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Introduction

Liberation Theology and Adult Education

Peter McLaren

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The political situation today is unrelentingly grim and the United States has never been this divided in recent historical memory. Black men are being killed by police for minor infractions such as selling individual cigarettes, pushing a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill, or missing a registration sticker on their license plate. And while Black families mourn their sons and daughters, Reps. Margorie Taylor Greene and Paul Gosar are calling for the creation of an America First Caucus focused on a common respect for uniquely Anglo-Saxon political traditions and a return to European architectural styles. In Congress we are hearing about America First Education. We know what that means when we read: “America is a nation with a border, and a culture, strengthened by a common respect for uniquely Anglo-Saxon political traditions.” <https://www.rawstory.com/kevin-mccarthy-racism/>

If there was ever time for the social gospel of Jesus Christ to make its voice heard, it is at this present historical juncture. Now is the time for American adult education to bid welcome to Liberation Theology.

This is the not-so-new Republican Party who concede to racist demagoguery because its major proponents—the QAnon cult members in its ranks—raise millions for the GOP. We are still fighting a pandemic in which Blacks and Latinx

communities are watching their loved ones die at rates glaringly disproportionate to members of white communities. Since 2016, Americans have seen a dramatic rise in white ethno-nationalist organizations, some calling for the creation of Christian states within the former Confederacy. This has accompanied a rise in armed white militia movements. And what are we to make of the majority of Republicans across the country believing that the 2020 election was fraudulent and therefore stolen? We have learned that members of U.S. elite special forces are promoting conspiracy theories such as QAnon in their private chat rooms, claiming Democratic politicians are running pedophile rings and murdering children in Satanic rites and “radicalizing themselves online, just like many ... lone-wolf ISIS terrorists did” according to former Green Beret Robert Wilson. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/military/secret-facebook-groups-america-s-best-warriors-share-racist-jabs-n1263985>

In addition, we have the prospect of another Trump presidency after the first one sucked nearly all the remaining oxygen from our democracy.

Perhaps most alarming was the embrace of Donald Trump by so many Christian evangelicals, which shows how corrupt the evangelical movement has become, and how far away from the teachings of Christ it had strayed. Most dangerous of all, it revealed how deeply white supremacy is engrained in heart of the evangelical community. Instead of learning from critiques of systemic

racism in the US, or from the history of white supremacism, white Americans are turning to Tucker Carlson pushing the “great replacement theory” and Paula White speaking in tongues.

If there was ever time for the social gospel of Jesus Christ to make its voice heard, it is at this present historical juncture. Now is the time for American adult education to bid welcome to Liberation Theology.

LIBERATION THEOLOGY, PAULO FREIRE AND ME

My work is located more overtly within a Marxist theoretical orbit, that of revolutionary praxis and liberation theology, but my work in total is greatly indebted to Freire. Freire sets the standards very high, and it is difficult to be a Freirean at all moments. But it is worth trying. Paulo is the greatest educational thinker in modern history in my estimation. Paulo’s approach is compatible with my interest in existential phenomenology, hermeneutics and process philosophy, understanding and analysis and brings much needed relief from neoliberalism’s emphasis on quantified measurable outcomes. . .

Many of Paulo’s critics accused Paulo of being a utopian. In response, I always tried to keep in mind Ernst Bloch’s distinction between concrete and abstract utopias and the importance of an ‘educated hope’ emerging through the praxis of revolutionary movements, among grassroots organizations. Paulo taught me to focus on concrete utopian thinking rather than on abstract utopias which are often blueprints envisioned by bourgeois intellectuals to be put into effect at some distant point in the future. Abstract utopian thinking is often disconnected from the struggles of the immiserated, the impoverished, the disinherited. So in this way, Freire was a ‘Hopean’ educator. His work was animated by hope. And, of course, by love. My work is more directed at creating a socialist alternative to capitalism through social movements. My work has been venturing into the realm of liberation theology.

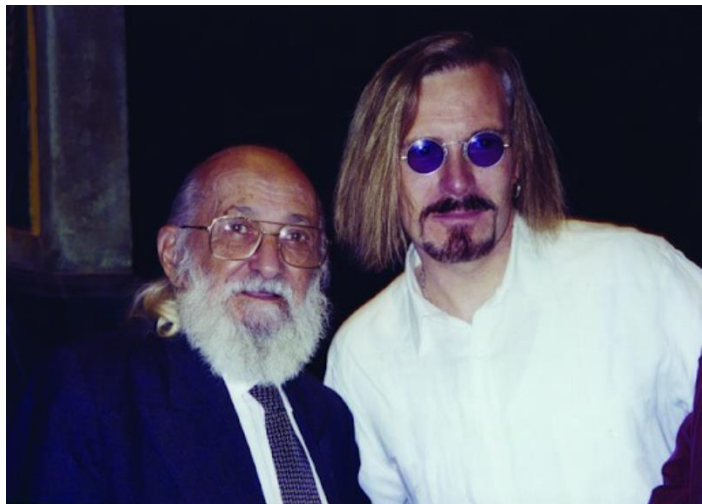


Figure 1: Paulo Freire and Peter McLaren at the Rose Theater in Omaha, NE, 1996

I have not always been able to be a Freirean because Paulo set the standards so high. But Paulo’s life and work helped me late in life to connect with the spirituality that informs all of our lives, whether we recognize it or not. Nita Freire also helped to inspire me. For me, it meant reconnecting with my Catholic faith and liberation theology.

When I say that Jesus was a communist, it does not go over too well in the United States. I have since 1995 tried to bring the field of education into conversation with a Marxist critique of

political economy, with the anti-fascist work of the Frankfurt School, particularly that of Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, and with contributions from the tradition of Latin American Liberation Theology and Catholic social justice teaching. And of course, the teachings of Paulo Freire.

LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

The philosophy undergirding liberation theology that combined Christianity with a Marxist critique of political economy was first drawn up at a meeting of Latin American theologians, initiated by Gustavo Gutierrez, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1964. Shortly thereafter Christian “base communities” inspired by Liberation Theology began to appear throughout Brazil and the rest of Latin America followed by meetings of theologians and priests held in Havana, Cuba; Bogotá, Colombia and Cuernavaca, Mexico in June and July 1965.

Of course, today liberation theology comes in many forms: Chicano liberation theology; Latinx liberation theology; Native American liberation theology; African American liberation theology and Islamic liberation theology. Liberation theologians argue that politics and religion are often analyzed as unwarrantedly and artificially distinct. But politics and religion are inseparable. Furthermore, in the case of Catholicism, they help to determine when and where the hermeneutical dualism between sin and capitalist structures and relations of exploitation are to be applied, creating a more authentically Christian covenant between Catholic teachings and the poor.

I have attempted to bring liberation theology into dialogue with critical pedagogy and I have referred to this work as a revolutionary critical pedagogy.

I have attempted to bring Liberation Theology into dialogue with critical pedagogy and I have referred to this work as revolutionary critical pedagogy to underscore its pro-socialist and anti-fascist position as well as drawing attention to the importance of spirituality that can provide us with a value system from which to ground

our work. I have been criticized by secularists for bringing spirituality into critical pedagogy. Revolutionary critical pedagogy is still very much indebted to the work of the Frankfurt School comprised of a group of intellectuals who were forced into exile in 1933. During and after their exile, Theodor Adorno and many of his Frankfurt School colleagues became preoccupied with fascism as an object of cultural and sociological inquiry. Critical theory, in fact, emerged from this crucible. Adorno and his colleagues were convinced that fascism was not mainly a German problem but a threat to all modern societies.

Teachers have been considered transformative and public intellectuals (Henry Giroux), and researchers (Joe Kincheloe), and cultural workers (Freire)... University campuses can—and should, in my view—become redesigned and repurposed as workers communes--places of solidarity with social movements, new and old, as well as labor unions and teachers unions who may be open to socialist alternatives. I believe that arguments that have been put forward for reimagining universities on the model of the worker cooperative rather than corporation and along the lines of the student as producer are important to consider, if we are to make significant gains in creating a socialist alternative to capitalism... Now, I also believe avenues for spiritual

expression should also be made available, but certainly not the truncated political fascism we are seeing from many of the evangelicals who worship at the altar of Donald Trump. I am referring here to the importance of promoting ecumenism and the value of understanding the contributions of religions and science from many different faith traditions.

TRUMP, THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH AND LIBERATION THEOLOGY

I have been engaged in the development of critical pedagogy for thirty years, and since the ascendancy of the Trump administration in 2016 and the contemporary resurgence of authoritarian regimes throughout Europe, I have been focusing more on present day fascism, and the Trump phenomena. I have also been challenging the religious fascism of much evangelical Christianity (those churches that support Trump) from the position or perspective of liberation theology, which combines the social gospel of Jesus with Marxist economic critique.

And as we have seen during the Trump administration, the United States came perilously close to fascism and the collapse of democracy. The recent attacks by Trump supporters—including many ex-military—on the Capitol building has shown the growing appeal of fascism over democracy. Trump’s penchant for symbolically delousing its new immigrant populations from the south by drawing attention to their alleged cultural inferiority, his egregious ideological alliance with white supremacy, his extreme nationalism, and his malignant narcissism and toxic masculinity has done little to allay the nation’s trauma in a world harrowed by war, famine, racism, and ecological destruction—and now the pandemic. Our universities have come under assault by Trump supporters and Republicans for promoting what they call ‘cultural Marxism’—code words for what they consider to be political correctness, feminism, gay and lesbian and transgender rights advocacy, and multicultural and anti-racist initiatives. Clearly there is an ideological battle occurring and the universities known as “culture wars”. These have been intensifying. But getting lost in this debate is the role of teachers and teaching and the structural, spatial and ideological conditions of possibilities for reclaiming the universities for democracy.

Liberation theology is systematically opposed to the trenchant conservative politics of white evangelical America in the U.S. who encourage individual charity over economic and transformation and distributive social justice.

Liberation theology is systematically opposed to the trenchant conservative politics of white evangelical America in the U.S. who encourage individual charity over economic and transformation and distributive social justice so familiar to many living in the richest country in the world. Liberation theology... attempts to establish the potential for a return of the role of the Church to the people similar to the conditions that existed in earliest Christian communities by nurturing critical autonomous ‘protagonistic agency among the popular sectors, creating the conditions of possibility for consciousness-raising among peasants and proletarianised multitudes. I recently coined the term protagonistic agency, to emphasize Freire’s (1972) idea of being the subject of history rather than the object of history... when we talk about liberation, we are referring to self-and-social transformation, that is, to a dialectical relationship. So, we need not refer to the self and social relations as though they were mutually exclusive categories, antiseptically distant

from each other. They are not steel cast terms but rather bleed into each other. Again, it's a dialectical relationship. It is at this point that we arrive at the notion of praxis, the bringing together of theory and practice.

Praxis is a way to realize freedom by transforming society's social structures, systems of intelligibility, of ideological mediation. However, it's important to remember that being critically conscious is not a precondition for social justice action but critical consciousness is an outcome of acting justly. We act in and on the world and then reflect on our actions in an attempt to effect a deeper, more critical change in our society. We make society, as society makes us. What takes priority in all of this is ethics — the purpose of creating a more just society absent of needless suffering.

Liberation theologians refer to this as a preferential option for the poor and oppressed. I take this a little further and call it a preferential obligation for the poor and those who are suffering. So, critical pedagogy is a means to challenge the ideological hegemony of neoliberal capitalism. Finally, I cannot state strongly enough that in our present political and social climate of unrest, there is a need to bring Liberation Theological thought to American adult education.

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Portions of the previous essay were extracted from Peter's previous writings and interviews with his perusal and permission.

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