

Peter McLaren & the 3 R's: Reflection, Resistance and Revolution

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I cannot feign some distanced objectivity in writing this profile of Peter McLaren. Our relationship dates back to 1989, when Philip Stedman, one of my professors at the University of Cincinnati, invited me to accompany him on a visit to Peter at nearby Miami University of Ohio. I had read some of Peter's work, particularly some of his early collaborations with Henry Giroux, who had helped bring Peter to Miami from Canada. No amount of reading, however, could have prepared me for meeting him face-to-face.

At the time, Peter and his wife Jenny, a beautiful woman possessed of equally great intelligence and compassion, lived an hour's drive from Cincinnati in the small town of Oxford situated in the middle of southwest Ohio farm country. After we parked the car in front of their modest house, Jenny welcomed us warmly at the door before we ever had the chance to knock. She invited us in and we exchanged introductions for what seemed like a long time. Being so new to academia, I was anxious to meet Peter who was, even then, an important figure in critical educational studies. When he did appear, he too welcomed us warmly, receiving us like we had known each other for years and like our arrival was as much of an event for him as it was for us. As I've grown to know Peter over the past fifteen years, I've learned to trust and appreciate his immediacy as part of the more general passion with which he lives his life. It's same passion unmistakably reflected in his writings, and the same passion that generates such tremendous shared loyalty and bonds of solidarity between himself, his students, and others of us who work with him.

As Alipio Casali & Ana Maria Aaujo Freire so accurately describe him in a chapter from Marc Pruyn and Luis Huerta-Charles's new book, *Teaching Peter McLaren: Paths of Dissent* (2005), "it is impossible not to notice Peter McLaren in the middle of a crowd, much as it is impossible not to be completely drawn in by his image: the extravagance of his mode of dress, his disheveled hair, his tattoos, his quick, sudden gestures, his attentive manner and luminous aura. At first, he seems a caricature, a remnant of the counterculture of the 1960s" (p. 21). Though the tattoos came after our Cincinnati years, I, too, was "drawn in" by Peter, but not as much by his appearance and demeanor than by the energy and the commitment that he brings to his work. Over a career that, to date, spans just two and a half decades, he has authored or co-authored more than 25 books, edited or co-edited 15 others, authored or coauthored over 100 chapters and more than 150 articles in scholarly journals.

Writing this profile of Peter has been a liberating catharsis for me. As much as I have always been drawn to his work, and as many times as he has come through for me when I've asked him to contribute to various projects (he has never rejected an invitation), my own stupid insecurities have prevented me from being totally comfortable in his presence. Antiona Darder shares similar feelings in her preface to *Teaching Peter McLaren* when she writes that "in all honesty, I must confess that although I appreciated his rhetorical gift, unusual language and powerful writings, I did not easily warm up to *the man* [emphasis added]. In fact, it took years for me to recognize the biases and prejudices that sharply colored my impressions." Though Darder doesn't discuss the nature of those "biases and prejudices," I have to wonder if they relate to what I've identified as the academy-induced feelings of insecurity that has inhibited me from feeling closer to him. Partially because of the passion of his presence described by Casali & Freire above, and partially because of his stature as perhaps the most internationally renowned figure in critical educational theory alive today, it is too easy to feel awestruck by Peter. It's also easy, I think, for some to feel jealous of his achievements. There are those, after all, who seem resentful of him. We can't deny the power of academia's hidden curriculum to socialize us into heavily narcissistic patterns wherein we learn to gaze upon our selves in the mirror pools of our curriculum vitas. We can, however, recognize it for the bourgeois ideology that it is, and, therefore, strive to resist its counterrevolutionary effects by framing our relationships less in terms of career aspirations and more in terms of a common struggle.

Naming the Common Struggle

Peter McLaren's name may be new to many readers of *Impact Press*. The reasons for this are tragic. The left has simply failed to mobilize any significant movement in recognition of the central importance that public education holds for the great historic struggle for democracy. For many reasons beyond its control, of course, the political left in the United States has always been fragmented and reactionary. It simply lacks the resources to create and sustain the organizational structures necessary to compete with corporate-financed structures developed by the right to inhibit the advancement of democracy. In contrast, since the populist movements of the 1960s that witnessed the potential of democratic movements to impact public institutions by harnessing the power of the state to serve public interests, the corporate sector of private wealth and privilege has subsidized the formation of a vast network of foundations, institutes, and think-tanks through which to bludgeon the mass-mind of government into complicity with their campaign of class warfare. The tight connections between these structures and the corporate-media have also given rise to such rightwing media celebrities as Rush Limbaugh, Ann Coulter, Bill O'Reilly and others. That same network also has very close ties to televangelists like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, again using the media to generate religious fervor in support of their neoliberal economic and neoconservative political agendas. Those connections, of course, were most crudely revealed to us by Reverend Pat Robertson's recent call for the assassination of Hugo Chavez in which he expressed overt support for state terrorism in the name of U.S. imperialism.

Those who operate within elite planning circles that now include the likes of Reverend Robertson and other proto-fascists understand perfectly well the importance of maintaining the illusion of democracy. They also understand that combating democratic populism through military or police violence, as in a totalitarian state, would destroy that illusion. Therefore, they have invested heavily in developing these various structures dedicated to what Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky famously labeled "manufacturing consent." In order to maintain the illusion of democracy, they must control what people think, and they have made major inroads over the past thirty years toward turning the entire information system of our society into one huge propaganda machine.

Against this background, we can best understand their assault on public education and Peter McLaren's position as a leading figure in the resistance against capital's ruthless campaign against democracy both domestically as well as globally.

Life in Schools?

For those of us who recognize public schools as legitimate sites for democratic advancement and for the contestation of capital's domination, Peter's work has always held central importance. Though he finds it impossible to identify a single moment in his life as sparking his politicization, Peter does recall a formative "series of events that began when my dad was fired from an electronics firm that was headquartered in Toronto. All the managers over fifty were fired so new managers could take over. I grew to hate corporations after watching my dad suffer. His emphysema grew worse. He refused to accept welfare, and got part-time work in various electronics stores. He died bitter and unhappy. I was bitter, too, and joined the counterculture."

This was around 1968, and joining the counterculture, for Peter, meant leaving Canada and going to the U.S. where he became involved in antiwar efforts. After a brief period in Los



In Hollywood, California, near mural of Subcommandante Marcos before it was defaced by vandals.



At the opening of Fundacion de Peter McLaren de Pedagogia Critica at the Universidad de Tijuana, Mexico.

Angeles and San Francisco, he returned to Ontario, entering Waterloo University and earning his Bachelor of Arts in English Literature in 1973. Soon after, he began teaching at a middle school where he worked with inner-city students from Canada's largest public-housing project in the Jane-Finch area of Toronto. He would later write a book, *Cries from the Corridor*, on these experiences that, to his later horror, became a best-seller in Canada.

I didn't offer any critical analysis in that first book, just stories of about my frustrations in trying to reach these inner-city kids who brought the violence of their lives outside the schools into the school itself. The book was shocking to Canadians. By not providing any critical analysis of the situation faced by these kids and their families, I left the door open for a lot of people to blame them for their own plight. That's when I became involved in critical theory, so I could get the story right the next time. That's what I tried to do with *Life in Schools: An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy and the Foundations of Education*. It's not a bestseller like *Cries from the Corridor*, but I've never had a bestseller since that first book, and I never will. But I don't care. As long as I can provide an analysis, I'll keep writing.

Internationally recognized as one of the leading architects of critical pedagogy, Peter was a close friend and associate of the late Paulo Freire, the late Brazilian theorist and activist whose famous book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* helped to reawaken democratic energies around educational issues in North America and the rest of the world beginning in the 1970s. In a recent interview with Michael Shaughnessy, Peter described Freire's work as being "about establishing the 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." While he could have well described his own work in those same terms, Peter's recognition of capital as the overwhelmingly dominant social relation of our times has led him to infuse his writings on critical pedagogy with his own brand of Marxist humanism, which he identifies as the "cornerstone" of his work. Capital, as a social relation, negates democracy by denying us our humanity, alienating us from our need to autonomously act in community with others to create and recreate the world by reducing human beings to dead labor – strapped down and fed into the same system that produces and reproduces the private property that subjugates us in the first place. The aim of revolutionary critical pedagogy, for Peter, lies not with the abolition of private property, but with the abolition of the alienated labor on which it depends. For critical pedagogy to transcend its own domination under the social relations of capital, it must help those engaged in the pedagogical encounter to transcend their own alienation. To do so, Peter has written, critical pedagogy must brush

against the grain of textual foundationalism, ocular fetishism, and the monumentalist abstraction of theory that characterizes most critical practice within teacher education classrooms. I am calling for a pedagogy in which a revolutionary multicultural ethics is performed—is lived in the streets—rather than simply reduced to the practice of reading texts (although the reading of texts with other texts, against other texts, and upon other texts is decidedly an important exercise). Teachers need to build upon the textual politics that dominate most multicultural classrooms by engaging in a politics of bodily and affective investment, which means "walking the talk" and working in those very communities one purports to serve. A critical pedagogy for multicultural education should quicken the affective analysis of students as well as provide them with a language of social analysis, cultural critique, and social activism in the service of cutting the power and practice of capital at its joints (p. 92).

With his open embrace of Marxist humanism, of course, Peter has become the target of the rightwing attack machine described above. One element of the rightwing network of ideological enforcement, the *Washington Times*, published an article by Kenneth Lloyd Billingsly attacking critical pedagogues in general, and Peter in particular. In another article appearing in the ominously titled magazine *EducationNext*, published by the Hoover Institute (a neoconservative think-tank that has become home to rightwing demagogue David Horowitz), J. Martin Rochester laughably accuses Peter of “intellectual flabbiness” while attacking critical pedagogy, first, for

its emphasis on the affective-normative domain at the expense of the cognitive-empirical domain [This is simply not true and reflects either Rochester’s ignorance of critical pedagogy or his willingness to lie about it.]—it is more interested in engaging students in understanding the world as it ought to be than in how it is [Again, this is another falsehood.]—and, second, [for] its acceptance of the hierarchical, judgmental classroom, where the teacher’s role is not to facilitate value-free inquiry but instead to use the bully pulpit to preach doctrinaire gospel [The opposite is true, and critical pedagogues have always been especially self-conscious about guarding against such behavior], with schools performing the function not of political socialization but of counter-socialization. The school is to be, if not a ministry, at least a political party.

In criticizing critical pedagogy for politicizing education, both Billingsly and Rochester falsely portray traditional patterns in American schooling as benevolently apolitical and ideologically neutral, just as they would present their own arguments as being independent of the neoconservative agendas of the publications in which they appeared. Both the *Washington Times*, owned by billionaire neoconservative Reverend Sun Myung Moon, and *EducationNext* support the No Child Left Behind law which pressures teachers to teach in manner deemed most efficient toward maximizing student’s scores on standardized tests. Under these pressures, teachers do not approach student learning as a process of “value-free inquiry” as Rochester mischaracterizes the traditional patterns. Rather, they approach student learning in the most vulgar of didactic terms – drilling and killing the kids to score well on the tests. Under these prevailing conditions in public schools today, Billingsly and Rochester hardly need to worry themselves however over the prevalence of critical pedagogy. Education in the United States is as far away from revolutionary critical pedagogy as the American political system is from democracy.

Just Rewards

For those of us writing from the left, being attacked in popular rightwing publications comes as an honor. It is a signal to us of our success. The right attacks only those whom it fears, and it fears only those whose work threatens to awaken the public to seek the truth about their own realities and to transform those realities in accordance with alternative possibilities of their own imagining. The more the right attacks us, the more energized we become, because we know our efforts are making a difference in people’s lives.

In Peter’s case, the difference his work is making has spilled over our own borders to attract international attention and honors. In 2004, an international panel of experts organized by The Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences, a Russian-British University, named *Life in Schools* one of the 12 most significant education books ever written. In that same year, he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Lapland in Finland, and, most notably a group of scholars in northern Mexico established an institute in his name—La Fundacion McLaren de Pedagogia Critica (The McLaren Foundation for Critical Pedagogy).

In spite of the international and national awards and honors that he has received over the years, those of us who know Peter realize that he derives the greatest honor from the privilege of working with

his students and his colleagues. As Antonia Darder reported earlier, she remained aloof from Peter for many years. Eventually, however, she expressed her gratitude to him for “his patience and perseverance” with her. “For what I learned over time,” she writes, “was that Peter McLaren is one of the kindest and generous souls that I have met in the world of academia. Yes, like so many of us pitiful humans, he forever struggles with personal questions of insecurity and self-doubt—but like few, he is ever willing to extend a hand and create opportunities for comrades and struggling young scholars who seek his support.”

As previously mentioned, two of those young scholars, former students, and comrades—Marc Pruyn and Luis Huerta-Charles—have recently honored Peter by publishing a book (*Teaching Peter McLaren: Paths of Dissent*) of essays written by colleagues and other former students. Nathalia Jaramillo, one of his current students recently wrote to me that



Natalia Jaramillo and Peter McLaren in Caracas,

I consider Peter not only my mentor but my camarada, a dear and special friend. Working with Peter has changed my life completely, and it is not only because he serves as my academic mentor who has taught me a great deal about the ins and outs of the academy and of producing scholarship. I’ve learned the most from Peter because of who he is inside. It’s his spirit, his heart, his loyalty, imagination for and fearless defense of revolutionary praxis that has taught me the most. I’ve had the opportunity to work closely with

Peter for the past three years and I’m blessed, David. I’m blessed to be in his company and in that of people around the world who are striving to make this a better place for us all.

Postscript: Chavez, Robertson, & The Bolivarian Revolution



Peter has recently developed ties with scholars in Venezuela who recognize his work and value his contributions to critical pedagogy. At their invitation, Peter traveled to Caracas and elsewhere throughout the country to address scholars and teachers in a series of speaking engagements. Nathalia Jaramillo traveled with Peter. In light of the Reverend Pat Robertson’s recent call for the United States to exercise state terror by assassinating President Hugo Chavez on behalf of America’s historic imperial

claims to the region, I asked Nathalia for her impressions of Chavez and how he is regarded by the people of Venezuela. In keeping with Medea Benjamin's call for us to *Stop the Next War Now*, Nathalia's reflections might help better inform our fellow citizens that Robertson's characterization of Chavez as a "brutal dictator" stands in sharp contrast to the truth. This is what she wrote:

Walking through the streets of Caracas, Venezuela it is difficult to ignore the socialist energy on the streets. The city is pockmarked with images of great revolutionary legends... Simon Bolivar, Simon Rodriguez (Bolivar's teacher), El Che, Marx, Lenin and Engels... I personally think they fail to commemorate socialist women leaders, but that's a whole other topic. But murals can only go so far, it's in speaking to working people in the Misiones (Missions), in the shantytowns, in the Plaza Simon Bolivar or in an alternative radio station located on the state-owned floor of a high rise building with spectacular views of the city, that you really get a sense of what Hugo Chavez in particular, and the Bolivarian Revolution in general, mean to supporters of the movement.

We had the opportunity to visit one of the largest shantytowns in the hills surrounding Caracas, called La Vega. The municipality system can be a bit confusing. Within each municipality there are a number of subdivisions... so while in La Vega (which has a population of about 500,000), we were in Sector B. There is a strong emphasis and respect for systems of local governance, so while Sector B is in La Vega, La Vega (in its totality) does not necessarily operate according to what I am going to describe in Sector B. Sector B is a unique place to visit, I can't tell you the number of inhabitants who live there, but it is – at present – one of the most well organized and well-known communities in Caracas. Sector B gave us a snapshot of the various Misiones at work under the Chavez government. You walk into the unpaved community and immediately take notice of Infocentro – a two story brick building with at least a dozen high-tech computers with free internet access for the community. Across the way is Mision Barrio-Adentro, a dome shaped structure that houses the Cuban doctors who offer free medical services to Sector B's inhabitants. Just a few more steps down the road and you run into Mision Mercal, a market which sells groceries at a 40 percent discount rate and which is also known for selling food grown and produced by the local cooperative. Within this community, there is also an alternative radio station (Radio Activa, 92.5 FM), alternative press (the community has its own newspaper!), and one of the homes stacks five rows of student desks on a third story open air floor for the education missions (Mision Robinson (national literacy campaign) and Mision Ribas (high school certification program)) ** sidenote: Mision Robinson is named after the pseudonym used by the great educator and humanist Simon Rodriguez and Mision Ribas is named after Jose Felix Ribas, a distinguished figure of Venezuelan Independence **

Okay, so you asked me about what people on the streets think of Hugo Chavez... well, I spent some time above describing the activities made possible under Chavez to give you some context about what I'm going to write here. The people who support Chavez are primarily the poor, and I don't think it's a big surprise to understand why. When you walk into Mision Mercal for example, it is the people of the community who not only produce, but they also operate the Mision. In speaking to one man about his job and about his views of Chavez, he responded, "me siento con dignidad" (I feel dignity) because he feels ownership over the means of his production. For him, his life has a new sense of meaning and worth. He then spoke about how he considered Chavez "un hermano" (a brother). I can't tell you what its like to stare into the eyes of working people who have historically been oppressed and dehumanized and hear them speak

about human dignity, of living their lives with a sense of purpose, hope and excitement about what the future can bring. The people love Hugo Chavez, David. He is charismatic, a walking pedagogue who takes advantage of every opportunity to teach and learn from the citizens he serves and to create spaces where knowledge stays in the community. During his weekly five-hour long television show, *Alo Presidente*, Peter and I saw in person the extent to which Chavez serves the people of Venezuela as an educator and as an advocate for the most marginalized populations. For five hours, he engaged in non-scripted discussions with citizens from the community, who caught his attention by hailing “Chavez! Chavez! Chavez!” until they were passed the microphone. Some people recited poetry they had written on Simon Bolivar, others made direct demands and questions about issues affecting their communities. Together, the people and Chavez covered a range of topics, from housing to education to health care and cooperatives. The people made demands, and he responded. It was, for us, a true example of participatory democracy.

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