

## Education as class warfare. An interview with scholar/author Peter McLaren

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“Espejo de luna bucólica”, hierro forjado y soldado  
Rubén Schaap

### How is your work, broadly speaking, informed by Marxist theory?

As a Marxist I look to Marx’s writings and to contemporary Marxist scholars to help analyze the current crisis of capitalism. And within this context I try to understand the history of education, particularly in the United States and in my native Canada, but also educational trends worldwide, as part of the formation of the transnational capitalist class and the transnational capitalist state. Since 1987, I have had the opportunity to speak in approximately 30 countries (many of which I continue to visit, and some which I visit on a regular basis, such as Mexico and Venezuela), to academics, teachers and social activists and in numerous cases to form active alliances.

One of my projects has been to enlarge the scope of critical pedagogy into that of a social movement, a movement that I call “revolutionary critical pedagogy” (after British Marxist, Paula Allman) in order to underline its central aim—to

work towards a social universe outside of capitalist value production. I work in the area of anti-capitalist struggle and in the arena of epistemology, educating against the coloniality of power, and trying to create a pluriversal approach to indigenous knowledges through a critique of Eurocentric knowledge production and through working with subaltern groups who have been victims of European and US imperialism. So I begin with a critique of neoliberal globalization, financialization, the autonomous functioning of the monetary economy, working-class standards of living being sacrificed at the altar of the enrichment of finance capital, the declining rate of profit (a number of my students at UCLA took classes with Robert Brenner), overaccumulation of capital, and accumulation by dispossession as developed by David Harvey. But I also work within the analysis of the transnational capitalist class and the development of a global capitalist historical bloc composed of the transnational corporations and financial institutions, the elites that manage the supranational economic planning agencies,

major forces in the dominant political parties, media conglomerates, and technocratic elites, as developed by William I. Robinson at UC-Santa Barbara. Here I am specifically interested in how the class practices of a new global ruling class are becoming condensed in an emergent transnational state in which members of the transnational capitalist class have an objective existence above any local territories and polities.

Epistemologically, I am very interested in decolonial pedagogy, and here I am starting to work within a framework developed by the decolonial school, whose exponents include Enrique Dussel, Ramon Grosfoguel, Walter Mignolo, Catherine Walsh, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, and others. Here, I expand the idea of what happened when las Americas were transformed by capital. I try to think of capital as more than the limited sense of an economic logic but as an integrated network of cultural, political and economic process that are all internally related. We need to account for the complex entanglement of gender, racial, sexual and class hierarchies within global geopolitical, geocultural and geo-economic processes of the modern/colonial world system.

We need to keep in mind the global racial/gender/sexual hierarchy that emerged with European colonial expansion and that continues to be reproduced in the modern/colonial/capitalist world system. We are trying to bring this perspective to the Marxist left in Venezuela, and this summer will begin training cadres in the countryside in this decolonial perspective, as part of a project that we organized with the Ministry of Education. These multiple hierarchies or “heterarchies” are not epiphenomenal to capitalism, but are constitutive of capitalism, when we look at the historical formations that capitalism has taken, especially from the beginning of the conquest of las Americas right up to the present working of the coloniality of power, or the persistence of thinking within Eurocentric perspectives absent actual colonial administrations.

Now it is important when doing this work to keep the eyes on the prize—the abolition of capitalism. And here I try to remain faithful to Marx’s own writings, his criticism of the presuppositions and premises of classical political economy, and this causes me to be very critical of some of the formations of revolutionary organizations of the past and present. As Peter Hudis, Kevin Anderson, and other Marxist humanist scholars and activists have pointed out—and which has been

supported by my own reading of Marx—Marx did not support control of society by a single state party, he did not endorse authoritarian regimes, nor did he support state control of the economy. Of course he criticized private property, but he also opposed the notion that economic life should be controlled by the state as in a centrally planned, state-run economy that supposedly counters the anarchy of the deregulated market. Both of these positions were roundly rejected by Marx as expressions of alienated social relations. Marx identified the central problem of capitalism as the production of value.

What is value production? Well, it is different than the production of wealth. As Peter Hudis notes, value is wealth computed in monetary terms. It is the reduction of concrete, living labor—or “doing” directed towards satisfying real human needs—to abstract, alienated labor (the commodification of labor power) that operates to increase value as an end in itself, as in the drive to augment value through the creation of exchange value (i.e., the exchange of commodities as the universal medium of social interaction as in surplus value production). Capitalist social relations take on a certain form of value in which human relations take on the form of relations between things. It is this form that needs to be abolished and this can only be done through the abolition of value production.

Labor in Marx has a two-fold nature—useful labor or concrete labor (purposeful doing or conscious life activity) and abstract or alienated labor (which Marx argued was the substance of both value and surplus value). These forms of labor are in a dynamic and living antagonistic relationship due to the fact that capitalism requires the worker to sell her labor power to the capitalist for a wage. John Holloway identifies two forms of struggle here—the struggle of purposeful doing (concrete labor) against abstract labor (the struggle of doing against labor, or the struggle of workers against their own existence as a working class), and the struggle of labor against capital (as in the struggle of the labor movement against capitalist exploitation, i.e., wage labor and capital). We need to see these two struggles as being related. For instance, I am critical of labor movements and teachers unions for many reasons. But mostly because they define the struggle as that of labor against capital, when, in fact, they actually support abstract labor, or value production. They believe that value production can be made less

exploitative, or that abstract labor can be reconfigured in less alienated ways. While this might be true in the short run, with redistribution from capital to labor, it will actually exacerbate the crisis of capitalism in the long run.

I am against value production, and believe the only way to create a new society is through the abolition of value production. We can't tinker with relations of distribution and circulation by bringing them under the control of the state and believe we can create a socialist society. We need to abolish the production relationship itself, or we will create an even greater despotism than the one that exists under free market capitalism. We can't abolish value production by altering the mechanisms by which surplus value is extracted from the worker. Real freedom cannot be won in a society governed by exchange value and value production. Even cooperative, non-statist forms of production will not lead to freedom if they remain tethered to exchange value, money, and value production. Here, workers only become their own exploiters. As Peter Hudis notes, such cooperatives have eliminated the need for the capitalist but have not eliminat-

ed themselves from the capitalist relation itself, a message that I tried to deliver convincingly to factory workers in Argentina, who were part of the occupied factories movement, and who invited me to speak at a recuperated factory in Buenos Aires because they are setting up schools in these "recuperated factories".

**As a marxist, how would you explain the current state of public education and how would you characterize the latest attempts at school reform?**

Education is now a sub-sector of the economy. Public education is now on a fast-track towards privatization, it is part of the overall trend of neoliberal globalization, the two central axes being privatization and deregulation, which, by the way, has been forced upon nation states, especially after Reagan's crushing defeat of the air traffic controllers and Thatcher's defeat of the miners who went on strike in the UK in the 1980s. This has led to the current crisis of world capitalism, and yet its policies and practices are precisely those endorsed to an even greater extent by Republicans (and in a softer version by Democrats) today. This is all part of the overall pattern of neoliberal globalization in which The World Bank (controlled by the United States) and International Monetary Fund has forced national governments to develop economic policies that emphasize economic growth and property rights over social welfare and personal rights. Market-driven education (the voucherizing of education) has led to today's corporatization of education and for-profit and corporate-style charter school movement. Education is one of the largest market industries around, and it is now controlled by hedge-fund managers and bankers and speculators with the support of the Walton Foundation (Walmart gives 50 million a year to the charter school movement). The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation want to close thousands of broken inner-city schools and replace them with charters. And in some cases, for-profit corporations have created nonprofit foundations to obtain charters, and then hire themselves to run the schools.



"Cuzco pampuca", hierro forjado y soldado  
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Hedge fund managers and CEOs become rabid advocates for market reforms which are driven by the desire to create a less expensive teaching force, one that is shackled by narrow-minded test-based accountability measures, and on that has less union power to fight back. Federal education mandates have moved away from supporting equality of access and outcome and have focused instead on cutting back on school funding, on promoting shame and blame policies, on merit pay or on firing school staff, on supporting standardized tests based on common core standards which have little to do with the production of critical, meaningful knowledge and problem-solving, on giving grants to the school “winners” instead of those high-needs students who are most in need of financial assistance, and on corporate control of the curriculum. As Stan Karp has pointed out, the most complete study of charter school performance, by Stanford University, found that only 17 percent of charter schools had better test scores than comparable public schools and more than twice as many did worse. Traditional public schools accept all children, including much larger numbers of high-needs students, whereas charter schools are very selective in who they admit.

Charters – endorsed with enthusiasm by Arnie Duncan – have become the new common sense option for the poor and the dwindling middle-class who want to escape the crumbling, under-funded inner-city schools with failing track records on standardized tests and who can’t afford full-blown private schools (at least for those that can get through the admission requirements and who can afford it as the stipends for charters won’t pay for everything). For those desperately trying to escape the ravages of public schools, especially in decaying urban centers, the world of charters has been presented by Duncan and his ilk as the only feasible option. But the very people who push for charters are those who have spent years driving down public schooling. If you examine public schooling as part of the logic of neoliberal globalization, you can see that the assault on public education is really just part of the final frontier in a move by corporate America and the transnational capitalist class to privatize all public resources, at least as many as the public permits.

The whole privatization movement in education wants to smash the power of the teachers unions and to destroy decent public wages

for workers, be they teachers or other public employees. You have to see this in the context of the larger logic of neoliberal capitalism.

It’s not only the Republicans, but the Democrats, as well, that support the candidacy of pro-charter candidates for public office, even when they know full well that their selective advocacy avoids the fact that there are twice as many failing charters as there are successful ones and that a number of their principals have been indicted for embezzlement.

We are told by the state that there is a shortage of professionals in the United States in technology, mathematics, engineering and the sciences. But in reality there is no shortage of professionals in the United States in these areas. According to the World Economic Forum, the US ranks first in the world in global competitiveness and about 6th out of 134 countries in all categories related to these professions and availability of expertise.

So if this is the case, why does Obama’s Race to the Top justify its program by claiming the US needs to keep up with the rest of the world? We already keep up with the rest of the world. We know that students in schools that are well-funded score as well or higher than students from other countries in international tests. But all of this masks the fact that the US has the highest percentage of children in poverty of all the industrialized countries, and we know that children from poor families and that attend underfunded schools score below the international average. So it is clear that poverty is a problem. And it’s a problem that’s not being addressed because we ignore the fact that we live in a class-based society. We use the term “economically disadvantaged” or “low socioeconomic status” when we should be saying “working class”! When we use the term low socioeconomic status, we naturalize and legitimize inequality and try to rationalize it. In our sociology of education studies, we don’t look to Marx to provide an explanatory framework for poverty, we look instead to Max Weber who frames class more in terms of consumption habits and lifestyle than objective conditions of exploitation. While Weber wrote about the irrational logic of capital, the paradoxes of capitalist rationality and the illusions of progress, he did not exhibit much concern about workers and even defended aspects of capitalism as part of the protestant work ethic. So is it any wonder that when vouchers are proposed, or charter schools, that teachers can easily find a way to ra-

tionalize them, too, when the only language they know about class from their teacher education programs is from Weber?

When the commissioner of the New York State Department of Education, David M. Steiner, told critical educator, Henry Giroux, at the Nexus Conference in Amsterdam in 2007 that “social justice promotes hatred. Hatred for the established order” it became clear that the object of attack of many establishment leaders in education is critical thought itself. These thinkers, including Arnie Duncan, support what Giroux calls instrumental and practical classroom methodologies that, especially in the case of African Americans, function as part of a circuit of power that produces the school-to-prison pipeline. Reactionary political values are smuggled under the guise of technical reasoning and remain immune to the criticism that education has succumbed to the idiom of the corporation, to the business ethic of self-interest, to knowledge as a pre-packaged commodity, to the unlimited pursuit of the accumulation of capital, to the notion that progress is measured by the quantitative growth of consumption.

Somewhere around the late 1980s the output of the affiliates of transnational corporations outside their home countries overtook the volume of world exports of manufactures—and there was a dramatic shift in the ability to shift capital outside of government control. This is reflective of the shift in the nature of the power relationship between the nation state and transnational corporations.

The role of public schools has shifted accordingly. Schools are not longer preoccupied with cultivating democratic citizens for the nation state (creating the codes for citizenship and transmitting the deep character of the national state by legitimizing the superiority of elite bourgeois culture) but helping the nation state serve the transnational corporations. Schools themselves are becoming corporate enterprises. We are training students to become consumer citizens, not democratic citizens. The future of education is now in the hands of corporate rule as the hedge funds, finance capital and betting on the stock market overdetermine the fate of public schooling.

**With all the discussion around school reform, it seems that the conversation has been rather limited in its scope. What would you like to see**

**added to the conversation and what affect do you think this would have?**

Well, I would like to see a renewed emphasis on fighting poverty as a means of creating more equality of educational opportunity. The logic of conservative educational critics for years has been that public schools already overspend, that they have failed poor, urban students, and the teachers unions won't allow bad teachers to be fired, and until we fire the bottom 10 percent of the lowest performing teachers (some school boards are demanding that value added measures on tests should account for 30 percent of teachers' evaluations, and in some cases 50 percent) our nation will never break out of its sluggish economy and we will not be able to compete economically with other nations. But it is not a lack of education that creates poverty and economic inequality, it's a lack of jobs. It's the very nature of the capitalist system. Successful educational reform can close the achievement gap by increasing the number of working-class and minority students who do well in school, but a good education cannot rescue the majority of children from poverty because there are too many jobs that pay poverty-level wages.

The ruling classes want to blame poverty on the failure of our education system because it is the community that assumes the burden of paying for schools, whereas it would cost the capitalists more to pay decent wages to workers. I agree with John Marsh, who in a forthcoming book, *Class Divided*, makes the case that education should be treated as a political—not a market—phenomenon. We need social programs and non-educational interventions into the market, whether through redistributive tax rates, massive public works projects, a living wage law, or a renaissance of labor unions. More workers with college degrees will not stem the rise of low-wage jobs nor will it reduce inequality. We need to decrease the total number of people living in poverty. We can't use educational programs to reduce inequality, because this just won't work in a capitalist economy, and then when education doesn't do the trick, when unemployment is rampant and jobs are scarce, then the public educational system can be blamed.

Part of the reason that the US is one of the most unequal countries in the world is that we have limited economic rights. Our main vehicle for economic success is linked to our right to a

decent education. We can't simply use education as our main economic right. As Marsh argues, we need more economic rights and it is important that they not be tied to education. Every right we have must have an independent status, such as the right to a useful and remunerative job, the right to adequate food and clothing, the right to a decent education, etc. Education is seen as a requirement for all the other rights, and it is assumed that once you are given the right to a good education all the other rights will take care of themselves. But you can't make these rights dependent upon one another or an outgrowth of one another. They must remain separate. The only economic right we can exercise in the US is the right to a good education, and this right has been transformed into the right to a good corporate education.

Even in 2000, when the unemployment rate in the US fell to 3.9, and the poverty rate fell to 11.3, we had 30 million people living in poverty in this country—and that is approximately the population of Canada. But, as Marsh reports, the US does not generate many more poor people than other countries. European countries achieve lower poverty rates because they provide more social programs aimed at the poor and unemployed. Without government programs, Sweden would have 26.7 of its population living in poverty, but with their social programs, the poverty rate is 5.3 percent. Sure, education helps some people enter the labor market, and indirectly might create a few more jobs, but what we need are jobs, higher wages, and better redistribution programs. Marsh cites Douglass Willms, a Canadian professor, who found that among children whose parents have identical levels of education, those children who lived in unequal countries performed worse on tests of adult literacy. Children of parents with college degrees in general perform the same, whether they live in Finland, one of the most equal countries, or the US, one of the most unequal. But children in the US whose parents only attained high school will perform worse on literacy tests than children in Finland whose parents only attained high school degrees. This is because economic inequality affects the quality of family life, in areas of health, security, rates of substance abuse, etc. So yes, we need educational reforms, but we need to reduce inequality and poverty just as much if we want to increase the quality of educational opportunity.

Now of course we don't stop here—we do what we can to reduce poverty and inequality, but

we need to struggle internationally to create a social universe outside of the value form of labor—that is, outside of value production altogether. At least, that should be our long-term goal.

### **What role, if any, do you see the left playing in the future of school reform?**

Well I believe that the left cannot isolate the current crisis of education from the global crisis of capitalism and larger struggle against capitalism and the structural necessity of an equitable transition to a zero-growth economy. We need to take up the task of defining how another socialism or communism is possible and how to take up the transition to these possible alternatives. What will a social universe outside of capital's value form, outside of value production altogether, look like? And how do we get there? David Harvey calls this organizing for the anti-capitalist transition. We know that capitalism can survive this present crisis and that the costs to the popular majorities will be catastrophic as we will witness increased political repression, militarization, and state violence.

How can the left create a new revolutionary politics that can take us down the path of organizing social life in such a way that augmenting value—through acquiring money—is no longer considered the highest good. In fact, it is abolished outright. Harvey argues that we need a co-revolutionary theory derived from an analysis of Marx's account of how capitalism arose out of feudalism. He notes that social change arises through the dialectical unfolding of relations between what are essentially seven moments—considered as ensembles or assemblages of activities and practices—that occur within the body politic of capitalism, and these include: technological and organizational forms of production, exchange, and consumption; relations to nature; social relations between people; mental conceptions of the world, embracing knowledges and cultural understandings and beliefs; labor processes and production of specific goods, geographies, services or affects; institutional, legal and governmental arrangements; and the conduct of daily life that underpins social reproduction. Harvey argues that each of these moments, while marked by tensions and contradictions, are co-dependent and co-evolve in relation to each other.

The left has a tendency to look at these moments in isolation and focus on just one of them

and viewing it as the magic path to social transformation. But when capitalism renews itself, it does so by co-evolving all these moments (admittedly, there are many more than seven). This is how capitalism arose out of feudalism. So the transition from capitalism to socialism or communism must co-evolve in the same way. Our strategic political interventions must move within and across these different moments. So educators need to look beyond epistemological critique in the classroom. This is why I have been trying to treat revolutionary critical pedagogy as a social movement. Most educational reform never questions capital as a social relation. When this happens, you might be able to make some progress through reform efforts within capitalism, but likely these will be short lived. This doesn't mean we shouldn't try--we must. Yes we should not abandon a redistributive socialism but we should keep in mind the larger struggle of developing the path to a social universe without value production.

Reform and revolution are not mutually exclusive. Dialectics is about mediation, not juxtaposition, so the struggle is not between reform and revolution, but working to reform the system within the larger political optic of anti-capitalist struggle. But we can't just see capitalism in isolation from other dependent hierarchies that are co-constitutive historically with capitalism. Another way of looking at this is from what I call the decolonial Marxist perspective, utilizing some insights from Latin American social theorists, including the work of Anibal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, Gloria Anzaldúa, Walter Dignolo and Ramon Grosfoguel. When we on the left are trying to challenge capitalism, we need to imagine what capitalism was like for an indigenous woman in the Americas, when capitalism arrived in the 15th century. We must, in other words, shift our geopolitics of knowledge. What arrived was not just an economic system of capital and labor for the production of commodities to be sold for a profit on the world market. What arrived was a set of global entangled hierarchies that Grosfoguel calls a European/capitalist/military/Christian/patriarchal/white/heterosexual/male power matrix.

In other words, a global class formation arrived but other hierarchies arrived as well including an international division of labor of core and peripheral countries, an inter-state system of politico-military organization controlled by Europe-

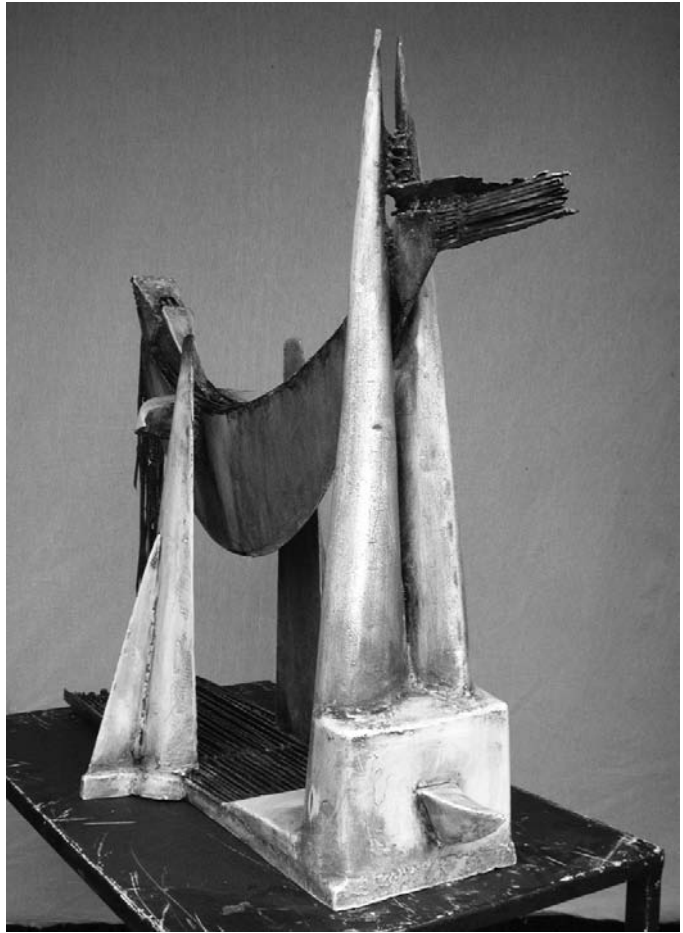
an males and institutionalized in colonial administrations, a global racial/ethnic hierarchy that privileged European people over non-European people, a global gender hierarchy that privileged males over females and European patriarchy over other forms of gender relations, a sexual hierarchy that privileged heterosexuals over homosexuals, a spiritual hierarchy that privileged Christians over non-Christian/non-Western spiritualities, an epistemic hierarchy that privileged western knowledge and cosmology over non-Western cosmologies, and institutionalized this hierarchy in the global university system, and a linguistic hierarchy between European and non-European languages that privileged European communication technologies as theory and reduced non-European communication to the status of folklore or culture but not knowledge/theory. So in adopting an anti-capitalist perspective, teachers need to pay attention to each moment as a part of this entangled global power matrix.

These moments are internally related or co-constitutive "heterarchies". So the left can participate in educational reform, but I would argue that it needs to pay attention to all of these moments—but in terms of the transition to an anti-capitalist future and in terms of creating a decolonial approach to knowledge production. And the left needs to realize that global problems cannot have national solutions. If we are to participate in school reform, it needs to be linked to anti-capitalist struggles, to decolonial struggles, to critical border thinking that can help us rethink our socialism by thinking with, and not about, indigenous knowledges and epistemologies of subaltern groups. We need a feasible alternative to existing forms of societal organization that reproduce labor's value form. And this will require educators who can work with economists, philosophers, rural and urban planners, critical geographers, anthropologists, sociologists, technology specialists, communication experts, social theorists and community activists coming to work together with this aim in mind.

**As we go through education school, many of us are taught critical pedagogy and method, but it seems that this does not get put into practice once people enter the classroom. What advice do you have for teachers who are working under the restraints of Obama's Race to the Top program who want to implement critical pedagogy in their classroom?**

What Obama's Race to the Top program is doing is essentially increasing the privatization and corporatization of education in such a way that results in the re-socialization of the perceptions of the popular majorities into the dominant legitimizing myths of US capitalism. The NEA and the AFT overwhelmingly accept neoliberal capitalism and so are not interested in long term structural transformation or a re-scaling of power from the bourgeoisie and private managerial elite to those toiling in the barrios. The school system is not obligated to prepare students for anything more than the lowest-level jobs. Our regressive tax structure is never challenged. US representative democracy is never questioned, or ever compared to or contrasted with participatory democracy, which emphasizes the social, political, economic and cultural aspects of human agency based on human rights, or direct democracy, which focuses on popular control of the means of production and organization by workers councils. The focus is on teaching to the test, which occupies itself with technocratic problem solving and technocratic knowledge but does not produce meaningful knowledge, knowledge grounded in contexts that require critical analysis and a philosophy of praxis, and an ethics of social justice.

What is taught in today's schools is technocratic knowledge or technical problem solving—means-ends thinking. What is missing is meaningful knowledge, that is, the ability to make moral and ethical choices and to interpret and critique. What is missing is intellectual engagement. Schools train students to become consumers. In a world facing ecosystemic breakdown, we clearly need to approach teaching through the optic of an ecosocialist pedagogy grounded in the notion of sustainability and as socialists we need to recognize that socialist developmentalism has often co-opted indigenous movements. Clearly we need to bring to our teaching practices a pedagogy of looking beyond Western/Euro/US-



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centric ways of knowing the world that are based on capitalist wastefulness and a lack of regard for the planet, in order to consider alternative and oppositional ways of thinking about and acting toward/against the imperialism of free-market neoliberal capital.

I am talking about seeking solidarity with non-dominant groups—in particular silenced groups, marginalized groups, indigenous groups-- in the bringing together the collective imaginaries of all peoples who seek freedom from necessity and dignity for themselves and their communities by denying epistemologies of empire and the destructive and genocidal practices of Western imperial regimes and their fraudulent narratives of historical innocence. We need different perspectives of justice, rights and social change and we must take up indigenous perspectives but in ways that do not exploit indigenous peoples in the process. In other words, I am talking about challenging our conceptions about mo-



ernity, and our European-based epistemologies in order to affirm the epistemic rights of the racially devalued. This means challenging the colonial matrix of power grounded in phylogenetic and ontogenetic Western theories. Critical pedagogy gives us critical distance in examining our own epistemological and ontological formation, but not too much distance that we cannot slay the hydra-headed beast of capital and its razor-toothed companions—racism, sexism, imperialism, colonialism.

But how do you fight against oppression from the classroom when teachers and students are both evaluated in standardized tests that are making a lot of money for the companies who are producing and developing the tests. Standardized tests are a form of social control, that keep students from exploring their own experiences through epistemological approaches grounded in critical reflexivity. Education should be grounded in a non-capitalist decolonial intercultural dialogue. The engine for this change is a commitment to the oppressed, to marginalized and subaltern groups. This commitment does not come with critical consciousness. In other words, critical consciousness is not the root or precondition of commitment to revolutionary struggle but the product of such a commitment.

An individual does not have to be critically self-conscious in order to struggle. It is in the very act of struggling that individuals become critically self-conscious and aware. Critically informed political identities do not motivate revolutionary action but rather develop as a logic consequence of such action. So I often ask my students to join a community group, a social movement, and in their act of struggling alongside and with their group, they will develop critical consciousness which can be augmented by reading and examining texts. But how can teachers use this approach in public school arenas? Teachers will need to educate their communities about the crisis of education, to try to get the parents on their side. Teachers will need the parents as allies against repressive administrations. They need to educate their communities about the dangers of charter schools, how charter promoters pump money into charters to prove they are better than public schools, how charter are undermining teachers unions and the quality of teaching, and how underfunded public schools often result in poor quality education and how

this then is used as another excuse to further gut public school funding.

Sarah Knopp, a Los Angeles teacher, talks about the practice of whipsawing, which has to do with the process of destroying unions by sub-contracting to create lots of small workplaces—in place of large, highly unionized ones—so that when workers in smaller, spun-off shops get inferior contracts, those contracts are used to pressure workers in bigger plants to accept similar concessions. We need to show the community that charter schools are a stepping stone to privatization and that corporate funding depletes state funds and that publicly funded schools are a basic right. Teachers need to create organizations dedicated to fighting standardized testing. They can't do this alone, working in their respective schools. They need to form larger communities of struggle. And they need to educate their communities about socialism as an alternative to capitalist society and capitalist schools.

**Teachers agency comes up against limitations of structural inequality. What are the limits on what a teacher can do? What can a teacher do to break through those limits?**

Here I draw on my work in Venezuela in support of the Bolivarian revolution. I am currently working with the Ministry of Education to train cadres of decolonial Marxists. The idea is that we need a revolution in our structures of knowledge, and in our political roles as educators. For instance, we could learn a great deal from the term *buen vivir* (*sumac kawsay*), a term that comes from the indigenous peoples of the Andean region, and the Aymara people in particular, that refers to harmony and equilibrium among men and women, among different communities, and among human beings and the natural environment. We also need new technological and scientific knowledges to develop alternatives to neoliberal capitalism, and to resist the academic repression we are experiencing in our schools and universities when we bring the language of Marx to bear on helping us to solve the current crisis of capitalism.

While educational transformation is a necessary and not sufficient struggle for creating a new social universe outside of the value form of labor, we need a new geopolitics of knowledge guided by an anti-capitalist imperative in order to play our part as teachers and cultural workers.

The challenge for us is how to recreate the state from the bottom up, while working towards the long-term goal of socialist transformation. The debates we encounter are usually between those who believe in taking state power, such as the Chavistas, and the anti-statist autonomists and anarchists, and often the Zapatistas are cited here as the alternative to follow. Again, I don't think it is an either-or choice. I appreciate the "andar preguntando" (asking we walk) of the Zapatistas to the "andar predicando" (walking we tell) of the standard recitation and repeat approach of conventional pedagogy. But I also believe that we need to struggle to rebuild the state from the bottom up as a step towards eventually doing away with the state altogether.

We certainly need state control over the distribution of the surplus in order to diminish inequalities but the old Keynesian model is no longer sufficient in this time of neoliberal capitalism and we need new forms of left statism, created from the bottom up using participatory democracy and direct democracy as potential models. I agree with John Holloway that revolution is not about destroying capitalism but refusing to create it. There are ways we can stop producing capitalism now, such as creating public gardens, fighting against corporate control of the schools, protesting the G8, etc. Saying "Ya Basta" in the face of education cutbacks. Struggling against pro-profit charters —"Que se vayan todos!" But I also believe we need a coherent philosophy of praxis linked to an epistemological revolution that can incorporate and negotiate both indigenous and westernized knowledges that contest the paradigms of western colonial rationality (what Anibal Quijano calls the "coloniality of power" or "patrón de poder colonial") and open up strategic spaces for engaging with new conceptualizations of living in Pachamama.

My position is that we need a subjective praxis connected with a philosophy of liberation that is able to illuminate the content of a post-capitalist society and project a path to a totally new society by making convincing arguments that it is possible to resolve the contradiction between alienation and freedom. The key here is that our forms of organizing society must be consistent with our philosophy of liberation. We need obviously to prioritize human development, and search for new epistemological frameworks and refuse to continue to participate in epistemicide, or the silencing and destruction of indigenous ways of

understanding and negotiating the world. Not all of us can use the political language of socialism. Speaking at a high school outside of Medellín, Colombia, a few years ago, I learned that the military had earlier attacked the community with helicopters, a tank, artillery and troops, and the paramilitary, and while the teachers had asked me to speak at their school, they rejected my language of socialist struggle because it put them and their students at risk for their lives. They created their own language of critical pedagogy. We need a pluriversal approach to critical pedagogy—there is no one universal approach.

Teachers will develop these approaches in their communities according to the contextual specificity of their struggles, their commitment to the oppressed, and their commitment creating a post-capitalist future.

**Many parents, particularly working-class parents, seem to have bought in to the rhetoric of "choice and competition," "academic rigor," and "achievement" and the idea that school should be more academic earlier. What ideas would you offer parents when thinking about the quality of their children's education that might counter the ideas they are being offered by the mainstream debate?**

Yes, working-class parents often want for their children the kind of education that the children in Beverly Hills are getting. You can't blame them for that. They believe that education is the only vehicle available to them and it's really a question of the kind of teachers they are able to hire at their neighborhood public school. They have bought into the notion of meritocracy and the capitalist propaganda that charters are the best option for their children. They often don't realize that for-profit charters have less public accountability and transparency requirements than public schools. That charter proponents are those behind the shame and blame policies of the Obama administration, behind the weakening of teachers bargaining rights, behind the giving of grants to the "winners" instead of those high-needs students who are most in need of financial assistance. I do know some very successful neighborhood charters, but the charter school movement in general is destructive of what remains of public schooling.

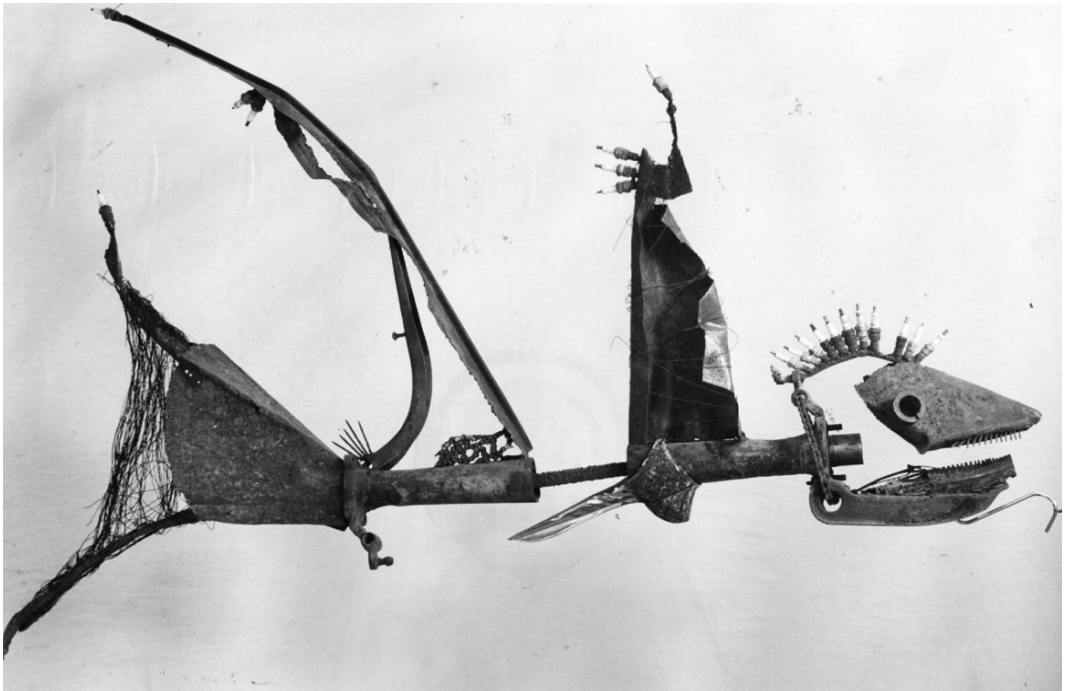
Public schools accept all children, including much larger numbers of high-needs students. The

move to privatize education can be traced as far as the World Bank and transnational efforts to weaken teachers unions and create international standards to put students globally into a lock-step with the needs of transnational capitalism, and the directives of the transnational capitalist class. But at the same time, we need to face the ugly reality that as cities are becoming more segregated, schools are resegregating and racially tracking students, with students of color denied equal access to educational resources, healthy school environments, and higher learning.

Parents can be allies in fighting the current assaults on education that can be traced to the deregulatory policies of free marketization, the neoliberal religiosity of corporate intermarriage and the corporatist managerialist assault on the welfare state that took place during the 1980s and 1990s and that brought about low public expenditures and the hovering up of state subsidies and support back to capital. I was part of the new left in the 1960s, and part of the problem is that we dropped the ball as far as labor issues were concerned, as we focused more on issues of civil rights. We need to pick up that ball again and run with it, while maintaining our defense of civil rights, many of which are in the process of being rolled back to a frightening degree. Parents must be invited into our meetings, into our commu-

nity struggles, into our broad alliances in which single-issue politics gives way to understanding how the major struggles of our day are struggles that are all “entangled” and have a transnational reach.

Academic rigor is of course an issue, but rigor can lead to rigormortis. The issue is critical thinking with revolutionary intent. Presenting students with various languages through which they can help to gain some critical purchase on their experiences. Those languages are restrictive, passive languages. You find it in universities, too. Teaching classical economics and rational choice theory, and leaving out a Marxist critique of political economy won't get us out of the current crisis of capitalism. Ideas have effects, and so do pedagogies. A truly transformative pedagogy takes students experiences seriously, challenges those experiences without taking away the voice or agency of the student, and is undertaken with the overall purpose of transforming the world in the interests of making it less oppressive, less exploitative. Academic approaches to knowledge are often based on a passive approach to learning. What we need is an active theory of knowledge production and pedagogies that can produce the knowledge/action needed to create alternative futures for ourselves and the world in which we live and labor.



“Pez gladiator”, hierro reciclado y soldado  
Rubén Schaap