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Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy for a Socialist Society: A Manifesto

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PETER McLAREN / Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy for a Socialist Society: A Manifesto

It is no flippancy to say that hagiographers of American life surely will describe the first decade of the twenty-first century as a decade of disaster piled upon disaster. The shattered parameters of our lives have become a hallucinatory, reconstructed junkyard, a horrifically compelling lamentation for the misery of everyday life in capitalist society, with the material certainty of our finite existence coming for many in the form of a pink slip or a home foreclosure notice. As critical educators, we search for a reprieve in the distance of the imagination but we find only its vanishing point. We perch ourselves on film noir skyscrapers like angelic gargoyles, peering meditatively over a city of human mystery like the holy watchmen in Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*. But in these vain attempts we realize that we are the tattered and banished wreckage of humanity. Lashed with wire to rust-splotched iron girders, spread-eagled and pierced by rivets, we have become the ultimate expression of human bondage, the detritus of value production, twisting in the blood red sun like a dancing messiah, peering down upon the charred refugees of hope below who prowl through the ruins of humanity like the gaunt and spindly stick figures sculpted by Giacometti.

As contemporaries, we have all observed epic moments of despair that we have attempted to graph with solemn regularity onto great arcs of history, but we know from the alienation and suffering that has afflicted humanity for centuries that history can never be trusted to bend one particular way or another. Unlike Cassandra, our purpose as revolutionary educators has never been to trust history, or whatever prophetic insights we believe we have pertaining to the future of humankind, but to understand history's movement and give it direction and momentum in the interests of social justice. Viewed from any point within the social-historical panorama of despair that now confronts us, such a task seems more daunting than ever. Besotted by ideological belligerence, capitalism relies to a greater extent today than ever before on ideological rationalizations and obfuscation to defuse and deflect criticism of its recent developments. Today during the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, we know that corporations are reaping huge profits but they are not spending their profits to hire workers or build factories but to enhance their own share prices.

In contrast to this reality, we all live with a certain image that is constantly being embellished: that we live in a meritocracy where we are rewarded fairly for our hard work and perseverance. When we look around us at the age in which we live, we see a ruling class with an unimaginably dense accumulation of wealth undertaking innumerable efforts to establish new organizations to reproduce the same social practices. We rarely see future-oriented efforts, planting seeds in a clod of earth. We live in a constant state of resignation watching our lives move lockstep into a mighty, super-sensible ensemble of social relations. Clearly in this enmeshment, those who control capital control the government, forcing governments to become part of a corporate superstructure, overseeing capital's base. And there has been an accompanying corporate colonization of civil society as well, effectively stifling any ameliorative function that might be offered by many new educational movements, those very pragmatic organizations that have become a more capital-friendly substitute for revolutionary manifestos of groups bent on overthrowing the regime of capital.

While those of us who have to sell our labor-power for a wage remain ensepulchered by the realities of the global economic meltdown and the militarization of the country, the haughty denizens of the American financial demimonde appear more in keeping with the characters in the Kienholz installation *Five Car Stud* or the film *Bride of Chucky* than with the white-haired titans of industry that we once pictured in full length cashmere coats strolling past stately oaks draped with Spanish moss and repairing to the smoking room of Pittsburgh's Duquesne Club to enjoy a Havana cigar and a single-malt Scotch, or as red-faced politicians in velvet smoking jackets meandering through the giant redwoods of the Bohemian Grove. The dark underbelly of Daddy Warbucks now permeates the structural unconscious of the financial world and the poor are left to face the organized burden of being American in the paradise created by the rich and for the rich.

The attempt by the Right to exorcise the insinuation of too much diversity into the U.S. Anglosphere, and the mass media's long-imposed separation between dialectical thought and everyday life have united to bring about a terrifying calcification of the public mind that has turned politics into a circus of pantomime, and has helped to secure both political parties as organs of interest for the corporations, which have become the servo-mechanisms of the corporate state.

It is the daily taunt of many on the right that socialism leads to mindless conformity. But what could be gloomier than the politics that has arisen out of the ashes of

bourgeois capitalist democracy? The word socialism is slurred in the United States, and rather than socialism being an unsettled question, it is used as an unsettling noun, intended to frighten and to create panic among the popular majorities. The left has yet to overcome this obstacle.

The cataclysmic social and political changes of this present historical moment has unleashed its most unholy aspirations among the modern Manicheans of the Christian right. The Tea Party, the prehensile tail of libertarianism, has made a vertiginous descent into the bowels of the American Armageddon psyche, resurrecting itself in the gratuitous sepulchral cant of Christian dominionism and reconstructionism. Armed with a message that is an eerie amalgam of generalized resentment, a nympholespsy of self-hatred, and nativism sutured together by theocratic aspirations, these activists are clawing their way towards the New Jerusalem with their rabble-rousing war-cry of dismantling the federal government. Television personality and Republican necromancer, Glenn Beck, makes a messianic overture to millions of Tea Party supporters gathered at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, while at the same time immolating the historical memory of the civil rights movement by claiming Martin Luther King as his forebear. In an atmosphere of a big tent religious revivalism dripping with a fascist miasma of national rebirth, a furor of white backlash zealotry, political demagoguery, fear-engendering and resentment-mongering, he grandly asserts that the civil rights movement was not really about black people but rather white conservatives under assault from evil liberals.

As advocates of revolutionary critical pedagogy, we stand at the turning point in this process. Critical pedagogy is an approach that we have chosen as a necessary (albeit insufficient) vehicle for transforming the world. The work that we do has been adapted from the pathfinding contributions of the late Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, whose development of pedagogies of the oppressed helped to lay the foundations for approaches (feminist, post-structuralist, Marxist) to teaching and learning that utilizes the life experiences of students in and outside of traditional classrooms to build spaces of dialogue and dialectical thinking. We have renamed our critical pedagogy, revolutionary critical pedagogy. We have done so because we believe that dialogical approaches to teaching can help to create a critical citizenry capable of analyzing and transforming capitalist societies worldwide. In doing so, we denounce the domesticated versions of critical pedagogy that are insufficiently critical of capitalism and even hostile to a socialist alternative.

Critical pedagogy has been discredited by the right as administering propaganda for a communist insurrection, or it has been domesticated by the left who do not want to directly challenge capital and state power. But critical pedagogy as a revolutionary praxis has never been extinguished. Like a burning ember hiding under a dung-heap, it can be stamped out by the jackboots of fascism, as is happening today, or rekindled to serve as the funeral pyre for the colonialist regime we are bound to serve as citizens of capital.

We are so reverentially preoccupied with what others have to say about the struggle for socialism that we fear to trust our own understanding and consequently we have no eyesight left to look upon these historical events themselves. Marx's writings that tell us untraditional truths about the social and economic order tap a world-weary longing that stretches back through the centuries. Here, the term "world-weary longing" is not meant to refer to the existential despair often experienced by intellectuals as fathomless as the abysses of the earth. We are talking about the anguish that accompanies what have been for the majority of humanity the failures of attempting to overcome necessity. Current struggles against oppression anchored by liberal appeals to fairness and equity and built upon the crusted over sediments of past choices—even those made with considerable autonomy—are no longer relevant to the present day.

Critical pedagogy teaches us that we have the collective power to overcome the inimical forces of capital. The promised land is not a glimpse of a lush fragrance of a dream, the sun shining on the window soffit. Nor is it only to be found in the verdant fields of the imagination. It is very much where we happen to be standing as we attempt to transform the world of capital into a world free of necessity. The promised land can therefore only promise to be a place of struggle, springing up in the dark, silent underground crypts and caves where revolutionary futures incubate and where hope is conjugated with the movement of the people towards an anti-capitalist future. We are all merely seeds in the moist soil of the counter-world. It is up to decide what that world is to look like and how to get there.

We need to extend the ambit of critical pedagogy from persons with 'authority' to whom by convention and precept education has hitherto largely been confined, to those who are 'least' among us, not in numbers, surely, but in social legitimacy—the poor and the dispossessed. We are not talking about the dispossessed as dispossessed but as a revolutionary force for socialism. They are carrying a much larger freight

than their single selves. It is in their name that we begin to unravel what which we have been formed to be and begin the arduous and painful process of remaking ourselves in a deliberately new way that often takes us on a collision course with the systems of intelligibility, ways of knowing, and received terms that we have inherited to create habitual and resigned agents.

The fact is, surely, that we are faced with two choices of how to live our humanity—the liberal model of pleading with the corporations to temper their cruelty and greed, or the reactionary model that has declared war on social and economic equality. And on the evidence that each of these models is fiercely and hopelessly entangled in each other's conflictual embrace, we can accept neither.

Critical pedagogy is more than throaty bursts of teacherly impropriety, more than enumerating in ironic detail the problems faced by the youth of today, more than hurling invective at government policies, but a sustained march towards a revolutionary consciousness and praxis.

We must become more like the unknown sailor who tried to smash the statue of Napoleon's head with a brick during the days of the Paris Commune, or like the Iraqi journalist who threw his shoe at the head of President George W. Bush while Bush was standing tall before the cameras of the transnational corporate media like a Texas version of the Vendome Column wrapped in a jock strap.

Revolutionary critical pedagogy questions the official, hegemonic view of ahistorical educational change, isolated from the capitalist social and production relationships. As critical revolutionary educators, we need to understand how the dynamics of the capitalist system—its movement from global capitalism to transnational capital, for instance—has guided the meaning and purpose of educational reform and has impacted institutions and approaches with respect to what counts as educational change.

We follow Che's dialectical conception of education which is formed internally through analyzing the continuous contractions of external influences on the life of individuals. We agree with Paulo Freire that dialogical pedagogy can achieve the kind of class consciousness necessary for a powerful social transformation. It also suggests that as we participate in an analysis of the objective social totality that we simultaneously struggle for a social universe outside of the value form of labor. If we are to educate at all, we must educate for this! Statist socialism has collapsed and weighs heavier on the minds of the living with its inevitable decay into the oblivion of

historical time. Libertarian socialism as well lies rotting on its deathbed, as capitalism continues to wreak its revenge, despite its present state of unprecedented crisis. Antisystemic movements of all shapes and stripes are still around but have, for the most part, become domesticated into reformist shadows of their previous revolutionary selves, forming enfeebled and enfeebling popular fronts that fall like spent cartridges on the heels of any real challenge to capitalism.

Critical educators must take a stand, working for a political or direct democracy, for the direct control of the political process by citizens, for economic democracy, for the ownership and direct control of economic resources by the citizen body, for democracy in the social realm by means of self-management of educational institutions and workplaces, and for the ecological justice that will enable us to reintegrate society into nature. The struggle for a new historic bloc built up by the working class will not be easy. If critical educational studies is to avoid being corralled into accepting the dominant ideology, or annexed to pro-capitalist forces among the left, or transformed into a recruiting ground for liberal reform efforts, or even worse, turned into an outpost for reactionary populism, it will largely be due to our efforts as revolutionary critical educators.

We need to awaken from our dream into another dream, but one dreamt with open eyes, a collective dream that will take us out of the homogeneous, monumental and chronological time of capital and beyond the consolatory pretensions of the bourgeoisie to create the “time of the now” discussed so poignantly by Walter Benjamin—the time of the revolutionary. We need to capture the revolutionary fervor of the communards, whose battle-tested hearts managed, if only for a brief time, to pump into the sewers of history the muck of ages lining the drainpipes of a lost revolution. It is precisely the socialist partisanship of critical pedagogy—not to the point of dogmatism or inflexibility—that reveals its power of critique. We need to reclaim the power of critique as the sword arm of social justice and not relinquish it. For in doing so we reclaim our humanity and the world.