure of John "Dirty Tricks" Negroponte, installed as the uber-Director of National Intelligence. Negroponte is a career diplomat whose role in the dirty wars of Central America began when he was U.S. ambassador in Honduras between 1981 and 1985, during which time he took aim at the bogey-man of godless communism and coordinated the funding and training of the counterrevolutionary death squad known as the "Contras" in its illegal war against the Sandinista National Liberation Front. If there is ever a case to make that human beings are really a species of lizard that devour children and rule the world in order to harvest human flesh for their starving planet, it's Negroponte. While in Honduras, Negroponte turned a blind eye to the horrific crimes of a secret army intelligence unit -- Battalion 316 --that was trained and supported by the CIA and which led to an increase in human rights violations and tortures and missing leftwing critics of Honduran dictator, General Gustavo Alvarez Martinez.

Critics of Negroponte now fear that the U.S. is more likely to be involved in extra-judicial killings in its ongoing war on terror.

For the United States backers of the Central American regimes responsible for such atrocities, it appears that communist dictatorships were always to be shunned whereas right wing authoritarian dictatorships, in spite of their crimes against humanity, made strategic allies. For a time, Iraq's Saddam Hussein was an ally of the U.S., until he served a more convenient role as the embodiment of evil. Many of the same war criminals that were part of the recently glorified Reagan years are now serving in their graying but no less gentler years in the current Bush Jr. administration.

And now we have Iraq. A hundred and twenty thousand Iraqis have been killed by US and British air and ground strikes. There are few caesuras of tranquility in what has become for that country a symphony of death. Britain and America's reasons for escalating the bombing of Iraq in the ten months leading up to the war in Iraq were boldfaced lies, as official figures recently released by the British Ministry of Defense show. So, in effect, the war against Iraq began in earnest 10 months before the actual invasion with thousands of bombing runs against command and control centers. In fact, it had begun much sooner than that, with the sanctions against Iraq, responsible for so many deaths of children, up to half a million by some estimates.

At first the US did not want to hold elections in Iraq, but pressure from the Shite leadership caused the Bush administration to change its mind. Once the elections were held, the US used them as a photo opportunity to help convince the world that victory for democracy was won (we all know that once the US captured Baghdad, they staged the tearing down of the statue of Saddam amid a throng of cheering Iraqis and that they used the Jessica Lynch story to fuel its pro-war propaganda, even by Lynch's own recent admission). Of course, Iraq has been brought to the brink of civil war as the insurgency grows stronger. If the United States is so interested in democratic values why, when Iraqi interim government declared its intention to endorse the treaty on the International Criminal Court (ICC), did the transitional administration in Baghdad reverse its decision within a few days, presumably under unremitting pressure from Washington?

The Bush cabal will never permit conditions to exist that could put its war criminals on trial, or lead to real sovereignty for poor nations such as Iraq. Iraqi sovereignty, i.e. the Iraqi government's direct and real control over major economic decisions within its national borders, will never be permitted by the dominant capitalist states. Poor nations will never be allowed to retain government control over substantial capital flows in and out of their borders. Deregulation will always be imposed on these economies, wherever they exist. Political-economic sovereignty cannot be permitted within the laws of the capitalist universe, laws enforced by the dominant capitalist states. Because such a move would defy the basic laws of capitalist accumulation and would give hope to the oppressed worldwide.

3) “In his unconscious attempt to achieve aplottes(simplicity of the soul) over kipsukia (duplicity of the soul) has Bush forsaken human reason?” What led you to ask this question and how do you respond?

I think George Bush believes that he is an honest man but he betrays no surfeit of scruples when he is conducting his presidential duties in concert with his intuitive feelings that he is God's envoy. He is the exception to the warrant that requires U.S. presidents to respect the separation of church and state when engaging in exigent issues involving national security. He is more like God's court jester, but the jokes are no longer funny (if they ever were) because they are drowned out by the shrieks of the dead and dying. Interesting to note the shift of the Vatican to the right, just as Reagan and Thatcher came into power. I would like to write something about this shift that culminated in the election of Benedict XVI, and how Benedict, when he was Cardinal Ratzinger, helped get Bush Junior elected by writing a letter to American bishops that condemned pro-life political candidates (i.e, John Kerry). I think Bush Jr. is using his 'faith' in a destructive way. He sees himself as carrying out the will of God. According to some reports I have read, Bush believes that God wanted him to invade Iraq. I have no problem with religious faith. But

as a materialist I believe that we need to employ reason to understand faith. I don't want to belittle faith; the more we explain faith does not mean that we need to take faith less seriously in our lives. Increasing our knowledge of faith can help us make faith work in the interest of social justice rather than employing faith in the service of what we perceive as some 'otherworldly' command. In our quest to make the world a better place, we have to be cautious not to see ourselves as instruments of the divine that would cause us to stray into abstract utopian hinterlands too far removed from our analysis of the present barbarism wrought by capital. Our vision of the future must go beyond the present but still rooted in it, it must exist in the plane of immanence, not mystical transcendence. We cannot deny the presence of the possible in the contradictions that we live out daily in the messy realm of capital.

We need to struggle for a concrete utopia where the subjunctive world of the 'ought to be' can be wrought within the imperfect, partial, defective and finite world of the 'what is' Any authentic future must be to some extent be connected to the material forces of the present. Our utopia must be born of the here and now since it exists in a potential state within the contradictions and conflicts that make up the present. Whereas Bush seeks an abstract utopia discontinuous with the present, one based on Biblical principles that are designed to serve the invisible forces of God on the basis of America's 'providential history', I seek a concrete utopia based on hope and reason where feelings, beliefs and intuition can be rationally traced to their sources in the real world and where progressive change is brought about by class struggle, by anti-imperialist, gender-balanced, anti-racist pedagogies designed to bring about a social revolution.

4) What are the main tenets in the age of neo-liberal globalization?

There was a time when the US was a creditor nation – it is now a debtor nation. I don't have time to discuss all the historical reasons that led to this, but the era of neoliberalism describes this shift. When you get down to it, the globalization of capitalism refers to the internationalization of capitalist relations of exploitation. It means the subjection of national capital by international capital. Its main concomitant is the astounding flexibility of capital and markets that makes it seemingly unassailable.

5) With Ramin Farahmandpur, you have written “ Teaching Against Global Capitalism and the New Imperialism: A Critical Pedagogy” In it, you discuss” contraband pedagogy”.What exactly is “ contraband pedagogy” and why is it important?

Contraband pedagogy is another name for revolutionary critical pedagogy. I wanted to emphasize its marginalized status as a dangerous weapon in the hands of the oppressed, as a pedagogy found mainly on the black market, like a rocket launcher that fires pencils instead of grenades, a pedagogy that, if seized, would be destroyed by the transnational capitalist class because they know that they are in its crosshairs. It is a pedagogy that cannot be named because it carries dangerous memories, subjugated knowledges of the dispossessed and the forgotten, the alienated and the exploited. I don't mean to romanticize this type of pedagogy but I wanted a name that would evoke its essential complexion, its outsider status.

6) Who should teach against globalization, when should we teach against the new imperialism, and why is it important that we do so ?

We shouldn't teach against globalization. I have no problem with globalization per se but with the globalization of capitalism. We need to keep this distinction clear. Globalization is inevitable – the sharing of cultures, values, information, knowledges, etc., worldwide—but the globalization of capitalism is something else.

7) In the socialist imagination, what type or format of educational policy would we see? What kinds of a “pedagogy of resistance” would be envisioned?

The policies would be very much directed at issues of scarcity and human needs, they would be focused on issues of regional development and achieved through class struggle by means of participatory modes of democratic decision-making.

8) “We live in urgent times” is the first sentence of one of the chapters in “Teaching Against Global Capitalism” What is the nature of these urgent times, and what do we have to address in these urgent times?

Clearly, capital – as a social relation – that is structuring most of life on the planet through neo-liberal policies and practices exercised by the transnational capitalist class is the central problem. The very soil in which capitalism rests is based on the overaccumulation of capital and the super-exploitation of rank-and-file wage laborers. These are irreversible contradictions and there are inherent within capitalist social and economic relations –those between capital and labor. They are taking us further away from democratic accountability and bringing us perilously close to what Rosa Luxemburg referred to as an age of “barbarism.” Here in the US – what I have called “las entranas de la bestia” (the belly of the beast”) we are witnessing an attack by the religious right on gays, lesbians and women who are fighting for the right to control their bodies. Religious fundamentalists believe that this is divisive to American family values. But what is really destroying the American family, as well as families throughout the entire globe, is the exploitative nature of capitalism, its logic of commodification and its practice of surplus value extraction. As Marxist humanists will no doubt tell you, the major engine that drives the economic and ideological hegemony of capitalism is racism. Just examine the rates of poverty and unemployment among African-Americans and Latinos. Class exploitation involves the buying and selling of human lives as commodities –the creation of what Marx called “wage slaves”. We need wage slaves to keep capitalism in motion.

In fact, wage slavery is a constitutive factor of our democracy. When you think about it, that’s why wage slavery is camouflaged as a “voluntary contractual agreement,” even though there is no alternative on the table. Well, there is an alternative: it is called unemployment, starvation, and death.

The underdevelopment of the economies of the so-called Third World *has become a necessary condition* for the flourishing of the economies of the so-called First World. Marxists have long addressed this situation. There is a growing bipolarization and the over-accumulation of capital by a new breed of what I have described in previous interviews as “opulent gangster capitalists from reigning global mafiacracies”. As a consequence, the odds of surviving hunger, poverty, malnutrition, famine, and disease is not very good for a growing segment of working-class men, women, and children throughout the world.

Check out the proliferation of *maquiladoras* along the U.S.-Mexican *frontera*, where the extortion of absolute surplus-value is increasing dramatically. It has to do with relative surplus value extortion through increasing the productivity of labor and reducing the value of labor power. This is precisely how capitalism continues to hold living human labor hostage to the valorization process. How else is capitalism able to recast the world into its own image?

Latin American educators don’t have as much of a problem with Marxist analysis as educators in North America – part of this has been the success of Cold World propaganda in linking Marxist analysis with totalitarianism and gulags...that’s about like blaming the Christian crusades on the sermon on the mount.

9) What led you to collaborate with Gustavo Fischman, Heinz Sunker and Colin Lankshear in your recent co-edited text, *Critical Theories, Radical Pedagogies and Global Contexts*?

I knew Gustavo as a doctoral student at UCLA, and realized then that he was going to do brilliant and important work and he has not let me down. He is a perfect example of an engaged and committed intellectual. Heinz Sunker is one of the leading critical theorists in education in Germany and fully engaged in the struggle for social justice in Europe and elsewhere. We have known he other for years, and have collaborated on projects before. Colin Lankshear is somebody with whom I have worked on and off for fifteen years, and one of the best authorities on literacy and the new technologies you can find anywhere. He's always one step ahead of most of us.

10) Can you tell us about La Fundacion McLaren, which has recently been started in Mexico?

Yes, I was approached by scholars and activists in Northern Mexico familiar with my work and they pitched the idea for an organization that would serve as a vehicle for critical pedagogy in Latin America, not only my work, but work by other individuals as well. There is a website, a journal called *Aula Critica*, and there are plans for conferences and seminars on contemporary issues, with the purposes of mobilizing educators for a social revolution, a revolution against capital.

11) Are there other McLaren foundations planned?

There is a university in Cordoba, Argentina that is establishing an Instituto Peter McLaren that is affiliated with a program in multiculturalism and migrations and I have been approached with the idea of more Institutos in other countries in Latin America, but they have not been finalized so I don't think I should mention them yet.

12) What do you make of these invitations to start foundations and institutes bearing your name?

I don't think they are about me as an individual as much as about the impact that critical pedagogy has made in general, which, of course, they associate with numerous educators worldwide. This does not mean that they don't see some distinguishing characteristics in my work, such as the Marxist humanism that has become the cornerstone of my work over the last decade. The word 'Marxism' is an alienating word to many North American educators, and it is less the case in Latin America. So-called third world countries that exist at the periphery of the world capitalist system are overwhelmingly the low-wage areas, interest and profit-exporters (not importers), and they are prisoners of international financial institutions and dependent on limited overseas markets and export products.

Haven't you noticed that there exists is a strong relationship between the growth of international flows of capital and an increase in inequalities between states, and between Chief Executive Officers of Corporations (CEO's) and workers?

13) It is now 2005. In retrospect, what is the legacy of Paulo Freire?

Freire's work is about establishing a critical relationship between pedagogy and politics, highlighting the political aspects of the pedagogical and drawing attention to the implicit and explicit domain of the pedagogical inscribed in the political. In a recent Preface to a new edition of Freire's book, *Teachers as Cultural Workers*, I had the opportunity to reflect upon Freire's enduring legacy. I mentioned that while Freire extolled the virtues of socialism, and drew substantively from various Marxist traditions, he was also critical of dogmatic, doctrinaire Marxists whom he saw as intolerant and authoritarian. Freire argued that by refusing to take education seriously as a site of political transformation and by opposing

socialism to democracy, the mechanistic Marxists have, in effect, delayed the realization of socialism for our times.

Freire believed that the Left's cardinal mistake had to do with their absolute conviction of their certainties and had to do with their unfriendliness toward democracy—and this, Freire believed, played into the hands of the Right. At the same time, Freire never forgot that educators engage in politics when they educate, and that educators need to distinguish between repressive and emancipatory politics. To be a Freirean educator in these times requires a dauntless courage, a hopeful vision and a steadfast commitment. Recently, Nathalia Jaramillo and I were invited to speak in Venezuela about critical pedagogy, at the invitation of the Venezuelan government, who are undergoing a brave and important experiment with socialism. We were struck by how important Freire's work is in Venezuela, and how it is helping to contribute mightily to the Bolivarian revolution.

14) Did you meet President Chavez?

Very briefly when he came to greet us in an office at Miraflores Palace. I am a great admirer of President Chavez and a staunch supporter of the Bolivarian revolution.

15) What are you working on in the future?

I'm trying to develop further what's involved in creating a critical pedagogy grounded in Marxist humanism. As Peter Hudis has remarked, Marxist humanism is not the only approach to appreciate the importance of spontaneous self-activity or to argue that mass practice gives rise to new theory or that the experiences of resistance on the streets are expressions of theory. But Hudis does point out some very unique features of Marxist humanism that maintain, for instance, that the movement from practice is a form of theory, that theory is not the same as philosophy and that the philosophy that is needed in these very dangerous times, at this historical juncture, is Marx's philosophy of "revolution in permanence" developed to its next stage of dialectical development. Now these are very difficult conceptual, political and pedagogical issues and my task is to try to make sense of them for a revolution in education, one that is part of the larger revolution in permanence of which Marx speaks. To accomplish that, I will work on my own as well as collaboratively, and rely on the expertise of many of my mentors, and try to be worthy of the task at hand.

There is a lot we can do before the revolution, but we can't abandon it. If we realize that there can be no educational reform without a major transformation in human relations, and that this transformation is impossible without a major transformation in the means of production, then we will be focused solely on pedagogies based on deepening democracy, improving civil society, invigorating culture, bringing about equality of distribution of resources, and the like. Well, as admirable as these reform efforts are, they still are structurally rooted in capitalist social relations, in the capitalist law of value and without transforming the economic structure of capitalism, educational transformation is too self-limiting to make enough of a difference!