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# Reclaiming Hope: Teacher Education and Social Justice in the Age of Globalization

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## **Reclaiming Hope: Teacher Education and Social Justice in the Age of Globalization**

**By Peter McLaren & Gustavo Fischman**

### **Introduction**

While we welcome the invitation by Alan H. Jones to respond to his “ten points of debate in teacher education,” we share a pronounced feeling of apprehension. On the one hand, our uneasiness arises from recognizing that any serious attempt to reflect upon all—or most—of the issues in less than ten pages would either be an exercise in futility or a presumptuous display of rhetorical skills. On the other hand, Jones’s articulation of ten abiding concerns related to teacher education is yet another uneasy reminder of the persistence over the years of familiar, pressing, and tired concerns in teacher education debates. That Jones’s list of ten points of debate reflect essentially the same categories and terms of debate that one would have seen two or three decades ago suggests to us not that teacher education is trapped in a community of fate sealed by the overriding concerns of a profession that has become out-of-touch with contemporary issues, but rather that the rationality underwriting the very

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terms of the debate over teacher education are deeply and inescapably rooted in education's dependence upon restricted forms of democratic life and the enshrining of capitalist social relations.

Consequently, we have decided to restrict our response to several topics glaringly missing from Jones's list, namely, the construction of identity and critical citizenship in a world increasingly under the sway of globalization and in the thrall of commodity culture. We believe that the absence of discussion of these issues diminishes the capacity of teacher education programs to participate in the formation of teachers as critical agents of social justice.

Our overarching position is unashamedly and avowedly criticalist: we believe that unless teacher education locates the pedagogical education of future teachers within the context of an examination of the current glorification of global corporatism and the capitalist economy's ability for self-valorization, teacher education will remain delinked from necessary and urgent political conversations and practices.

### **The Global Context of Teacher Education**

It is not surprising that at the present time, unfettered capitalism and the continued dismantling of the Keynesian welfare national state is perceived by the ruling elites as the key to the magical kingdom of unlimited consumption that will provide the solution to unequal and unfair distribution of wealth, to ecological disasters, and to institutionalized forms of racism and sexism. In our view, such a position is dangerously misguided, politically dishonest, and patently false.

We claim that an unregulated pursuit of capitalist expansion has posed serious challenges for the advancement of democratic social relations. In fact, the unregulated system of private power that we are now witnessing on a global basis—under the sobriquet of “globalization”—imposes severe restrictions of political decision-making in the interests of social equality in both the so called “developed” and “underdeveloped” nations (Mander & Goldsmith, 1996). Social policies—from housing and economic development to health and education—have been subordinated to a neo-liberal rationale that demands structural competitiveness and a growing internationalization of capital.

Such policies arrogantly disregard the enormous amount of data denouncing the increased pathological mixture of social inequalities that neo-conservative and neo-liberal proposals have inflicted upon countries throughout the world (Fischman, 1998; Kabber, 1994; Sammoff, 1994).

Neo-liberal and neo-conservative discourses in education have been theoretically and ideologically fueled by the corporatist logic of the free market. Backed by heavily-funded conservative think tanks such as The Heritage Foundation, The American Enterprise Institute, The Free Congress Research and Educational Foundation, The Cato Institute, and The Hoover Institution, right-wing advocacy organizations stressing national security, foreign policy, and educational issues are

producing “policy products” and distributing them widely to various constituencies, including media outlets nationwide. As part of a neo-conservative discourse of efficiency and accountability, neo-liberalism has taken a white-knuckled grip on public policymaking, particularly affecting state-sponsored programs such as public schooling. In this urgent sense, we are faced with what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as the “gospel” of neo-liberalism. This gospel serves as a clarion call to combat “*by every means, including the destruction of the environment and human sacrifice...any obstacle to the maximization of profit*” (1998, 126). Bourdieu describes neo-liberalism as:

*...a powerful economic theory whose strictly symbolic strength, combined with the effect of theory, redoubles the force of the economic realities it is supposed to express. It ratifies the spontaneous philosophy of the people who run large multinationals and of the agents of high finance—in particular pension-fund managers. Relayed throughout the world by national and international politicians, civil servants, and most of all the universe of senior journalists—all more or less equally ignorant of the underlying mathematical theology—it is becoming a sort of universal belief, a new ecumenical gospel. This gospel, or rather the soft vulgate which is put forward everywhere under the name of liberalism, is concocted out of a collection of ill-defined words—“globalization,” “flexibility,” “deregulation” and so on—which, through their liberal or even libertarian connotations, may help to give the appearance of a message of freedom and liberation to a conservative ideology which thinks itself opposed to all ideology. (1998, p. 126; emphasis in the original)*

These ideological forces described by Bourdieu are operating in a context in which the public continues to witness a dramatic assault on the social and personal rights of minority groups such as Chicano/as and African Americans (including the majority of poor women) and the social, political, and economic infrastructures that have traditionally supported them. We want to note that by recognizing and criticizing these attacks, we in no way wish to suggest that the traditional structures of the welfare state were always successful in promoting more egalitarian societies. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake not to examine the complex and contradictory histories of personal and collective struggle which have contributed to and benefited from the welfare state. To dismiss the fact that, accompanied by severe contradictions, the condition of public schools as a component of the welfare state did vastly improve—in relative ways—the social conditions of economically and socially oppressed groups is not only politically disingenuous, but also an inadequate exercise in historical reasoning.

Current neo-conservative policies of social and economic restructuring have profound implications for reforming the public education sector and involve the application of tighter systems of accountability in the context of the de-skilling, standardization, and changing rationales of the teaching profession (Popkewitz, 1991). Pressure to do more work in the same amount of time, to do more work for

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less money, or to increase the number of students per classroom are clear manifestations of what has been termed the “intensification of teaching” (Apple, 1997). Both de-skilling and intensification are phenomena well-known to United States teachers. Because much of the “schools-are-failing” literature blames teachers for the so-called current decline in student achievement, the relationship between teachers and educational authorities are under increased pressure (Whitty, 1997). As Jones has noted, teacher education programs have been under severe scrutiny. Plans to reform these institutions have frequently become agenda items in state legislatures, at “blue chip” governors’ conferences, and in federal reform initiatives (Darling-Hammond 1998; NCTAF, 1996).

Even where there is less focus on blaming teachers, attention is directed towards issues involving the control of teachers, as in the case of teacher competency testing, certification, and national exams. In short, diverse attempts are being made to improve aspects of teachers’ activities judged as central to the quality and excellence of instruction. However, in this context, excellence becomes tantamount to attempts at reducing expenses of financially overburdened school districts and to make these systems more cost-effective. This process usually involves layoffs and the substitution of fully trained, more expensive teachers for lower-paid instructional personnel (Carnoy, 1995; Whitty, 1997).

As educators, as students, and as citizens-in-the-making (in structural conditions not always of our own choosing), we are living amidst a major crisis of capitalism and the concomitant changes that new capitalist formations have brought about in social, political, and cultural life. Particularly in this decade, the world has witnessed the feeding-frenzy of unfettered capitalist accumulation and the increasing moral collapse of social democracy following in the wake of public support given to neo-liberal political agendas, the left’s increasing abandonment of a critical dialogue with Marxism in progressive sectors, the decomposition of class as the main axis of politics, and the rise of the metropolitan service class. Runaway capitalist accumulation and its unholy alliance with informational society has catapulted democracy onto the brink of an abyss, comodifying its logic and transforming it into an “authorized” language of neo-capitalist technoculture, bureaucratic high-tech developmentalism, infotainment, and teledemocracy (Garcia Canclini, 1995).

In the face of the historical resiliency of the ruling class, democracy has become reduced to spray-painted slogans on decaying buildings, as the progressive collapse of the welfare state has been followed by a rising tide of homeless populations, diasporic movements of immigrants looking for work, a vicious private sector and government assault on unions, and the political neutralization of the labor movement and other likely alternative voices in the political spectrum. The relatively low levels of unemployment in the United States have not been without a significant price: widening income inequality, and likely underemployment for many within the African-American and Latino/a populations. The logic of capitalist fundamen-

talism (casino-style capitalism on a global scale) is being championed as nature's own principles *writ large*. The idea of returning to nature has been perverted to mean absolute deregulation and unfettered capitalist expansion and accumulation. Henry David Thoreau has been turned into a slick blackjack dealer in a Vegas night club, dealing a stacked deck to the likes of William Bennett, Paul Weyrich, and Lynne Cheney while Charles Murray, co-author of *The Bell Curve*, stands at the roulette wheel, trying to figure out which ethnic groups possess the strongest cognitive capacity for throwing dice.

Within such a scenario, teacher education has become reduced to a sub-sector of the economy, as cost-benefit analysis and the maximization of profits have emerged as the major components for the manufacturing of educational "excellence" according to the needs of the triumphant global society. Globalization, which has been framed as a dramatic yet unstoppable "new era," appears on the stage of the public discourse as an autonomous entity, as the new divine agent of salvation through which society's destiny will be realized, while we the audience sit in the back rows, waiting for the miraculous power of techno-capitalism to defy death on behalf of struggling humanity.

But are we going to sit and wait quietly for the technozealots and corporate capitalists to steal our future?

### **Toward a Renewed Teacher Education Curriculum**

Industrial partnerships, academic-corporate consortia, and the bureaucratic commercialism of instruction have turned universities and teacher education programs into patent-holding companies and marketing agencies. It is at these institutions where teachers are encouraged to celebrate computer-based instruction and on-line education—but in a fashion that delinks computer literacy from larger hierarchical social arrangements of power and privilege—in an attempt to turn educators into public service clerks for the Empire of Facts. Not only are university-business partnerships disciplining research into areas that reap the most commercial profit, but the risks of such experiments are socialized while the benefits are privatized. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out who benefits (Noble, 1998)—and it's not the children of South Central or East Los Angeles, although they most certainly will be helping to pay for these initiatives.

We do not believe that history follows a succession of stages from particular ideologies to universal ones. Nor do we believe that history is at an end. It is obvious that ideological conflicts still characterize much of public life in the United States and elsewhere. Even if capitalist market principles of economic organization do predominate, restrictive forms of liberal democracy do not go uncontested. Small and grand narratives of human emancipation still struggle bravely on. And while there is a permanent contestability to historical narratives, Marx's analysis of the fundamental oppressive characteristics of capitalism has far from exhausted itself

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as an essential diagnostic tool and utopian narrative even as we acknowledge, with regret, its residual attraction among teachers.

Capitalism may not be an all-embracing totality that mediates all aspects of social, cultural, and political life, but its circuits, flows, networks, and social relations undeniably play the central exploitative role in our contemporary existence and need to be critically interrogated as part of any progressive teacher education program. Notwithstanding the fact that some might view any attempt to engage in Marxist analysis as either an expression of scholarship rooted in nostalgia or as the will of renewal of an authoritarian and homogenous discourse preoccupied by a single-minded and narrow focus on only one set of explanatory terms, we believe that Marxist social theory represents an historically specific understanding of capitalist social relations and a set of insights and methods that are irreplaceable resources for the current struggle against capitalist exploitation.

There exists no pure Marxist problematic, no unitary and cohesive Marxist epistemology, no pristine ontology, no "official" Marxist philosophy or unsullied devotional methodology (McKay, 1995-96). There are many Marxisms, and we are urging that a dialogue begin not only among competing Marxisms (which after all, is one of the great legacies of Marxian thought) but that educators begin a dialogue with Marxian approaches to education in a non-recriminatory and productive manner.

In our view, the Marxian problematic in general possesses a singular capacity to formulate new perspectives, the dimensions of which are always situation-specific and reflect the class-determination of practitioners. We do not see Marxism as imprisoned by the ironclad dogmatism historically associated with it or as a total philosophy of social evolution. In the words of Ian McKay, Marxism is

...a way of crafting political and cultural praxis in the present by mobilizing certain key determinate abstractions to establish a relationship between the ideal of the future (the realm of socialist freedom) and the reality of the past (the realm of necessity). (1995-96, p. 62)

While clearly Marxist programs and proposals have not solved the problems of bureaucracy, surveillance, hierarchy, and state control, we believe that they still carry great explanatory power for developing a framework and foundation for the multiple anti-capitalist, anti-sexist, and anti-racist struggles ahead; and, more importantly, for making history in addition to theorizing about capitalist social realities.

Teacher education needs to meet the educational tasks demanded by the challenge of the global informational age: from the development of new languages of criticism and interpretation inspired by innovation in Marxian, feminist, and anti-colonial scholarship and activism to a revolutionary praxis that refuses to compromise its commitment to the imperatives of emancipation and social justice.

We do not have space to do much more than to offer a brief sketch of what a teacher education curriculum committed to social change would look like. First, we believe that existing teacher education programs be reconsidered in light of the

shifting patterns of globalization and how these patterns effect local communities. This means that prospective teachers need to be actively involved in teacher education and mentoring activities in schools that would benefit most from activist-oriented teacher education programs. In addition, teacher education programs ideally should be involved in local community struggles for better jobs, better working-conditions, daycare facilities, housing, medical treatment, etc. There is no substitute for working in local community sites with groups of people that one is attempting to serve. And further, there is nothing as satisfying than to be able to connect the immediate needs of individuals to the practical needs of the subaltern classes. Second, teacher education programs need to be framed within the context of anti-racist (Villenas, 1996), anti-capitalist (Kumar, 1997), and feminist pedagogies (Ellsworth, 1997; Weiler, 1997). And third, we believe that this can be most effectively accomplished when perspectives on anti-racist, multicultural, and gender education are linked to shifting patterns of global capitalist accumulation.

Anti-racist education addresses itself to more than the project of contesting dominant institutional arrangements or personal “attitudes” in a society riven by various racisms and forms of class and gender stratification. As a form of revolutionary multiculturalism (McLaren, 1997), anti-racist education addresses ways in which global economic restructuring help to embed racist and patriarchal practices in the politics and practices of everyday life. It also unmask the ways that race, class, and gender arrangements are mutually constitutive of the capitalist social order. Revolutionary multiculturalism is fundamentally a counter-hegemonic strategy (Kailin, 1994; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995) that attempts to help teachers unlearn racist practices as well as develop forms of revolutionary agency capable of contesting dominant arrangements within white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

Teacher education students need to engage in an analysis of the mechanisms of capitalist production and exchange, and develop research methodologies that will facilitate such analyses. In this context students should be introduced to theories of power and be encouraged to pursue sociological investigations of administrative control, bureaucratic manipulation, the process of commodification, the creation of violence in local communities and in broader contexts of nation-states, and the destructive patterns within the earth’s ecosystems. Fourth, teacher education programs need to make active alliances with new social movements—here in Los Angeles we are referring to various organizations associated with the Chicano/a movement, the United Farm Workers, Justice for Janitors, urban greening initiatives, homeless rights advocates, human rights organizations involved in local and international organizations, and gay and lesbian organizations, to name just a few. This is to assure that what transpires in methods classes, or classes in social sciences, or with teacher-mentors in classroom sites, is grounded in a well-articulated political project aimed at the transformation of asymmetrical relationships of power and privilege (McLaren, 1995). Fifth, teacher education programs

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need to emphasize a media literacy curriculum. Today it is necessary to acquire multiple literacies in order to critically engage in the production of counter-hegemonic discourses through the use of print, television, film, photographs, and computer technologies.

While it is clear for us that the current language of educational research is largely neglecting its potential for exercising social power, for resisting and creating alternatives to today's inequalities, we are not suggesting that all that is needed is a Marxian rewriting of the language of educational theory. We are calling for a critical understanding of social and political power within educational arenas, and a recasting of teacher education programs as integral parts for the extension and deepening of the democratic project, in order to achieve its critically utopian, socialist character. In other words, teacher education programs should be committed to the development of critical epistemologies as well as an ethics of caring, compassion, and solidarity. They should also strive to heighten students' understanding of social relations of production and to consider alternatives to existing structural arrangements that privilege the rich and exploit the poor.

Democracy requires the realm of freedom and the constant development of an ethic of social justice as its two fundamental characteristics. No realm of freedom or ethics of social justice worthy of the name can continue to be defined by social relations constructed to assure privileges for those who inhabit the regime of whiteness, for those who willingly participate in capitalistic relations of exploitation, or for those who champion patriarchal forms of family organization and forced heterosexuality. In the same vein, we need to transform those neo-liberal structures of exploitation and discrimination which have become the markers of the "good society."

Unfortunately, space prevents us from further developing a more detailed proposal for a critical pedagogy for teacher education. However, we hope that this is not the last opportunity to engage in a critical and constructive discussion with colleagues, practitioners, and activists around these topics. Finally, we extend our thanks again to Alan Jones for providing us with the opportunity for raising the above issues in the context of his call to reinvigorate the debate over teacher education in the United States.

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