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An Expanded Definition of "Pedagogy": An Essay Review

Samuel Day Fassbinder

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McLaren, Peter & Jaramillo, Nathalia. (2007) ***Pedagogy and praxis in the age of empire: Towards a new humanism.*** **Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.**

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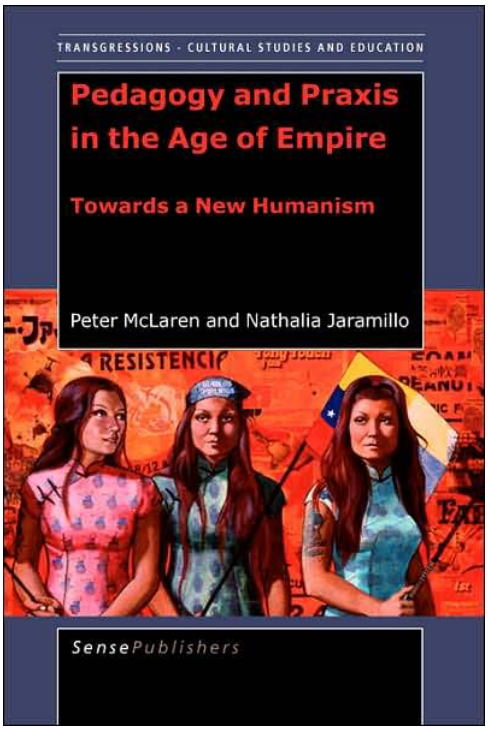
[For another review of this book see Lilian Cibils & Marc Pruyn's review at http://edrev.asu.edu/essays/v10n11index.html]

Introduction and Summary of Text

This book is a collection of four political essays that might seem at first glance to be unconnected to the standard notion of "pedagogy," and have everything to do with a critique in which "there is never any sense mistaking the priority given to property rights in capitalist societies," (p. 11) as it says in the lengthy excursus that serves as the introduction to this book. "Critical humanist pedagogy," as McLaren and Jaramillo proclaim it, is not "pedagogy" in the standard sense in which texts on "pedagogy" are written. It is instead part of the other concept given in the title – praxis – and regarded as a species of activism. Readers might be forgiven for approaching this book with the question "how is this pedagogy," as the authors appear to have answered such a question

to their own satisfaction some time ago. To understand its bent, then, we must understand why we are learning what McLaren and Jaramillo are teaching us – and here I hope to offer an explanation of my own.



A summary of *Pedagogy and Praxis* (as given below) should mention the authors' take on "pedagogy." Defining pedagogy as a species of activism, however, is not the authors' peculiar specialty; the tradition of writing about "critical pedagogy" starts with Paulo Freire, who grants us a definition of "teaching as activism" that employs common understandings of teaching. McLaren and Jaramillo, then, come from a specifically socialist take upon "teaching as activism." Overall, *Pedagogy and Praxis* has much to contribute within this frame, both in terms of clarification of the current context and in terms of advice for activists. It does, however, put forth a lot of "pointing" discourse in its clarification of the current context. Future texts in this genre, however, can go further in reconnecting it with common understandings of teaching and learning.

The first chapter of *Pedagogy and Praxis*, "The Crisis of the Educational Left in the United States," is firstly about the disaster that politics has become in this era, prefaced with a long narrative somewhat expressed in this personification: "In a social universe pock-marked by the ravages of capitalism's war against the working-class and people of color, there are few places in which to retreat that the global market does not already occupy." (p. 32) I do think it's somewhat dangerous to personify "capitalism" here, as the central problem appears to be one of relations between people, and not one of capitalism as an imagined monster. Nevertheless, McLaren and Jaramillo meaningfully outline the extent to which Iraq politics is determined by "finance capital," which "dictates the rules of the game of capital concentration and centralization."

The rest of this first chapter is a discussion of economic imperialism and war under Bush and of various (mostly) Latin American resistances to economic imperialism. From these emphases, we can start to outline the contours of what McLaren and Jaramillo think "pedagogy" is about. For them, "pedagogy" is not about "teaching," insofar as "teaching" is a flat presentation of information for no specific ulterior purpose. For the

authors, "pedagogy" is about changing the world, which is itself in crisis. And the agencies which will accomplish this world-changing are social movements. McLaren and Jaramillo say this about the social movements that respond to this crisis:

> They recognize the broad scope of the current crisis, which encompasses a crisis of overproduction, a crisis of legitimacy of democratic governance, and a crisis of overextension that has dangerously depleted the world's material resources. (p. 47)

In this context, McLaren and Jaramillo suggest one primary goal: "the real issue that must not be obscured is the need to abolish the domination of labor by capital." (p. 48)

As support for their definition of "pedagogy" as such, they suggest that there is a "pedagogy" to the broadcasts of the mainstream news media, as well, one directly implicated in the creation of the abovementioned current crises. Against this "pedagogy," McLaren and Jaramillo recommend a pedagogy of movement politics. "Pedagogic questions" in this context are questions of movement organization (pp. 38-49): in this regard, the authors argue:

> We are aware that one of the biggest debates occurring among the educational left at this moment is between the Zapatista position of changing the world without taking power, advocated by John Holloway and others, and the position taken by supporters of Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales in Venezuela and Bolivia respectively. While we have tremendous respect for the work of the Zapatistas, especially in terms of their advocacy of indigenous and women's rights, we do not believe that actions of those, like Chavez, for instance, who have chosen to take state power, are wrong-headed. We still hold out hope that the state can be remade democratically from the bottom up in such a way that it will be able to serve the interests of the poor and the oppressed. (p. 46)

Now, this is an important argument for those who are involved in radical political movements. But how do we conceive of this, for instance, as a "pedagogical" question? Now, the definition of "pedagogy" given in dictionary.com (for instance) suggests its

intimate embrace with another concept, "teaching": 1) the function or work of a teacher; teaching. 2) the art or science of teaching; education; instructional methods.

Now, teaching people how to change society, and showing them a marxist direction in which social change could proceed, is certainly *one* type of teaching. But it isn't the *only* type of teaching. So what's important about McLaren and Jaramillo's version of "pedagogy"? One could certainly argue that the prose of *Pedagogy and Praxis in the Age of Empire*, for all that the word "pedagogy" is in the title, is politicized social analysis, dependent upon sociology, politics, and political economy, with occasional references to the word "pedagogy." Uninformed readers might ask: have the authors switched academic fields?

The answer to the first question is that society must indeed change if it wishes to find a real solution to the crises mentioned above, and so the world will need education for social change. The last question, however, is not fully answered by this book. I will explore the connection to pedagogy in paragraphs below.

In the second chapter of *Pedagogy and Praxis in the Age of Empire*, written for teachers (but not just teachers!) about the politics of the No Child Left Behind Act, we are told that "a healthy educational system can only function in a post-capitalist, socialist democracy," (p. 66) and that "activist teachers know that free trade has devastated the world's poor and filled the coffers of capital's comprador elite." (p. 71). To quote thusly, however, is to cherry-pick two sentences out of McLaren and Jaramillo's text which just happen to be about education and teachers. The chapter as a whole is a meaningful research study in the sociology of education, highlighting the destructive effects of NCLB.

The third chapter, "Critical Pedagogy, Latino/a Education, and the Politics of Class Struggle," is a reworking of an essay published in *Cultural Studies/ Critical Methodologies* in 2006. Within the promotion of "Marxist-Humanism" and "revolutionary critical pedagogy" that envelops this rather theoretical piece, McLaren and Jaramillo promote the rights of Latino/a students to an education which unifies their disparate interests toward a concern with "class struggle" while at the same time honoring disparate senses of identity. The authors effectively integrate the world-systems analysis of William I. Robinson into their understandings.

The fourth chapter, "God's Cowboy Warrior," is an apposite reworking of a previous McLaren and Jaramillo essay issued in McLaren's book *Capitalists and Conquerors*. This chapter is a marxist critique of the Presidential term of George W. Bush. Much of

the writing in this chapter has the florid character that one of its authors, Peter McLaren, is famous for.

In between each chapter are excellent photos meant to display the authors in appropriately political contexts. There is a photo of Peter McLaren and Nathalia Jaramillo attending a march for Hugo Chavez, and one of both authors with Aleida Guevara March, Che's daughter. Painted illustrations by Erin Currier also grace the covers and the interludes between chapters. The authors display photographs of themselves at a march for Hugo Chavez, with the APPO in Oaxaca, with educational unionists in Monterrey in Nuevo Leon, Mexico, and with fellow teacher-activist Noah de Lissovoy in South Africa. This book has the stamp of global activism upon it.

In sum, perhaps McLaren and Jaramillo are right to define "pedagogy" as one of the political arts. So before readers dismiss this book as irrelevant to the workaday life of the public schoolteacher, or even of the professor operating outside of a social-movement context, they should scrutinize the case in favor of teaching as activism.

The Case for Activist Pedagogy

Not all teachers think of themselves as activists, but some do, and we may ask of those who consider themselves to be teacher-activists why they chose their profession. Generally speaking, teachers become activists because they must respond to circumstances in an activist way. McLaren and Jaramillo's book is written, from beginning to end, as an activist response to circumstances: much of what they do is to spell out such circumstances, while at the same time pointing the way to possible activist responses. But in writing a book on "pedagogy" that is full of this spelling-out, McLaren and Jaramillo have pushed the envelope a bit as to how "pedagogy" is to be defined. To understand this, their readers should make explicit the life-world assumptions about teaching that would make activism seem appropriate for teachers, in order to grasp this genre of writing (of which *Pedagogy and Praxis* is just one example).

A good beginning definition of "the teacher as activist" is to be found in Charles Derber's short essay "Reflections of an Activist Teacher":

> The "positivist" tradition suggests teachers must be objective and are morally obliged not to become preachers, ideologues, or political activists in the classroom. The "normative" tradition suggests teaching is inevitably value-laden, and that in an increasingly unjust and violent world, teachers have an obligation to help students connect knowledge with action. (p. 1)

Teachers who are activists, then, connect knowledge with action. They are activists of the pre-political – they prepare the seed-bed for political action in their students. They (as Derber demonstrates in the rest of his essay) need not proselytize; they foreground. They belong to a "tradition" which sees teaching as properly located within a normative context of action. Classroom activity becomes entwined in disputes about value, about what is good and about how to act.

Perhaps no particular teacher is more famous for the development of an activist pedagogy (and the genre of writing surrounding pedagogic activism) than Paulo Freire. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* expresses a definition of what activist teachers do: "problem-posing education." This is to be contrasted with "banking education," which teaches students to be passively observant of reality. Freire expresses this dichotomy as follows:

> Banking education inhibits creativity and domesticates (although it cannot completely destroy) the intentionality of consciousness by isolating consciousness from the world, thereby denying people their ontological and historical vocation of becoming more human. Problem-posing education bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality; thereby responding to the vocation of persons as beings who are authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation. (p. 65)

Thus, for Freire, our vocation as "authentic beings" is to become more human, to act upon reality, and to be engaged in creative transformation. Problem-posing education, for Freire, is supposed to stimulate us to do this.

Freire's abiding support for problem-posing education shines through in his numerous writings. His most direct attempt at illustrating "pedagogy" as advice to teachers is in his *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach*. In his Third Letter, he spells out the requirements of educational practice, to teachers who do not seem to have a relevant purpose in being teachers:

> Educational practice is something very serious. As teachers, we deal with people, with children, adolescents, and adults. We participate in their development. We may help them or set them back in their search. We are intrinsically connected to them in their process of discovery. Incompetence, poor preparation, and irresponsibility in our practice may contribute to their failure. But with responsibility, scientific preparation, and a taste for teaching, with seriousness and a testimony to the struggle against injustice, we can also contribute to the gradual transformation of learners into strong *presences* in the world. (p. 33)

For Freire, teachers need to teach competently so that their students can become "*presences* in the world." Teaching, then, is at least a preliminary form of activism – teachers are handed the responsibility for guiding the students' identities within an explicitly social context, and this responsibility consists of a process of discovery connected to the struggle against injustice. McLaren and Jaramillo are the inheritors of Freire's tradition in this regard, and they equate teaching as activism, and pedagogy as praxis, as a *prior* understanding.

In adopting "revolutionary critical pedagogy," McLaren and Jaramillo adopt a particular stand within the community of activists-as-teachers. This quote, from the beginning of the third essay ("Critical Pedagogy, Latino/a Education, and the Politics of Class Struggle") of *Pedagogy and Praxis*, explains their stance:

> We have borrowed the term used by Paula Allman (1999, 2001) – revolutionary critical pedagogy – to emphasize critical pedagogy as a means for reclaiming public life that is under the relentless assault of the corporatization and privatization of the life world, including the corporate-academic complex. (p. 94)

Revolutionary critical pedagogy, here, is described as a form of cultural activism ("reclaiming public life"). It isn't the (revolutionary) seizure of power itself, but rather a form of publicity which points to the political. Further in the same paragraph in the third essay, the authors elaborate upon the political stripe of this intervention:

> This is not a reclamation of the public sphere through an earnest reinvigoration of the social commons but its socialist transformation. (p. 94)

Then the authors show us how it should work:

> The term *revolutionary critical pedagogy* seeks to identify the realm of unfreedom as that in which labor is determined by external utility and to make the division of labor coincide with the free vocation of each individual and the association of free producers, where the force of authority does not flow from the imposition of an external structure but from the character of the social activities in which individuals are freely and consiciously engaged.

So the authors, writing to an audience which assumes that teachers start from an activist subject-position, wish to promote a particularly socialist type of activist-teaching. And, indeed, given the conditions they themselves cite, this is an admirable thing to do. There is, however, a realm of explanation which can be added to this approach to move forward from its premises, which I will examine in detail in the paragraphs below.

McLaren and Jaramillo on the Discursive Terrain

Conditions frame the educational impulse to activism; conditions are the soup in which activists find themselves to be doing something for social change, or not. In order to continually establish and re-establish the educational impulse to *be activist*, McLaren and Jaramillo feel obliged to continuously point and re-point to the political and economic conditions of a real-world context in which their version of pedagogy ("revolutionary critical pedagogy") is justified.

This rhetorical move has been part of the Peter McLaren lexicon for some time now. One recalls, for instance, the first line of McLaren's "Introduction: Education as a political issue," in his 1995 book *Critical Pedagogy and Predatory Culture*: "I will not mince my words. We live at a precarious moment in history." (p. 1)

At any rate, McLaren and Jaramillo take as given a radical, activist definition of pedagogy, and so *Pedagogy and Praxis* offers an advanced level of revolutionary critical pedagogic *talk* that spends a lot of page-space pointing to political and economic conditions. In this vein, the introduction viscerally addresses the catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina and the further catastrophe of right-wing forces in America which have used Katrina as part of America's abandonment of its poor. Chapter 1 prefaces important insights about the Zapatista movement and about Venezuelan radicalism with a long discussion of US imperialism. Chapter 2 clothes the critique of NCLB in a discussion of economic disparity and privatization in America. Chapter 3 is relatively thin on "pointing" discourse. But the heaviest example of "pointing" is to be read in Chapter 4.

We are three pages into a description of the Bush administration, at the beginning of chapter 4, before Bush's drive to autocracy is described as a "Straussian pedagogy" (pp. 125-128). The text then launches into a further discussion of pernicious Bush behavior that runs for nearly 20 pages. From there, the authors launch into a debate between Peter Hudis and James Petras about whether the US empire is in danger of collapse. Thereafter a critique of the capitalist system segues back into a critique of the Bush administration in this 78-page essay.

My most constructive suggestion as regards this long essay comes from a quote within the essay itself. The conclusion of the fourth chapter proclaims an affinity with "strategies" but continues to generalize in a preliminary way about what those strategies might be:

> In order to shift critical pedagogy into a new register, we need to rethink the very premises of critical pedagogy, not as some grand contemplative act, but as part of a philosophy of everyday life. (p. 199)

If the authors had indeed taken this advice as the prime directive underlying the book, then it would not be *Pedagogy and Praxis* as I have read it. It would be a book more directly connected to the genre of advice for teachers than the book I just read. I do indeed think that a reconnection with everyday life is due, not just for the authors of this book, but for that small portion of academia which places any activist hope in its ability to connect with a largely-misinformed public. Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of Hope* offers a valuable kernel of advice in this regard:

> I insist (once more) on the imperative need of the progressive educator to familiarize herself or himself with the syntax and semantics of the popular groups – to understand how those persons do their reading of the world, to perceive that "craftiness" of theirs so indispensable to the culture of a resistance that it is in the process of formation, without which they cannot defend themselves from the violence to which they are subjected. (p. 106)

Alongside a revolutionary critical pedagogy, then, there needs to be a revolutionary critical ethnography. In it, the various popular discourses can be decoded in revolutionary fashion, looking (as Freire did) for resistance potentials in the interstices of everyday life. This would be an important step ahead from the defense of a revolutionary critical pedagogy and toward the creation of more and more diverse models for action in such a vein.

This book is meant to *open up a political discussion within the context of activist pedagogy*. What sets it apart from books calling for "radical democracy" (within this genre) is its advocacy of a socialist alternative to capitalism. It does not apologize for any of the political realities of US empire, either. The socialism of *Pedagogy and Praxis* expresses itself in terms of the concept of democratic control of the means of production, which is something we should all have. Neoliberal capitalism, of course, is an oligarchy of production, a "regime" in the sense in which Charles Derber uses the word (p. 3).

No capitalist regime will save us from the ecological crisis which lies ahead for the human race after fifty more years of burning 85 million bbls. of oil every day. Capitalism simply isn't ecologically sustainable over the long run of planetary domination, and we're most of the way to the end of that long run. We need this discussion.

Conclusion: Pedagogy and Praxis' Accomplishment

In critiquing this book for its genre-related definition of "pedagogy" and its heavy reliance on pointing to political conditions as a justification for its activist stance, we should not lose sight of the accomplishment that it represents.

Overall, *Pedagogy and Praxis* offers a critique of our present-day global society and culture that operates on several levels. World-systems theory guides its overall understanding of the history of the capitalist system. An awareness of global crises springs from this understanding. From this awareness of global crises comes its call to activism. And from this call to activism comes an analysis of the world's activist movements, with an assessment of what sort of activism is likely to change the world in a lasting way, while at the same time preserving freedom and human dignity for all.

Pedagogy and Praxis pays keen attention to the misdeeds and to the ideological tenor of the Bush administration. From these misdeeds and from this ideological tenor, it sees the Bush administration as putting forth a pedagogy in its own right, alongside the misleading, consumerist pedagogy of the American mass media. It wishes to counter the deceptive pedagogies of the status quo with a "revolutionary critical pedagogy" of its own, and has started a wide-ranging conversation about what is to be done and how it is to be done.

In connecting all of these threads, *Pedagogy and Praxis* is a monumental work, and hopefully not the last of its kind.

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About the Reviewer

Samuel Day Fassbinder was last Adjunct Professor of English at Mount San Antonio College, in Walnut CA. His weblog is at http://ecosocialism.blogspot.com/ . He works with Food Not Bombs (http://foodnotbombs.net/).

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