Reviews


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At the CCCC convention following James Berlin’s unexpected death, in the session in which he was scheduled to speak, the room and the hallway outside were so overfilled that many couldn’t see or hear the proceedings. Inside the room, Ira Shor placed a bouquet in Jim’s honor in a vacant chair at the table, a graduate student studying with Berlin read the paper she had prepared because he would have thought it fitting that her ideas be heard, and Berlin was eulogized. After a time, a man in African dress stood up and chastised the group for sentimental indulgence when much of the work Berlin believed in remained to be done, and the group began to disperse. I believe that that session, combined with other memorials and tributes to Berlin, marked a time of change for rhetoric and composition. In a series of rituals marking Berlin as essential to its past and future, the discipline reconstituted itself in closer alignment with his progressive ideas by instating him as an honorable and respected leader whose intellectual heritage would be central to future deliberations. Berlin’s work was profound and necessary to many, obscure and wrong-headed to others. During his lifetime, these differing perceptions were a significant source of disciplinary contention. At his death, however, this major figure became an icon, his work established as definitive to rhetoric and composition.

In the neighboring discipline of teacher education, the aims of Peter McLaren’s new book, *Che Guevara, Paulo Freire, and the Pedagogy of Revolution*, bear a certain resemblance to this process of icon-making. In an effort to inspire educators to revise their goals and methods, he memorializes Ernesto Guevara and Paulo Freire as larger-than-life heroes who are morally and intellectually exemplary. He starts from the premise that teacher education programs are in urgent need of a corrective
to their politically rightward movement of the past two decades. He proposes the use of Guevara's and Freire's ideas (intensified by their personal qualities) in resuscitating and reviving critical pedagogy, which he argues "no longer enjoys its status as a herald for democracy, as a clarion call for revolutionary praxis, as a language of critique and possibility in the service of a radical democratic imaginary, which was its promise in the late 1970s and early 1980s." McLaren contends that a return to critical pedagogy's radical dimensions, in the form of a pedagogy of revolution, is essential. With its political ally, multicultural education, critical pedagogy is too often understood as merely student-directed learning or, in extreme instances, a means of promoting classroom dialogue and improved student self-esteem. Its interest in transforming the social and political order has been reduced to "liberal teachers and their students ... carefully seated in dialogue circles" where they are "encouraged to emote."

McLaren lays much of the responsibility for this domestication of critical pedagogy on the educational Left's withdrawal from historical materialism in favor of conservative forms of postmodern theory. The New Left's embrace of reactionary terms of critique celebrating cultural hybridity, pastiche, indeterminancy, and the incommensurability of discourses limits our ability to investigate "the historical conditions of possibility": material, economic, and social conditions that encourage certain patterns of thought and action while inhibiting others. Speculation about causal relations is necessary to such work. McLaren asserts that "if we are to gain a more nuanced and measured grasp of these discourses, we need a theory of how these discourses came to be what they are as opposed to something else." To accomplish this goal, McLaren argues for a model of teacher education that recognizes interactions between the global political economy and social conditions. Such a model would assure that U.S. students recognize not only the role of "Western officialdom and statecraft" in producing worldwide poverty, illiteracy, homelessness, crime, and domestic violence but also the processes by which its discourses are either legitimimized or challenged.

Challenging the enactments—through challenging the discourses—of global capitalism is primary to McLaren's revolutionary pedagogy. He contends that capitalism holds an insidious power over human consciousness. Much like paranoia, it has its own interpretive system, one not amenable to the analyst's intervention or persuasion. Resistance to its powerful forces must rely largely on the rhetorical appeal of ethos rather than logos, an appeal evident in the lives and work of Guevara, the
Argentine revolutionary martyred in Bolivia in 1967, and Freire, the internationally recognized Brazilian educator who died in 1997. According to McLaren, the quality that made Guevara and Freire revolutionary was their intense belief in and devotion to the necessity of resistance to deprivation and oppression of the poor. He argues that reason alone has no power in the face of capital's dictates; only love's radicalism can withstand them. It is the revolutionary hero's self-sacrifice that makes faith possible for capital's subjects.

In the book's introductory materials, the *ethos* of McLaren himself is established by Freire's widow Ana Maria Araujo Freire and by Rowman and Littlefield series editor Joe Kincheloe. Ms. Freire, who met McLaren in the early 1980s, writes of McLaren: "There he was, trying to hide behind the hair falling over his face and his frank, boyish smile and soft speech, this marvelous gift that some people have in a very deep and special way: that of loving men and women independently of their social, ethnic, religious, gender, or chronological condition." Kincheloe proclaims McLaren "the poet laureate of the educational left," adept at "McLarenisms" characterized by "critical humor, unparalleled phraseology, and brilliant insights." They describe an idealistic and gifted McLaren who urges profound change in educators' thinking. "McLarenisms" such as the one below approach this challenge with (critical) humor:

The academy is a place where Marxism is dismissed as innocent of complexity and where Marxist educators are increasingly outflanked by fashionable, motley minded apostates in svelte black suede jackets, black chinos, and black '50s eyeglass frames with yellow-tint lenses, for whom the metropole has become a riotous mixture of postmodern mestiza narratives and where hubris shadows those who remain even remotely loyal to causal thinking. For these vanguard hellions of the seminar room, postmodernism is the toxic intensity of bohemian nights, where the proscribed, the immiserated, and the wretched of the earth simply get in the way of their fun.

Partisan humor throughout the book underscores McLaren's position that radical action is required because U.S. education is failing its obligation to enable citizens' powers of critique and resistance.

The muting of such powers veils contradictions between U.S. ideals of democracy and our national embrace of capitalism. McLaren produces extensive evidence that the United States is an imperialist global presence, controlling the fates of millions in Third World nations according
to its capitalist agenda of maximum exploitation of resources. The U.S. has committed acts of aggression, for instance, against "Guatemala (1954), Lebanon (1958), the Dominican Republic (1965), Vietnam (1954–1975), Laos (1964–1975), Cambodia (1969–1975), Nicaragua (1980–1990), Grenada (1983), Panama (1989), and Yugoslavia (1999)." Under cover of discourse about liberty and democracy, the U.S. engages in covert military actions undermining the people's will while propping up authoritarian governmental and military regimes. More openly, it extracts allegiance to its imperialistic interests through domestic and international discourses that trumpet as the highest good the taking of profits and collection of capital.

It is in this context that McLaren presents Guevara as a resistance fighter on the world scene. In keeping with his emphasis on the significance of the personal to the public, he includes a considerable body of biographical information. He describes Guevara—affectionately known as "Che" or "El Che"—as the son of affluent, politically active parents, who was taught to read classical literature and to speak French during his childhood and adolescence in Argentina and who was certified as a medical doctor in 1955. Traveling across Latin America as a young man, Guevara witnessed the effects of extreme poverty, military action, and racism and as a result began to devote his life to armed resistance. He fought with Jacobo Arbenz's Guatemalan governmental forces against a military coup, joined with Fidel Castro to overthrow President Fulgencio Batista's regime in Cuba, and led a unit in support of Patrice Lamumba's bid for independence in the former Belgian colony of the Congo. In each case, Guevara and his armies fought military forces trained and supplied by the CIA, the U.S. State Department, and capitalistic interests such as the United Fruit Company. In 1966, he began to develop insurrectionary fronts against Bolivia's governmental hierarchy led by Rene Barrientos. For a time, Guevara's fighting forces met with notable success; in response, in April of 1967 the U.S. sent an Air Force C-130 cargo plane to Santa Cruz, along with light arms, ammunition, communications equipment, and helicopters (at a cost of approximately five million dollars). A training camp was set up in which U.S. Green Berets, recently returned from Vietnam, trained Bolivian Rangers, and it has been claimed (and disputed) that Washington sent aerial infrared photographic sensors for detecting human body heat. In October of that same year, Guevara was captured and executed by Bolivian Rangers.

Because of the ideological threat he represented even (or possibly especially) in death, Guevara's captors dispensed particularly gruesome
treatment to the corpse. It was repeatedly shot and beaten and, so the populace could harbor no hopes that authorities had gotten the wrong man, its hands were severed and preserved for identification purposes. To avoid mob action among the townspeople near Bolivian military headquarters, the body was secretly dumped in a ditch near an airstrip under construction. McLaren contends that when the body was discovered thirty years later Guevara became through "posthumous rebirth...a man among us once again."

Guevara's relevance to McLaren's revolutionary pedagogy lies in his dedication to teaching and the principles he adhered to in combat. As a teacher, he promoted the value of mental and manual labor for all in order to prevent elitism among professionals and intellectuals, and he routinely worked as a field hand, broke rocks, washed dishes, or served as a male nurse in order to better understand the everyday concerns of the poor. He read widely (Proust, Faulkner, Sartre, and Milton), held regular classes in which he taught peasant recruits to read, read aloud to them from the works of Cervantes and Robert Louis Stevenson, and imposed severe sanctions on his bodyguards if they neglected their studies. In his camps, the torture of prisoners was not allowed, and execution was reserved for those who had engaged in torturing others.

McLaren's sympathies with Guevara, the armed revolutionary, are based on the need to defend against life-threatening tyranny. Nonviolence such as that used successfully in the revolutionary struggles of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Cesar Chavez is to be preferred because, he notes, "nonviolence can change the heart of the oppressor as well as the oppressed." However, McLaren argues that "one cannot remain passive when military...assault teams bulk large on the horizon, or when death squads enter into defenseless communities. We cannot remain idle observers when our brothers and sisters in struggle starve in the streets. We must defend against life-threatening tyranny at all costs."

McLaren notes in contrast that Freire, who also was acutely aware of the life-threatening circumstances of the poor and oppressed, rejected the concept of violence, even to stop violence. His work focused not on saving people's lives but on preparing them for saving their own. For him, introducing peasants to the means of such liberation was the central project of education. This was to be done by enabling learners to approach the world as an object that can be understood by their own efforts; to see the cultural and historical world as a constructed artifact continually under reconstruction according to the dictates of ideology; to connect
their own experiences with current knowledge; to consider the possibilities for new forms of being human if, as a communal project, new knowledge were made; to recognize the importance of print for this shared project; and to understand the myths of dominant discourses as marginalizing and oppressive but amenable to being transformed. Rather than engaging in violence to save lives, Freire worked to create "counterhegemonic sites of political struggle, radically alternative epistemological frameworks, and adversarial interpretations and cultural practices, as well as advocacy domains for disenfranchised groups."

Despite this disparity of view, Freire greatly respected and admired the work of Castro and Guevara. They were teachers of a rare sort because they loved those with whom they worked. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire wrote that, above all, Castro and his comrades identified with the people who endured the brutal violence of the Batista dictatorship. This adherence was not easy; it required bravery on the part of the leaders to love the people sufficiently to be willing to sacrifice themselves for them. It required courageous witness by the leaders to recommence after each disaster, moved by undying hope in a future victory which (because forged together with the people) would belong not to the leaders alone, but to the leaders and the people—or to the people including the leaders. (qtd. in McLaren)

About Guevara, Freire wrote:

It was, then, in dialogue with the peasants that Guevara’s revolutionary praxis became definitive. What Guevara did not say, perhaps due to humility, is that it was his own humility and capacity to love that made possible his communion with the people. And this indisputably dialogical communion became cooperation. (qtd. in McLaren)

This is the same work undertaken by Freire, the self-styled “Pilgrim of the Obvious,” who wrote, “I cannot think authentically unless others think. I cannot think for others, or without others.” The revolutionary action of dialectic is elevated to the level of spiritual atonement in which self-sacrifice and love’s power makes transformation possible.

On September 11, 2001, when the balance of global power shifted for the foreseeable future, school children and adults throughout the U.S. asked why anyone would wish to attack our peace-loving, democratic nation. Why us, who have hewn out a land of freedom and equality among tyrannies and dictatorships? As a nation, we have learned a lot about the
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world since then. Our national discourse, however, still describes a pleasant, happy people, doing no harm to others even if others are less fortunate. McLaren's pedagogy of revolution would improve citizens' awareness of the ways in which capitalistic imperatives are defined as uniquely "American" values and their awareness of the damaging consequences of this scenario to the image of the U.S. around the world, especially in Second and Third World nations.

As McLaren points out, few in the U.S. know what's wrong with capitalism—for instance, that

There currently exist seventy transnational corporations whose revenue is greater than Cuba's—seventy privately owned economic nations. Millions are unemployed in First World economic communities and millions more in Third World communities; three-quarters of the new jobs in the capitalist world are temporary, low paid, low skill, and carry few, if any, benefits. . . . [W]e are witnessing a vast redistribution of wealth from the poor to the rich, as corporations are benefitting from massive tax cuts and the reorientation of consumption toward the new middle class. . . . The globalization of capital has unleashed new practices of social control and forms of internationalized class domination.

Teacher education programs could improve this situation by promoting the arts of critique, especially useful in the context of recent events. A prime target of a revolutionary pedagogy might be the faceless, nameless representatives of vast media conglomerates, intent on ratings and profits, who determine what will be said by Dan Rather and Christiane Amanpour. Another might be state officials who obscure rather than clarify the economic and social issues that prepared the ground for the attacks by calling the bombings "attacks on freedom itself" and by imbuing with religious overtones our counterattack, "Operation Infinite Justice." By better preparing us to engage, reinterpret, and struggle against these and other instances of capitalistic might and military imperialism, McLaren's latest call for a politically and economically savvy program of teacher education offers the potential for decreased hostility and bloodshed through rigorous interrogation of national policies and more humane interactions with our global neighbors.