

REMAKING EDUCATION**History and Hope from the Present Moment: Peter McLaren and Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy****Samuel Day Fassbinder*

In the summer of 2007, enormous holes were eaten in the Arctic ice pack, reducing it from its previous low (in 2005) of 5.32 million square kilometers to a new low of 4.13 million square kilometers. The decline was such that scientists were predicting an ice-free Arctic summer as soon as 2012 or 2013.

This news fact, of course, is a symptom of abrupt climate change. But, far from being the citation of a mere natural phenomenon, it illustrates the social dilemma in which world society finds itself. Capitalism is trapped in its own structural fantasies, which it uses to protect itself from its own eventual end. This essay points to an educational path which would allow people to think rationally about life after capitalism.

Abrupt climate change is a human-caused phenomenon, a byproduct of global society's burning of 85 million barrels of oil each and every day (as of 2005). And that's not counting the coal and natural gas that are also burned each day and which add significantly to the Earth's atmospheric carbon dioxide endowment. Importantly, abrupt climate change is the result of a delayed effect; the abrupt climate change we are experiencing today was caused by a carbon dioxide endowment which entered the atmosphere significantly before the present moment. Thus, there is more to come.

Another very important fact about abrupt climate change is that it is only one of the many, many ecological problems caused by human exploitation of the natural world and the resulting assault on ecosystem resilience. A good list of all of human society's ecological problems is given in John McMurtry's essay, "The Planetary Life Crisis: Its Systemic Cause and Ground of Resolution." The "catastrophic dieback" of the coral reefs, the disappearance of the rainforests, the overfishing-caused depletion of the oceans, and pollution of water, air, and land, are all brought into statistical focus. For McMurtry, the real problem is that too few finger the capitalist system as the cause of ecocidal activity. "Ecological and environmental analyses and positions...have failed to link the life-stripping phenomena they discern back to the inner logic of the global market system that propels them."

Moreover, the capitalist elite's response to abrupt climate change appears to be the same sort of shell game, played to absolve capitalism of culpability so the show may go on. What counts for "emissions reduction" is a "cap-and-trade" scheme, per the so-called restrictions of the Kyoto Protocol, in which "emission restrictions" become something to be evaded through the planting of "carbon sinks" or the purchase of "carbon credits" in trading schemes, neither of which are likely to reduce emissions significantly.

However, the problem with the Kyoto Protocol goes far beyond the dubious quality of its easements, or even that the "developing" countries, especially India and China, are generally exempt from its restrictions. The problem with the Kyoto Protocol starts from its refusal to acknowledge that real social change will be necessary to deal with the causes of abrupt climate change. The

realities of Kyoto, as the editors of the *Monthly Review* point out, are that its goals are merely the first—and very modest—attempt at cutting global carbon emissions:

The truth is that addressing the global warming threat to any appreciable degree would require at the very least a chipping away at the base of the system. The scientific consensus on global warming suggests that what is needed is a 60-80 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions below 1990 levels in the next few decades in order to avoid catastrophic environmental effects by the end of this century—if not sooner. The threatening nature of such reductions for capitalist economies is apparent in the rather hopeless state at present of the Kyoto Protocol, which required the rich industrial countries to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by an average of 5.2 percent below 1990 levels by 2008–2012. The United States, which had steadily increased its carbon dioxide emissions since 1990 despite its repeated promises to limit its emissions, pulled out of the Kyoto Protocol in 2001 on the grounds that it was too costly. Yet, the Kyoto Protocol was never meant to be anything but the first, small, in itself totally inadequate step to curtail emissions. The really big cuts were to follow.

The “consumer-based” approach to “cutting carbon burning” is thus like trapping oil with a sieve. Having allowed the oil companies to extract and refine the oil, Kyoto then makes the oil consumers pass through an additional hoop or two. A sensible approach to cutting “carbon burning” would be to keep the carbon itself in the ground—to not pump it or refine it in the first instance. That would be a producer-based approach, going on the logic that if it hasn’t been produced, it won’t be consumed. But such an approach would run contrary to the financial interests of the oil companies, which themselves wield enormous power under capitalism. This is what the *Monthly Review* editors mean by “chipping away at the base of the system.”

The collective fate which awaits us, should our civilization not select such an approach, is that of a “runaway greenhouse effect,” a composite of smaller climate changes that magnify themselves into larger ones. Hotter land temperatures, for instance, mean the faster evaporation of water in semi-arid climates, thus deserts expand. The melting of the polar ice-caps means less ice to reflect back the sun’s heat, thus even hotter average ocean temperatures. Eventually the “runaway greenhouse effect” causes the release of methane hydrates, unlocking reserves of flammable greenhouse-gas methane from beneath the oceans and heating the world beyond recognition. Climate change writer and activist Mark Lynas, author of *Six Degrees*, gives world society about eight years to figure out how to reduce its “carbon emissions” before the “runaway greenhouse effect” starts to kick in. Meanwhile, world society shows with its every gesture its undying allegiance to the model of neoliberal capitalism given in the “Washington Consensus,” amidst a near-absence of public revolt.

As the ecological crisis deepens, the capitalist system itself shows signs of unraveling: one symptom of this is the decline of the world’s reserve currency, the U.S. dollar; the Euro is now worth 50 percent more against the dollar than it was nearly five years ago. The dollar decline, adding to inflation, accentuated a financial shake-out in which the expanding bubble in the U.S. real estate market, largely considered the engine of U.S. economic growth in the period after 2000, shrunk considerably, as evidenced by much lower prices amidst much higher foreclosure rates. True to the mandate of the U.S. government—the protector of the global capitalist regime—to squeeze every last penny of profit, its central banking system, the U.S. Federal Reserve, decided to act. Thus, the Fed’s “solution” to the problem has been to lower interest rates, which has the effect of allowing creditors to continue to believe that unpayable debts can somehow be paid off. The result should be

a further pouring of dollars into a global money economy already inflated by \$9.3 trillion in U.S. national debt.

The economic crises of dollar decline and mortgage shakedown exist amidst the ongoing situation of a worsening glut of capital, as described by Harry Shutt's *The Trouble With Capitalism* and subsequent books. Shutt sees capital devouring the world through ever-increasing government subsidy, "privatizing" things into its own hands, by hiring in cheap-wage nations, through fraud and corruption, and so on. He describes the situation as follows:

It will be readily apparent that, as long as the growth in real demand for investment capital is tending to weaken while the rate of return sought by investors remains high, the fulfillment of these mutually interdependent objectives (new profitable investment, plus continued rate of return on old investments) is bound to prove ultimately self-defeating. This is because the inevitable consequence of maintaining a high return on the capital stock as a whole is that yet more investible funds will be generated for which outlets must be found. Moreover, as already noted, in a globalized economy increasingly geared to anarchic speculation, there is a natural tendency for investors to push their demands for return on capital higher still. Hence the effort now needed to sustain the market value of capital resembles the futile labor of Sisyphus.

Thus the economic history of the past 30 years reveals that as capital gets larger and hungrier, it tends to eat at a world that can offer it less and less in terms of real economic growth, further increasing economic instability. William K. Tabb summarizes Angus Maddison's OECD statistics as follows:

Real global growth averaged 4.9 percent a year during the Golden Age of national Keynesianism (1950-1973). It was 3.4 percent between 1974 and 1979; 3.3 percent in the 1980s, and only 2.3 percent in the 1990s, the decade with the slowest growth since World War II. The slowing of the real economy led investors to seek returns in financial speculation...

Much of what Shutt describes in *The Trouble With Capitalism* is a classic crisis of overproduction, straight out of Marx's *Capital*: capital, no longer able to make profits by selling people stuff they don't want or can't afford, invents an ever-larger and ever-more-fragile house of cards to preserve for itself the notion that it is continuing to profit and get ever-richer. The world economy takes on aspects of a Potemkin village, as described in the conclusion to Robert Brenner's *The Economics of Global Turbulence*:

The odds therefore favor a still further opening up of the already enormous chasm between the income and profits actually produced by the world economy and the paper claims generated by it—the build-up of external surpluses and credit in the hands of East Asia and of external deficits and household debt in the U.S. being one highly symptomatic manifestation of the broader syndrome.

The crisis of abrupt climate change, then, takes place amidst an economic system that is increasingly lying to itself, in bigger and bigger terms, to preserve the illusions that are supposed to keep it working. Its doom, then, is sealed; it confronts its problems by spinning ever-more-elaborate fantasies, worsening the situation.

The fundamental drive at the heart of capitalism is its need to extract what its protagonists call "resources" in order to feed the growth of its core regions: the corporate hearts of its cities. In

the process, the world is subjected to capitalist discipline: its things and its working-class people are made into commodities and repackaged for market sale. Eventually the world will have had enough capitalist discipline, after which it will no longer be able to support capitalism itself. The Earth can only sustain so much use of its “natural resources” at current rates before its capacities for natural renewal become overwhelmed by phenomena such as abrupt climate change. Capitalism, on the other hand, needs to grow in order to provide something real to back up (aggregate) investor profits. This growth, barring vast and immediate increases in efficiency, must be fortified by increased exploitation of natural resources—despite the accompanying ecosystem damage.

The defenders of capitalism, then, today seek some quick technological fix that will restore capitalist growth without harming ecosystems. This dynamic is well-illustrated by Saral Sarkar in his book *Eco-Socialism or Eco-Capitalism?* in a discussion of the “fundamental contradiction between the logic of capitalism and that of a sustainable economy.” Sarkar writes:

... if resource consumption in industrial societies has to go down in the next 50 years by a factor of ten and, at the same time, economic growth is to continue at the rate of 2 percent per annum, then resource productivity must rise by a factor of 27. Is that a realistic hope?

So, given the vast increases in efficiency that will be necessary, we would be wise not to expect a late-arriving techno-god to save capitalism from what James O’ Connor calls the “second contradiction of capitalism,” in which the damage capitalism causes to ecosystems undermines the ability of the capitalist system to generate profits, thus undermining the capitalist system itself.

The depressing reality is this. Rationally, and regardless of what happens, we are ourselves the products of capitalist discipline. That means we are not only remotely distant from the possibility of a planned transition to some other, non-capitalist form of political economy, but most of us haven’t even considered that capitalism will not last forever. Politically, capitalism is supreme. How can we change?

Building a Post-capitalist World

One crucial element in transitioning to a post-capitalist world society of the future is the redesign of education. The obvious candidate for such an educational task is critical pedagogy, which is listed in its Wikipedia entry as a teaching practice that questions “domination.” Critical pedagogy doesn’t merely go “against” domination by teaching students to believe that domination is bad or by promoting slogans against domination. Critical pedagogy is the practice of preparing students to be subjects of social reality—individuals capable of supporting social change.

The term “critical pedagogy” is typically associated with the thought of Paulo Freire (1921-1997), with its connection to liberation theology; but the power of “critical pedagogy” to promote change within world society gains an important cogency through the “revolutionary critical pedagogy” of Peter McLaren (1948-), which suggests more specific modes of addressing social change.

Perhaps the most famous work of Freire’s is the capstone philosophy of critical pedagogy, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, however, addresses itself to the zeitgeist of 1968, written to an audience that believed in the words of Che Guevara and of Mao Zedong; more important measures of critical pedagogy’s promotion of social change can be found in words written at times when the intensity of social change is not urgently “revolutionary.”

Freire's "Second Letter" in the collection *Pedagogy of Indignation* is titled "On the Right and the Duty to Change the World," written just before Freire died in 1997. In this redeeming essay, Freire argues against an educational gesture of bad faith: the "deproblematization of the future." Freire is criticizing the sense of inevitability with which many of his associates accepted the imposition of neoliberal economics upon Brazil and other countries. He saw this as the newest form of the "dominant fatalist ideology, its power to encourage immobility on the part of the oppressed and their adaptation to unjust reality," as elaborated in the "First Letter." Against this acquiescence, he argues that we do in fact intervene in, or make, the future:

The future does not make us. We make ourselves in the struggle to make it.

The entire first portion of this essay describes the future that the capitalist system sets itself up for; Freire reminds us that nothing is foreordained in reality. We have free will, and this free will makes the future unpredictable in struggle, the struggle against inequities in power:

Mechanists and humanists alike recognize the power of today's globalized economy. However, while for the former there is nothing to be done about this untouchable power, for the latter, it is not only possible but also necessary to fight against the robust power of the powerful, which globalization has intensified, as it has the weakness of the fragile.

If one has no power in the world, if one is merely characterized as part of the "weakness of the fragile," then the struggle to make the world is characterized by resistance to "the robust power of the powerful," by which Freire means those who are making neoliberalism seem inevitable.

In this letter, Freire laid the ground for a revolutionary critical pedagogy. In Freire's *Pedagogy of Freedom*, written for a seminar that was canceled after his death in 1997, he even spells out the method by which the struggle against the robust power of the powerful is to take place:

It is necessary to go beyond rebellious attitudes to a more radically critical and revolutionary position, which is in fact a position not simply of denouncing injustice but of announcing a new utopia.

In a time when revolution appears far away, a "revolutionary critical pedagogy" still dreams of the possibility of utopia, of a radical resolution of social problems which may in other lights seem unresolvable. Today's proponents of revolutionary critical pedagogy have expanded this utopian dream into an agenda.

After (and in Tribute to) Freire: Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy

Now, Freire is no longer with us, but his legacy is carried on in various versions of the "Instituto Paulo Freire" and different schools in (at least) the U.S., Brazil, and Spain. One of the most important of these, "revolutionary critical pedagogy," opposes "adjusting ourselves to the world at hand," as Freire characterized the dominant attitude in the 1990s. Revolutionary critical pedagogy, a term coined by Paula Allman, is advocated by a number of prominent scholars: Paula Allman, Dave Hill, Mike Cole, Gustavo Fischman, Glenn Rikowski, as well as my good friend, Peter McLaren.

Perhaps a personal disclaimer is in order, as I've known McLaren since late 2004, and he has helped me in numerous ways. However, the reason I made Peter's acquaintance was prior admiration of his

writings, which has grown since I've seen him at work and realized the degree to which he has authentically assumed the mantle of Freire. McLaren has become not just a public intellectual, centered at UCLA, but a global force, as he goes around the world blessing versions of the "Fundación McLaren" set up in his name in Chihuahua and in Tijuana, Mexico, and the "Cátedra Peter McLaren" established by the Bolivarian University in Caracas, Venezuela.

I originally took an interest in Peter McLaren through his book, *Schooling as a Ritual Performance*. This 1986 text was a study of a middle ("7-8 grade") Catholic school in inner-city Toronto, taking an approach that intrigued me: McLaren combined a "ritual analysis" with the social and political analysis of the setting in which the students, mostly underclass Italian and Azorean immigrants, lived. With this combination of analyses, the repressive nature of Catholic schooling came fully into light. The sketches that McLaren drew of this school, moreover, moved me in ways that most such writing missed. In reading such a book, it seemed to me, I could see how Peter McLaren had gotten ahold of something—something integral to everyday life and, moreover, essential to its politics—that my professors had missed.

Since writing *Schooling as a Ritual Performance*, a book he says was adapted from his dissertation, McLaren has gone on to write and edit over 40 books. Since 2000, with *Che Guevara, Paulo Freire, and the Pedagogy of Revolution*, McLaren has upheld the banner of revolutionary critical pedagogy. Much of the content of this writing involves "rethinking the political economy of critical education," to quote the subtitle of a recent essay. In so writing, McLaren hopes to spark debate about the ultimate purposes of the teaching profession and to exhort teachers to "build upon the textual politics that dominate most multicultural classrooms by engaging in a politics of bodily and affective investment, which means 'walking the talk' and working in those very communities (they) purport to serve."

In discussing revolutionary pedagogy, McLaren draws upon real-life examples to demonstrate how experience is politicized, rather than proscribing educational content or lecturing us about politics. In an interview with Angela Calabrese Barton, McLaren discusses the example of an eighth-grade science teacher explaining "temperature gradients and the function of insulators" to show how this particular teacher's "students turned science class into political space where the learning of science was coupled with learning about (and critiquing) the schooling process and the purposes and goals of doing science and its connections to social control, economic tradeoffs, and human welfare." The students ended up designing insulated lunch bags for their own personal use in this class, thus adapting the educational experience to their own specific practical ends rather than passively being molded by the teacher (as is standard practice in many public schools). Moreover, the students used the lesson to explore the politics of their school's science curriculum, as well as the politics of the relative availability of refrigeration to rich and to poor sectors of the world economy.

So how would revolutionary critical pedagogy work? In *Capitalists and Conquerors*, McLaren outlines a revolutionary critical pedagogy curricula:

Revolutionary critical pedagogy begins with a three-pronged approach: *First*, students engage in a pedagogy of demystification centering around a semiotics of recognition, where dominant sign systems are recognized and denaturalized, where common sense is historicized, and where signification is understood as a political practice that refracts rather than reflects reality, where cultural formations are understood in relation to the larger social factory of the school and the global universe of capital. *This is followed by* a pedagogy of opposition, where students engage in analyzing various political systems, ideologies, and histories, and eventually students begin to develop their own political positions. *Inspired by a*

sense of ever-imminent hope, students take up a pedagogy of revolution, where deliberative practices for transforming the social universe of capital are developed and put into practice.

So this is the plan under proposal when McLaren argues: “Revolutionary critical pedagogy supports a totalizing reflection upon the historical-practical constitution of the world, our ideological formation within it, and the reproduction of everyday life practices. It is a pedagogy with an emancipatory intent.”

Applying Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy to Ecological Practice

As we proceed under the aegis of capitalist life, we can expect both social and ecological disruption to flow from the continued operation of the system. Much of what has been written so far in revolutionary critical pedagogy has been about social revolution. But revolutionary critical pedagogy is also highly relevant to developing a more ecologically conscious path. McLaren has himself endorsed such a path: in the interview with Barton cited above, he argues that “science education needs to be directed to assisting an educated population with managing a large-scale investment program for a sustainable future for humanity.”

We may, in fact, make ourselves in the way in which we make the future, but the way in which we do this may have no ecological bearings. The result is that we ourselves become predators without a future, much like the polar bears whose habitat will be irreversibly ruined with the disappearance of the polar icecaps.

But if we choose otherwise, our revolutionary critical pedagogy will be brought to bear on the subject we were hired to teach; its actual content will differ depending upon whether we are teaching chemistry or reading, history or agriculture. Our vision of the future will guide the way in which we teach this content: our utopia will be that of a global, ecologically sustainable society. Regardless of our subject matter, our students are icons of the new, the world to come; and we will want them to take heed to picture that world.

In a pedagogy of demystification, easy pronouncements of “sustainability” will have to be contrasted with careful direct observations of the natural world itself. We have a living planet to contend with, and its domination, its exploitation, and its long and difficult recovery cannot be glossed over with easy economic rationalizations. A pedagogy of opposition would draw into question the structure of our world society itself; we need to be able to distinguish between the movement to establish our utopia and capitulations to social power dressed up in socially approved, “green” language. A pedagogy of revolution, finally, will bring students toward real transformation with both people and the land that can be hoped to support them.