

A Response to McLaren's Revisionist Interpretation of Freire

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It is difficult to know exactly where to begin with Peter McLaren's response to my arguments about the silences and double binds in the thinking of John Dewey and Paulo Freire. McLaren may expect me to be pleased with his acknowledgement that I have raised important issues. His statement suggesting that I have finally become aware of issues (for example that indigenous languages and knowledge are important forms of diversity linked to the ecological stability of the planet) that he long-ago addressed leaves me bewildered at best, given the clear evidence in each of our scholarly histories. If it moves his followers to take seriously the need to promote educational reforms that address the deepening ecological crises, I will happily let him take credit for ideas that indirectly have their origins in my writings.

What is more important is his claim that I am a "rabid anti-Marxist," which he repeats in a more recent book. This claim raises two important issues: 1) whether he is able to enter into a dialogue with someone who disagrees with him, and 2) whether he has produced evidence to support his claim that my criticisms of Freire and him are evidence of my "rabid anti-Marxism." As for the first claim, McLaren has previously shown himself unwilling to enter into the kind of dialogue advocated by both Freire and Martin Buber. Following an earlier criticism by me of one of McLaren's recommendations that appeared in *Life in Schools*, he responded with a twenty page attack on my character. What I questioned was his suggestion that critical pedagogy should "encourage students to develop a *pedagogical negativism*" (his italics), and to "doubt everything." The ferocity of his attack on me calls into question his ability to engage in the critical reflection he takes so seriously.

Last year, I suggested to the organizers of a conference held at Washington State University that the two of us should engage in a public exchange that would clarify where we disagreed and where we shared common interests about issues relating to the environmental crises and economic globalization. As a way of avoiding the tensions that might arise when references to each other's writings inevitably take statements out of context, I suggested that the ground rule would preclude references to each other's writings, as this would avoid diverting attention from the discussion of environmental and globalization issues. McLaren said he was unwilling to participate. This unwillingness to engage in public debate is surprising, perhaps especially given that Freire and I engaged in a two hour debate at Portland State University years ago.

The other, and more important issue, is McLaren's strategy for trying to marginalize my culturally informed proposals for educational reforms that address the misconceptions perpetuated in the metaphorically based language that different constructivist learning theorists (including both Dewey and Freire) take for granted. He also describes as marginal my reform proposals that include the need for classroom teachers and professors to understand their role as cultural mediators. Specifically, I argue that teachers mediate between the students' primary culture and the industrial/consumer dependent culture that is enclosing (monetizing) what remains of the cultural commons. I make the argument that students are not fully aware of their cultural commons as alternatives to their increasing dependence upon

consumerism, thus making teachers' roles essential. The role of the mediator between the culture of the commons and the industrial system of production and consumption is to clarify what strengthens the mutual support systems within community and contributes to personal talents and skills, and what creates new forms of dependencies that are further impoverishing. To make this point in a way that brings out the silences in the thinking of Freire and McLaren, mediating between cultures helps to clarify what needs to be conserved and what needs to be resisted and, if possible, changed. McLaren's strategy, which his followers have also adopted, is to claim that my only concern is with indoctrinating students with the idea that they must learn to respect traditions.

I have two responses to McLaren's efforts to represent me as against both Marxism and socialism, and as an advocate of mindlessly embracing traditions. The first is that I have never criticized Freire for being grounded in Marxist theory—which he seldom makes explicit. And I have never criticized McLaren's Marxism, though I did question his motive in representing Freire's emancipatory agenda as identical with that of Che Guevara. I read Marx and used several of his books in my graduate classes up until the mid-eighties, as well as the writings of the major critical theorists when most radical educators were still focused on the economic determinism of Bowles and Gintis. However, I decided that using the language of various interpretations of Marxism would prevent me from being taken seriously by the larger audience of educators whom I hoped would recognize the importance of the early scientific warnings about the degradation of the natural systems that human and other forms of life depend upon. I think I was correct in this decision to not use the language of Marxism. Unfortunately I erred in my judgment about educators taking seriously the early warnings about the environment. It's interesting to note that in McLaren's recent book, *Capitalists & Conquerors* (2005) his attempt to link a critical pedagogy with ecosocialist scholarship fails to identify strategies of resistance in classroom practice that even Marxist teachers would find useful—and they are such a minority that they could not be counted upon to reverse the environmentally destructive pathway that public schools and universities now perpetuate.

There were just too many interpretations of central issues in Marx's thinking, and with the exception of Murray Bookchin, there were few if any Marxists at that time addressing environmental issues. My four most recent books on the nature of educational reform address how to revitalize the cultural and environmental commons as sites of resistance to the further enclosure by different industrially inspired strategies for promoting economic globalization. In writing these books, I have been fully aware that the use of the concept of the commons incorporates, without using Marx's language, his central concern with finding alternatives to the dehumanizing and anti-democratic agenda of capitalism. As most Marxist governments have promoted the expansion of the industrial system of production, I avoided the tendency of Marxists such as McLaren to identify capitalism as the primary source of the problem. The industrial system of production, which requires a constantly expanding population of consumers, is both a primary source of environmental degradation and the primary force behind the enclosure of the world's diverse cultural and environmental commons.

I recognized that McLaren would finally become aware of the environmental crisis, which turns out to be about 30 years after I wrote my first book on how educators were reinforcing the cultural assumptions that contribute to overshooting the sustaining capacity of

natural systems. And I have been waiting to see if he could make the conceptual turn required for articulating what we need to *conserve* in this era of ecological and political uncertainty. I am pleased to see that he has avoided the mistake of Moacir Gadotti (the leading Brazilian interpreter of Freire's ideas) who accepts the market liberals' hijacking of the label of conservatism—which rightly belongs to environmentalists and the people working to conserve the traditions of the commons that represent alternatives to dependence upon consumerism. But McLaren has not avoided another characteristic of market liberal and Christian fundamentalists who are leading us down the road to a fascist future—and that is his practice of using their friend/enemy pattern of political discourse.

Before returning to my critique of Freire, I need to identify examples of McLaren's thinking that I have criticized in the past as being culturally and ecologically uninformed. Again, I am not concerned with his Marxism. But as he thinks of himself as one of the world's leading interpreters of Marxism, he takes any criticism of his ideas as an attack on Marxism. McLaren's 1989 recommendation that critical pedagogues should encourage their students to develop a *pedagogical negativism* (his italics) was, as I saw, a restatement of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* recommendation that "to exist humanly" each individual must rename the world of the previous generation—and in the process of renaming, "change the world." In the same chapter that contains his universal formula for achieving the individual's fullest expression of human potential, Freire states that "... to speak a true word is to transform the world." When McLaren recommended that students should question everything, I had already made the linguistic and cultural turn that led to the publication of an article that started the decades-long smear campaign. The title of the article was "The Linguistic Roots of Cultural Invasion in Paulo Freire's Pedagogy."

I've spoken with students who were discouraged by their mentors from reading my writings after that article was published. What they missed was my work on how the metaphorical nature of language reproduced earlier cultural ways of thinking in today's environmental discourse that did not take account of ecological limits. Students were also discouraged from reading my writings drawing on Gregory Bateson, on how computers reinforce the form of autonomous individualism and decontextualized knowledge required by the globalization of the industrial culture. And now, as McLaren's response demonstrates, my efforts to delineate the nature and importance of revitalizing the cultural and environmental commons as part of an on-the-ground strategy for achieving a sustainable post-industrial future is the latest in his long campaign to discredit my work.

The essay that challenged the prevailing idea that Freire's pedagogy avoided any form of cultural imperialism was based on the field work of two cultural linguists who documented the world view and educational practices of the Chipewyan culture of northern Alberta. Their different ways of learning, which were place and intergenerationally based, were well-adapted to their special environment. If they had adopted the Freirean model of critical inquiry as their sole approach to knowledge, their survival would have been threatened. While respectful of Freire's intent, I argued that his pedagogy was based on assumptions about change, individualism, anthropocentrism—as well as a long list of biases against indigenous forms of knowledge, and thus could not be introduced in the Chipewyan culture without it becoming yet another well-intentioned form of cultural imperialism.

After a long association with the two linguists who did the Chipewyan study, and who introduced me to other indigenous cultures whose languages and ways of knowing were based on an awareness of ecological limits as well as a responsibility for the welfare of future generations, I was invited to participate in an ongoing series of meetings with Third World activists sponsored by the Foundation of Deep Ecology. These activists included Vandana Shiva, Helena Norberg-Hodge, Gustavo Esteva, as well as other critics of economic globalization. This group eventually became known as the International Forum on Globalization. The intellectual pathway I was following deepened my criticism of educational reformers like McLaren whose abstract statements about democracy, freedom, oppression, and so forth, were intended to be taken as universal prescriptions. Given my cultural/linguistic perspective, which was informed by a knowledge of cultures that ranged from the Balinese of Indonesia, to the Hopi and Western Apache of the American Southwest, to the Quechua of the Peruvian Andes, I challenged the universal prescriptions of McLaren and his uncritical followers who gave only lip service to cultural differences—and who reduced the environmental crisis to a single comment, if that, in their writings.

The following statement is typical of what I criticized as McLaren's flawed habit of mixing references to the diversity of cultural voices with universal prescriptions that failed to take account of the actual beliefs and practices of these diverse cultural voices. In an essay titled "White Terror and Oppositional Agency," which later appeared in his 1994 book, *Critical Pedagogy and Predatory Culture*, he italicized the statement that "*we need to legitimize multiple traditions of knowledge.*" A few pages later he argues for a "universalist emancipatory world-view in the form of a provisional utopia or contingent foundationalism" (whatever that is). He then negates the possibility that even oppressed groups may not be willing to abandon all their traditions of mutual support and knowledge of how to adapt daily practices to the limited possibilities of the local environment in order to pursue McLaren's vision of a "provisional utopia or contingent foundationalism." As the unfinished feminist movement demonstrates, overcoming the many forms of marginalization and exploitation did not lead to calls for abandoning all traditions. For example, they did not call for overturning the traditions of habeas corpus, the separation of church and state, and an independent judiciary—which the market liberal and Christian fundamentalists are now bent on replacing with their own version of a "provisional utopia" that appeals to nearly 40 percent of American voters. Another statement that is close to what we now hear coming from the market liberal and Christian fundamentalist media is McLaren's recommendation to recognize that "if we want to recruit students to a transformative praxis, students must not only be encouraged to choose a language of analysis that is undergirded by a project of liberation, but must affectively invest in it." (p. 143). The chosen language of analysis of millions of Christian fundamentalist youth is derived from a literalist interpretation of the Bible. McLaren also fails to recognize that students (unless they have already been colonized to a Western way of thinking) are likely to think and speak in the language of their own culture, with its distinctive mythopoetic narratives that serve as the basis of the root metaphors that frame their culture's understanding of relationships, values, and approaches to problem-solving.

McLaren's inability to think within a more expanded political vocabulary—one that takes account of how different cultures rely upon intergenerational knowledge (traditions) in the areas of food security, healing practices, creative arts, narratives that carry forward the values of moral reciprocity between humans as well as between humans and the environment they depend upon—is the same shortcoming found in Freire's thinking. My critique of

Dewey and Freire’s anti-cultural and environmental commons thinking has been based on a radically different set of theoretical frameworks, scientific studies of environmental and cultural changes, and interactions with Third World activists who are working to protect what remains of their commons—from the traditions of thinking that McLaren still takes for granted. McLaren is now working to protect his reputation by representing his revisionist interpretations as simply an elaboration of what Freire really thought but did not put into print.

McLaren’s revisionism makes three claims that deserve special examination. The first of his revisionist interpretations is that Freire did not argue against cultural transmission. It’s especially interesting that McLaren makes this claim when Moacir Gadotti, the head of the Instituto Paulo Freire in Brazil and who sees himself as a close friend and an equal authority on Freire’s thinking, argues that a planetary citizen cannot be achieved through the “transmission of culture ‘from one generation,’ but (by) the grand journey of each individual into his interior universe and in the universe that surrounds him.” While Gadotti is being dismissed by other factions attempting to control Freire’s legacy—which is another story—the stronger evidence of McLaren’s revisionist attempts to counter my criticism can be found in Freire’s own writings. We need only recall Freire’s argument that everyone the world over can only achieve their highest capacity as human beings when they speak a true word, rename the world of the previous generation, and engage in continual emancipation through critical reflection as the one true approach to knowledge. Freire could not have made his prescription for escaping the oppressive nature of cultural transmission any clearer. He restates his opposition to cultural transmission, which is so clearly stated in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, when he writes the following in *The Politics of Education*:

History has no power. As Marx has said, history does not command us, history is made by us. History makes us while we make it. Again, my suggestion is that we attempt to emerge from this alienating daily routine that repeats itself. Let’s try to understand life, not necessarily as the daily repetition of things, but as an effort to create and re-create, and as an effort to rebel as well. Let’s take our alienation into our own hands and ask, ‘Why?’ ‘Does it have to be this way?’ I do not think so. We need to be subjects of history, even as we cannot totally stop being objects of history. And to be subjects, we need unquestionably to claim history critically. As active participants and real subjects, we can make history only when we are continually critical of our lives.

History includes the taken-for-granted traditions of how to prepare a meal that relies upon intergenerational knowledge rather than relying upon an industrially prepared meal, language that organizes our thinking in ways that we are generally not aware of while, at the same time, reproduces the culture’s most basic moral values and misconceptions, narratives that carry forward the information about the nature of moral reciprocity as well as which groups are to be marginalized and exploited, and so forth. Freire and McLaren are correct in arguing that the sources of injustice that may be passed along as part of the cultural commons need to be critically examined and transformed. But they do not recognize that the history of how a culture addresses certain forms of injustice may lead over many generations to wisdom that needs to be passed along through keeping the tradition alive—especially when attacked by extremists. The traditions of habeas corpus that go back to the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215 should be part of the cultural transmission that needs to be passed along without assuming that each individual has the responsibility to exercise critical reflection in a way that frees her /him from being oppressed by this tradition. The tradition of separation of church and state in the United States also reflects the achievement of wisdom about how people of diverse faiths can live together without killing or imprisoning each other. An interesting question is whether the evangelical and fundamentalist Christians are engaging in Freirean

praxis when their “utopian vision” leads them to speak their understanding of a “true word” that frees them from the restrictions of our traditions of civil rights, which they find oppressive.

Critical reflection is highly useful in clarifying why these two traditions need to be conserved, and in clarifying the cultural forces that are threatening them. What is now being called “slow food” also reflects wisdom accumulated over many generations, and the role of critical inquiry is to make explicit the industrial forces that are undermining it. There are many traditions that are exploitive, based on misconceptions, that were wrongly constituted in the first place, and that change too slowly. There are also traditions that we rely upon as part of our taken-for-granted daily life that may disappear before we are aware of the loss, such as the recent loss of privacy—which has now been replaced by widespread public acceptance of the right of government to keep us under constant surveillance.

Cultural transmission is at the core of all cultures, and it is a basic misconception to think that it can be done away with, and that the critical reflection of each generation needs to be constantly over-turning the hold of history (the code word for cultural transmission). The silence of Freire was his failure to provide guidelines for recognizing when critical reflection is empowering and when traditions need to be intergenerationally renewed—which sometimes take the form of mentoring relationships, narratives of past wrongs as well as gains in social justice, and so forth. McLaren now appears to recognize the absurdity of suggesting that a critical pedagogy can do away with cultural transmission—which he recommended in his earlier statement about encouraging students to question everything. But McLaren still is a long way from understanding that the cultural and environmental commons, which cultures sustain in different ways, often represent alternatives to dependence upon a money economy. They can also be sources of injustices and practices that degrade the environment. Thus, the need to understand the complexity and place-based nature of intergenerational renewal as practiced by different cultures, rather than representing it in an abstract and culturally uninformed language that relies excessively on such words as “transformation,” “change,” “emancipation,” “liberation”—as though these words have the same meaning in all cultures. Ironically, the ignorance of most Americans about the traditions that need to be conserved, to which the change-oriented Freirean/McLaren-oriented critical pedagogy contributes, is making it easier for the fascist elements in our society to use McLaren’s emancipatory vocabulary for achieving their own vision of utopia.

McLaren’s effort to challenge my criticism that Freire’s emphasis on critical reflection and renaming the world leads to the form of individual autonomy required by the industrial culture also needs to be criticized. The logic of the industrial culture is very simple. If individuals lack the intergenerational knowledge, skills and patterns of mutual support that are part of the community’s cultural and environmental commons, they will be dependent upon the industrial culture to meet their daily needs. If individuals, in following how the industrial culture enables them to escape the history of their community’s commons, and thus do not know how to prepare a meal, to grow food, to repair or build something useful, to read the environmental signs that tell when and where to plant, they can meet their needs by going to McDonalds, to supermarkets, to Monsanto for genetically modified seeds that resist Roundup and have to be purchased each year by the farmer. The industrial culture has many ways that lead to the autonomous individualism promoted by Freire’s pedagogy.

In *Mentoring the Mentor*, Freire follows a discussion of cultural differences that need to be taken into account when developing a democratic and liberating pedagogy with a restatement of the mentor's primary responsibility. As he put it, the ethical posture of the mentor is to foster "the total autonomy, freedom, and development of those he or she mentors." This statement cannot be read as anything other than a refutation of McLaren's revisionist argument that Freire emphasized collectivity of thought and action. Face-to-face relationships, which are one of the characteristics of collectivity (as McLaren uses the word) involves the culture's traditions of mutual respect, of patterns of meta-communication, of social justice, of how to understand the attributes of the participants in the relationships. While these cultural traditions might involve honor killings dictated by the culture's belief system, taken-for-granted understanding of attributes of individuals and classes of people that preclude their basic rights to equality, there are other examples of cultural traditions that are essential to mutual respect and support of community decision-making. Freire fails to explain how the idea of autonomy can be reconciled with the cultural traditions of tolerance and mutual respect that democratic decision-making requires—including the tradition of avoiding labeling the individual or group whose ideas prevail over those held by others as the enemy (which is a proclivity in McLaren's thinking and writing). The double bind is in the failure of Freire and McLaren to recognize that the language of emancipation, which they assume leads to greater social justice, can also be used by market liberal and Christian fundamentalists to argue for overturning the social justice traditions of the cultural commons they find oppressive.

Many of McLaren's followers, including book editors, also practice the friend/enemy approach to decision-making. This can be seen in the fact that I had to go to nine different publishers before I found one willing to publish a collection of essays titled *Rethinking Freire: Globalization and the Environmental Crisis*. The essays were by Third World activists who were former colleagues, followers, and even close friends of Freire. These activists attempted to use his pedagogy within their own cultures, and in speaking the local language they recognized the indigenous responses to the Western assumptions that are part of the pedagogy that are generally overlooked by Westernized proponents of his pedagogy. They discovered what I wrote about in my 1982 essay; namely, that Freire's pedagogy was based on Western assumptions about the progressive nature of change, critical reflection as the one true source of knowledge that will emancipate individuals and communities from all their oppressive traditions, and the anthropocentrism that made no sense to indigenous cultures, including the Quechua and Aymara of the Andes who adapt their agricultural practices to what the environment is communicating. The friend/enemy approach to decision-making led to automatic rejections of publishing the reflections of men and women who had a deep knowledge of Freire, and who recognized that the continued promotion of his pedagogical ideas represented yet another expression of Western colonization. Criticism of Freire's pedagogy had to be suppressed, just as my writings had to be suppressed following the publication of my 1982 essay.

The third issue central to McLaren's revisionist agenda is related to my criticism of Freire's ethnocentrism. But Freire's ethnocentrism is not limited to his emphasis on individual autonomy—as though all cultures share the same way of thinking. He compounds the problem by adopting the Social Darwinian interpretative framework of the 19th century. That the distinction Freire makes in *Education for Critical Consciousness* between what he terms [the near-animal] existence of the indigenous cultures living in the interior of Brazil and the

more evolved culture that he represents escaped the attention of his many readers, including McLaren, from recognizing Freire's Social Darwinian thinking is remarkable.

McLaren would like his readers to believe that my criticism of Freire's ethnocentrism and Social Darwinian thinking is simply a fabrication I made up to discredit Freire. However, on pages 17 to 18 of the 1974 paperback edition of *Education for Critical Consciousness*, Freire explains the evolution from a state of “semi-intransitivity of consciousness, through a state of “naïve transitivity, to the highest and most evolved state of consciousness,” which is “transitivity of consciousness.” As he explains the least evolved state of consciousness, “men of semi-intransitivity of consciousness cannot apprehend problems situated outside their sphere of biological necessity.” I am not making this up! His ethnocentrism is so deeply engrained that he ignored the forms of knowledge that the indigenous cultures acquired about the ecosystems they depended upon and the technologies they developed before making his sweeping generalization. Perhaps this should not surprise us, since Freire's own consciousness really did not include consideration of the larger natural world as worthy of his attention. The most evolved state of consciousness, we should not be surprised to learn, is characterized by critical and dialogical forms of life, and authentic democracies—which ironically do not include the non-Western cultures that do not share Freire's Western assumptions.

As I am nearing the word limit that *CNS* allows, I will close with the recommendation that if McLaren is serious about sites of resistance to economic globalization and the enclosure of the world's diverse cultural commons, he should actually read what I have written in my last thirteen or so books. The last four books deal with different aspects of how the cultural and environmental commons are being enclosed by various aspects of the industrial/consumer dependent culture—by the ideology of market liberalism, technologies, coalitions of anti-democratic groups that want to maximize profits before Armageddon liberates them from their earthly pursuits, and constructivist theories of learning. And he should pay attention to how universities privilege the ideas of Western thinkers going back to Plato who marginalized the importance of the commons while, at the same time perpetuating the Orwellian political language that hides the long-term consequences of the political and environmental transformations now taking place. A starting place would be my two most recent books that appear on my website <http://cabowers.net/>, followed by *Revitalizing the Commons* and *The False Promises of Constructivist Theories of Learning*. If McLaren still is unable to recognize that equating my writings with excrement is yet another reflection on his poor judgment, perhaps some of his followers will be able to exercise sufficient independence of thought to recognize the difference.