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An Essay Review of *Pedagogy of Insurrection: From Resurrection to Revolution*

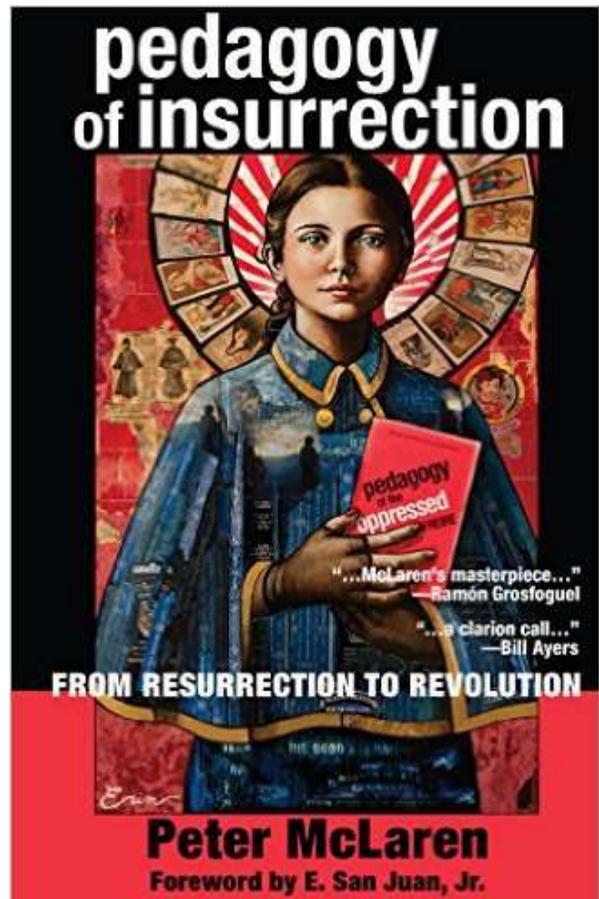
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Peter McLaren's *Pedagogy of Insurrection: From Resurrection to Revolution* is a thoughtful, passionate, and a call-to-action book, and the reader is immediately drawn in by the book's cover with the mesmerizing eyes of Erin Currier's rendition of Maria Gemma Umberta Pia Galgani, who is provocatively holding a copy of Paulo Freire's seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

Recognized as Saint Gemma Galgani since 1940, the Italian mystic, who bore the stigmata of Christ and is highly venerated by the faithful especially in Italy and Latin America, is sometimes referred to as the "daughter of passion" and patron saint of students. In his reflections about the saint, McLaren writes,

She was effusively and fervently devoted to assisting those who were insensible to the presence of the divine. Her detractors thought her to be insane. While in no way saints (after all, they have committed the sin of critical thinking for social transformation!), revolutionary critical



educators likewise are targeted in fierce attacks from the proprietors of the educational establishment in their attempts to weave together the threads of the spiritual and the material in the fabric of active, liberating knowledge, knowledge designed to break the chains of oppression. (p. 43).

McLaren further proclaims, “The subtle alchemy of critical pedagogy rarely admits—let alone seeks—the irreplaceable divine assistance attributed to saints and mystics...” (p. 43).

Taking its Cue from the Spiritual

Right from the start, beginning with the alluring book cover and statements in the introductory chapter, McLaren makes clear this book is unlike any other he has written, and one that was birthed in his mind a few years ago, particularly springing forth “during a dark time in which it was difficult for me to maintain much faith in humanity” (p. ix). He then goes on to mention how a Catholic priest, Father Alan Roberts, of Holy Cross Seminary in Auckland, New Zealand, was deeply instrumental in spiritually injecting him back to a place of hope.

As McLaren declares, it was in 1975 that he made his profession of faith in the Catholic Church, but more specifically in the crucified Christ, as opposed to the organization. Hence, perhaps a certain comfort and spiritual affinity in turning to Father Roberts at that very low point in his life, ultimately taking McLaren on this renewed or perhaps reinvented path, is what more concretely links his work to the spiritual.

While McLaren argues that there is a place that intersects critical pedagogy with the religious dimension, his effort here is not a project that aims to proselytize. Rather, with an ecumenical spirit, he contends that regardless of one’s faith, even for the agnostic and atheist, we all hunger for something deeper; that we are all in need of a spiritual connection that emanates from outside ourselves, which faithfully guides and leads us to not only personal transformation, but also to social transformation where needless suffering is purged. To that end, *Pedagogy of Insurrection* clearly takes its cue from the spiritual and the religious as a cornerstone filter in which injustice, inequities, oppression, violence, socialism, capitalism, alienation, Marxism, communism, and exploitation are examined, all themes we have come to identify with McLaren’s large body of scholarship and activism over the last few decades.

Put another way, this text is not your typical work on critical pedagogy, but rather, as McLaren indicates, it is distinguished through the bringing together of the various strands of critical pedagogy that he characterizes as “revolutionary critical pedagogy” and which are linked to a critical spirituality as well as aspects of liberation theology. And on that latter score, the notion of a revolutionary critical pedagogy that infuses McLaren’s Christian faith and the spirituality of liberation theology will perhaps catch some off-guard, perhaps put-off others, and to still others, like this writer, provide a deeper sense of camaraderie for his work, and more importantly for his being.

In her reflections on the spiritual dimension that roots *Pedagogy of Insurrection*, Lilia D. Monzó declares in the Afterword that McLaren makes a daring move in this work by presenting “...an unexpected and controversial but revered star guest—Jesus Christ, himself, is at the door...” (p. 440). Monzó further goes on to mention that McLaren is quite aware that bringing in biblical themes into the critical pedagogy narrative opens himself up to critics from the left, who may be skeptical of those themes, and from the right, who may be uncomfortable with his interpretation of the Jesus of the Bible.

With a Foreword by E. San Juan, Jr., a Preface by Michael A. Peters, and Monzó’s Afterword, the 465-page text is comprised of 12 lengthy chapters. In chapters 1-5, McLaren devotes time discussing Jesus, Paulo Freire, Hugo Chávez (written with Mike Cole), Fidel Castro, and Che Guevara, each of whom is the theme of a respective chapter.

Particularly with respect to Freire, Chávez, Castro, and Guevara, McLaren has extensively written elsewhere about his great admiration for these four men, expanding further in *Pedagogy of Insurrection* and reminding us that Freire’s thought is still very relevant and continues to saliently inform critical pedagogy; how Chávez was misunderstood particularly in the US, and even by the Catholic Church in his own country, yet was an ardent voice for the poor; how illiteracy was considerably reduced under the leadership of Castro; and, how Guevara challenges our capacity in order to move toward the transformation of the “new man” through a revolution that is self-transformative and structurally transformative on behalf of dignity, freedom, and justice.

Comrade Jesus and Liberation Theology

While McLaren thoughtfully discusses those four luminaries who obviously have had a tremendous impact on his life, it

was Chapter 1, *Comrade Jesus*, which particularly caught my attention and which I would like to spend a little time exploring. This appears to be the first time that McLaren is so transparent about his faith and spirituality in general and in a public forum such as a book volume. As in all of the chapters, there is certainly much to unpack in this chapter, which McLaren begins by providing a panoramic view of his world travels, all along the way advocating justice and salvation, grounded in the notion that the Kingdom of God is upon us.

On one hand, I struggled with this chapter because of the confluence of Marx, neoliberal thought, capitalism, critical pedagogy, socialism, and communism and then somehow “politicizing” Jesus in the mix, causing me to be somewhat uncomfortable. That is, whether it is from the left or the right, I am not quite comfortable when one associates Jesus exclusively to one political, social, or economic ideology, as McLaren seems to do here.

For example, throughout the text, as an avowed Marxist, McLaren naturally excoriates capitalism, which works to exploit and oppress, and then goes on to point out that the early followers of Jesus lived a communist lifestyle and were committed to communist ideals. It certainly appears McLaren is being purposely provocative here, knowing that the general contemporary conception of communism, or that of being a communist, is a charged concept, and is divisive in nature among the populace, as is with discussions on the strengths and weaknesses of capitalism.

Yet, on the other hand, when McLaren applies the communist designation to the early followers of Jesus, he is not talking about some kind of totalitarian concept of communism; rather, he appears to naturally be drawing from the Latin *communis*, from which the word “communist” derives, meaning to be in common, to share. The early followers of Jesus indeed did live in community where all was shared to build up the common good. As it says in the book of Acts, Chapter 2, “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one’s need” (v. 44-45). And still further, as McLaren cites, Acts 4:34-35—where the text further affirms what is written in Acts 2—makes clear that “There was no needy person among them...”

McLaren additionally reminds us that the central mission of Jesus is to “...proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord”

(Luke 4:18-19). Quite passionately, McLaren then challenges the reader:

How is it possible to follow the message of Christ when his dire warnings about economic inequality are ignored? If you accept Christ as your personal savior and support a system that creates inequality and injustice, then what does this say? This goes beyond whether you vote for a Democrat or a Republican. It is the heart of the struggle to be human. It does not mean that a socialist country is more Christian than a capitalist country, especially if that socialist country exercises a totalitarian grip on its population. While justice is more than economic, it remains the case that economic justice is fundamental to the Kingdom of God here on earth. (p. 105).

To be sure, for those who believe in Christian eschatological thought, entrance into the Kingdom of God is ultimately the saving event, but that is not to say, as McLaren rightly argues, that the Kingdom of God also walks among us, working to set people free from oppressive forces of all sorts here on earth, including economic injustice.¹ In short, the entire thread that links the Hebrew Scriptures to the Christian Scriptures is about liberation.

¹ McLaren reminds us in his text that Pope Francis warns us that idolizing capital ultimately enslaves and ruins society. It is also worth reminding that the thrust of Pope Francis' papacy is one that seeks a poor Church that possesses a heart for the poor, which is clearly making its mark on his pontificate. This desire of Francis is not only rooted in the Gospel message, but it is also the same message that is filtered through Catholic social justice teaching. For example, in his celebrated 2015 trip to Bolivia (and other countries in Latin America), Pope Francis not only offered an historic apology on behalf of the Church for its role in exploitation, colonialism, and the grave sins that "...were committed against the native people of America in the name of God" (Yardley & Neuman, 2015, para. 4), but he also denounced a "new colonialism" in which multinational corporations and global capitalism cultivate a system in which materialism is revered, inequality perpetuated, and exploitation of the poor is painfully evident (Yardley & Neuman, 2015). More recently in 2016, at a mass in the chapel of the Vatican guesthouse, he vigorously called out businesses who hire those on a part-time basis, only in an effort to avoid providing health insurance and pension benefits, calling these businesses "...leeches, and they live by spilling the blood of the people who they make slaves of labor" (Scammell, 2016, para. 3).

In the end, there is a certain appropriate political, social, theological, educational, religious, denominational, and economic intersection that converges whenever there are conversations about Jesus. And while much resonates in McLaren's heartfelt narrative of who he calls "Comrade Jesus," my sense is that he leans too much on a discussion of identifying Jesus with the political, as alluded to earlier. That is, while human-made concepts that identify political persuasions or economic ideologies naturally have their place, the language that identifies these concepts, however, can be limiting when injecting a deity in the mix, perhaps even unintentionally subverting the transcendent and omniscient nature of that deity.

Of course, such discussions about language, the deity of Christ, and the humanity of Christ are wrapped in mystery and are multi-layered in nature. It is clear, however, that when Jesus walked among humanity in the flesh, he certainly was radical and remains so to this day. He certainly calls out, challenges the establishment, individually challenges, brings comfort, and has as His aim to set people free.

But His form is not one that can obviously be contained by the language of political persuasion or denominational beliefs. Thusly, in the Christian Scriptures when Jesus spoke, he principally shared in terms of "good" and "evil," ultimately proclaiming that the human condition is flawed by sin in need of a redeemer who makes humanity whole. In other words, as Gustavo Gutiérrez (1973, 1990), the "father" of liberation theology, reminds us sin is the ultimate reason for oppression and injustice, impacting values, relationships, and policies.

I am reminded of the words of Archbishop Oscar Romero of San Salvador—who McLaren makes clear that he greatly admires—and whom I believe who personifies the meaning, intent, and action of liberation theology, inspirationally illuminated during the height of the social, political, and cultural unrest in El Salvador during the 1970s. Romero took what Richard Rohr (1978) calls the naked position of the gospel—that is, not pleasing to the political left or the political right.

Romero's position was one that fervently and persistently—simply, but profoundly—proclaimed truth in intensely calling out structural inequalities or what the liberation theologian would call "institutional sin." In other words, Romero was not about taking a said political position or inflaming politically charged party affiliations as a platform; rather, he was about the seeking of justice and God's ultimate reality of peace and love. Romero (1979) puts it this way,

It's amusing: This week I received accusations from both extremes—from the extreme right that I am a communist; from the extreme left, that I am joining the right. I am not with the right or with the left. I am trying to be faithful to the word that the Lord bids me preach, to the message that cannot change, which tells both sides the good they do and the injustices they commit. (p. 163)

In McLaren's portrayal of liberation theology, he argues that "Jesus is the prototypical rebel" and further points out that doing God's work is one that always bends its arc toward justice, astutely drawing from the Book of Matthew and other biblical texts to argue his point. In addition, he heavily draws from the theologian José Porfirio Miranda, among others, and turns to James Cone, the "father" of a black theology of liberation, to filter his analysis of liberation theology and the Kingdom of God on earth. While McLaren does draw from the work of Gustavo Gutiérrez, I would have liked to have seen more of Gutiérrez's work embedded in his narrative, particularly when he mentions the "preferential option for the poor," a chief cornerstone that drives the meaning of liberation theology.²

In fact, McLaren argues that "...liberation theology gets this wrong when it asserts that there should be a 'preferential option for the poor'—it is not an option, but, as Miranda notes, it is an *obligation*" (p. 106). While Gutiérrez has previously written elsewhere regarding the term "option," in a 2003 interview with *America Magazine*, a national Catholic publication, he does acknowledge that the translation of the word "option" from the Spanish to the English is problematic, making it the "weakest" word in the phrase. Gutiérrez further explains,

In English, the word merely connotes a choice between two things. In Spanish, however, it evokes the sense of commitment. The option for the poor is

² Subsequent to the historic 1968 Medellín, Colombia Bishops' Conference, highly influenced by Gutiérrez and other progressive clergy, in which the term "liberation" emerged, particularly as a response to unjust economic, agricultural, industrial, cultural, and political realities which clearly violated basic human rights (Kirylo, 2011; Los Textos de Medellín, 1977), the phrase "preferential option for the poor" was first introduced at the Latin American Bishops' Conference in 1979, later reaffirmed at the 1992 Latin American bishops' conference in Santo Domingo, and still later in 2007 at the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean in Aparecida, Brazil (Brown, 1990; Gutiérrez, 2013, 2015).

not optional, but is incumbent upon every Christian. It is not something that a Christian can either take or leave...The option for the poor is twofold: it involves standing in solidarity *with* the poor, but it also entails a stance *against* inhumane poverty. (para. 10-11)

Contrary to McLaren's assertion, therefore, I would argue that liberation theology does get it right, but I do agree with him that Christians—and all people of good will—are obligated to make that commitment to the notion of making a preferential option for the poor in their activism.

In the final analysis, McLaren's leap into weaving an intentional Christian spirituality within the web of critical pedagogy is admirable and courageous, deserving applause. I look forward to how he further develops this theme in subsequent writings, whose time, I believe, has come to be meaningfully part of the conversation among critical pedagogues.

Working to Abolish Capitalism

Chapter 6 is a conversation between McLaren and Sebastjan Leban in which McLaren argues that academics must be more involved as activists in pushing back on a system of capitalism that works to foster inequality. And within that conversation McLaren argues that his emphasis on class struggle is not at the expense or the exclusion of a focus on race and gender, but rather sees class struggle as one that is conjugated as a multi-pronged endeavor with anti-racist and anti-patriarchal struggles. As a response to his critics, McLaren reminds us that while his emphasis is a deliberate focus on the centrality of class struggle, he also makes clear that "I have been creating anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-homophobic curricula and pedagogical practices for decades..." (p. 247).

Continuing in Chapter 7, a conversation with Petar Jandrić, McLaren maintains his attack on the alienating and exploitive nature of capitalism. In addition, there is a lively exchange in which McLaren discusses the various strengths and limitations of technology, social media, Facebook, and other related media. Perhaps the most interesting tidbit of Chapter 7 is when McLaren discusses his approach to writing in the way he puts thought to text, his approach to metaphor use, and his approach to vocabulary use. McLaren is well aware of his "idiosyncratic style," which people ask about more today than in the past, which signals to him that his style is more appreciated.

Chapters 8-11 revolve around a variety of critical themes, related to the environment, music education and social justice, the scourge of firearms (the latter written with Lilia D. Monzó and Arturo Rodriguez), all of which McLaren ultimately sees the prize as one that works to completely abolish capitalism. Indeed, as one gathers rather quickly and as suggested in this narrative, a central theme that is webbed throughout the text is centered on the malevolence of capitalism, also arguing that neoliberal globalization simply works to keep the few privileged in and the rest of us picking up the crumbs from the dirty floor of their unregulated accumulation of economic power.

Neoliberalism and Education

Neoliberal thought not only works to propel an economic system that is driven by privatization and works to shut down the public square, but it also goes further in disturbingly influencing the trajectory of education. McLaren is on point here, and this is something that I am particularly sensitive to as a former K-12 educator and a current teacher educator, thus necessitating a brief examination.

McLaren rightly underscores that the explosion of charter schools—all of which are either operated by for-profit and non-profit enterprises—work to suck public dollars out of their coffers in a systematic effort to simultaneously dismantle public education and foster privatization. Driven by competition, individualism, and consumerism, neoliberal thought, when applied to education, terribly poisons the education waters into a warped system of competition. In other words, this type of system fundamentally functions by blaming public school teachers for all that ails society, and hangs over the proverbial head of schools the threat of closure if students don't "perform" well on standardized tests. In short, threats and coercion are the *modus operandi* in which a neoliberal education functions, which has not only dispirited numerous outstanding teachers, but also has prompted many to depart the profession, leaving school-aged children perilously in the wake. This is most disruptive to those students who have already been historically marginalized by an unregulated capitalist society that perpetuates a system of "haves" and "have-nots."

To state differently, the notion of developmentally appropriate practice is thrown out of the window only to be replaced by the objectification of students suffocating in a test-centric climate. Ultimately, this corporatization of education thwarts critical thought, creative energies, and the

arts in all its forms and dismisses teacher expertise, only to replace all of this with a system of education in the image of the Walton Foundation, Gates Foundation, and everyone else in between with bags of dough.

To be sure, McLaren could very well be correct when he asserts that the assault on public education is playing a part in what he calls the “final frontier,” working to take down the public square in an effort to corporatize and privatize. In other words, as McLaren perceptively puts it,

Schools are no longer preoccupied with cultivating democratic citizens for the nation-state...but instead with helping the nation-state serve the transnational corporations. Schools themselves are becoming corporate enterprises. We are training students to become consumer citizens, not democratic citizens. (p. 379)

Yet, this assault is not simply contained in K-12 education, but as McLaren makes clear, it has infiltrated the university setting, particularly teacher education where the incursion is driven by the same playbook hurled at the K-12 setting. That is, as K-12 teachers have been blamed for underachieving schools, teacher education programs around the country are under attack with the same blame game for their supposed sub-par operation, paving the way for once again the Gates Foundation and others to swoop in and “reform” teacher education in a corporatized paradigm that focuses more on training as opposed to critical education.³

This very thing, despite my ardent push-back, happened right before my eyes at my previous institution where I worked for over a decade. While we were recognized as an outstanding teacher preparation program in the state of

³ While there is a certain interfacing between receiving training and receiving an education, those two paradigms of thought and practice serve two different purposes. To draw from *Merriam-Webster* (2012), the notion of receiving training implies one learns the necessary skills to do a job or perform a craft, and the concept of receiving an education implies formal schooling at such places as a university. In other words, training suggests learning of methods, techniques, and skills, simply steering prospective teachers to become functionaries or what Stokes (1997) describes as technicians who uncritically abide by a standardized or a one-size-fits all model of doing things. Indeed, as Freire (1998) rightly reminds us the idea of teacher preparation being reduced to a form training should never happen, but rather should go beyond technical preparation, which is mindfully pervasive with criticality, igniting epistemological curiosity and is “...rooted in the ethical formation both of selves and of history” (p. 23).

Louisiana and elsewhere, with incredible dedicated faculty, somehow an arbitrary decision was made without any faculty input to participate in a Gates Foundation Grant, linked to U.S. Prep, linked to Lowell Milken and his National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET).

The reason for aligning with those privateers was in part a money grab and presumably an effort to “improve” our teacher education program that ironically has as its motto, “setting the standard for excellence.” To put another way, the keys to “setting the standard of excellence” at our public institution were freely given to the corporatizers to do that for us. As McLaren reiterates, particularly as it relates to those educators who work within the critical tradition, teacher education is under attack, and a decisive element in that takeover is to marginalize criticality.

In other words, this new standard of “excellence” is not so much concerned with critical thought, critical pedagogy, inequities, and examining the social, economic, educational, curricula, and pedagogical forces that impact the teaching and learning process; but, rather, this standard is systematic in an effort to focus on mind-numbing training in such a way that works to minimize the professorate, and more insidiously to ultimately take over teacher education programs in such a way to corporatize it in a neoliberal image.

And the way to enter that door is to belittle the importance of tenure, to dismiss the notion of academic freedom, to defund higher education, to hire more adjuncts and instructors (who have no job protection, and, de facto, little voice) and then grab the ear of either uninformed or shameless or arrogant or dictatorial deans who are willing to sell out when coin is thrown their way and who are contented to accept the attached strings that come with that currency.⁴

⁴ To exacerbate this reality, it is also worth noting that public universities in the state of Louisiana have endured cuts to higher education—more than any other state in the nation—nine years running. Faculty in many of these state institutions, many of whom are underpaid (living near poverty wages), have not received any merit raises, have not received any cost of living allowances, all while enduring furloughs, and pro-rated summer school pay. This all also negatively impacts retirement savings. This is not to mention that they are currently living in a reality where university professors have to vigorously push-back in justifying the importance of their work to many in the Louisiana legislature. All of this is juxtaposed to the fact that many in administrative positions at respective universities, including university presidents, deans, and chairs—some of whom possess a plantation mentality along with their hefty paychecks—more than simplistically, if not insultingly, proclaim to instructors and professors, “Well, at least

Sadly, my former university is not alone in going down this corporatized path; it appears there are more than a handful of education deans across the country who appear willing to sell or have sold teacher education to the highest corporate bidder, a theme I have written about elsewhere (<https://dianeravitch.net/2016/02/12/james-kirylo-gates-plan-to-take-iver-teacher-education-advances/>). To that end, as McLaren reiterates, the corporatization of education is led by an onslaught of the new “Daddy Warbucks” which includes the Gates Foundation, the Broad Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, the National Council on Teacher Quality, Teach for America, among numerous others.

In many ways, critical pedagogy is still in its very early stages as McLaren suggests, and that one’s commitment to truth is fundamental for a transformative act to unfold. And particularly when it comes to teacher education and K-12 education, unless there is the will, commitment, and vision to push back on the neoliberal agenda, it will continue to seep over the entire education profession landscape like *The Blob* in that 1958 sci-fi cult classic which stars the late Steve McQueen. In that flick, the blob, a jelly-like organism, invades a small community, slithering through the area and consuming anything in its sight, including people, all of which strengthens its power and enlarging its size.

McQueen, one of the first witnesses of this creepy glob, warns the townspeople who were not aware of this creature taking over its community. In a sense, like the slithering glob, a neoliberal education agenda, with its bottomless coffers, is toxically expanding. And McLaren is the McQueen character, warning us, to take heed, be committed, and push back, and to “...be fearless teachers, even unto our last breath...” (p. 436), urging us, and indeed the entire community to be aware of what is happening with a neoliberal glob that aims to undermine, marginalize, and has as its central target to consume the entire public square.

Final Chapter in Poetic Prose

you have a job;” or “We can do more with less;” or any other patronizing mantras in glibly addressing the economic injustice occurring at university settings in Louisiana. And, finally, this is not to mention that while the state has cut funding for higher education, the tuition of students has gone up over a 100% the last near-decade. It is indeed no coincidence that Louisiana is experiencing an outflow of university professors and researchers, and seeing students either drop out of their studies or not even attending the university at all.

In the final chapter, recapping in nature, McLaren writes in prose that is poetic in spirit, even using musical nomenclature symbols indicating the presumed speed of his articulated cadence in which he rips individuals, companies, corporations, governments, economic, social, religious, and education systems that work to marginalize and oppress, but also exalting those heroes who have significantly contributed to social justice and making a better world.

And at the end of Chapter 12, McLaren goes back to where he started, right back to the theme of the tantalizing book cover that graces *Pedagogy of Insurrection: From Resurrection to Revolution*, exhorting us to live in wonder, to love without measure (citing St. Francis de Sales), to rest in the miracle of life, and to remember that “St. Gemma Galgani has beckoned you to go forth and teach, acting lovingly. For it is only by teaching that you can learn, and only by learning that you are fit to teach. And it is only through love that we can transform the world” (p. 436).

Conclusion

While I have written other reviews, preparing and putting this narrative together was quite a challenge because there is so much embedded throughout this thick text, embedded in the subtext, with multiple tributaries of thought through which McLaren paddles.

In fact, upon finishing the book, one thought raced through my mind and that is this: there is much to unpack in this volume that no one review can do justice to such a scholarly, passionate, energized, multi-theme book. To a definite extent one sees a different side of McLaren, a spiritual, religious side which one is perhaps not familiar, yet the book illuminates the same McLaren who over the years has been an ardent defender of those in the shadows.

In a literary style that is uniquely McLaren, *Pedagogy of Insurrection: From Resurrection to Revolution* is a text that is tightly threaded with a deep love for humanity, a righteous anger toward those who oppress and exploit, and a sense of hope through a revolutionary critical pedagogy. In the end, my attempt in this essay is to simply do my part in what I hope will be a fiber among numerous other reviews and essays that will collectively web the meaning, intent, and practice of this important work.

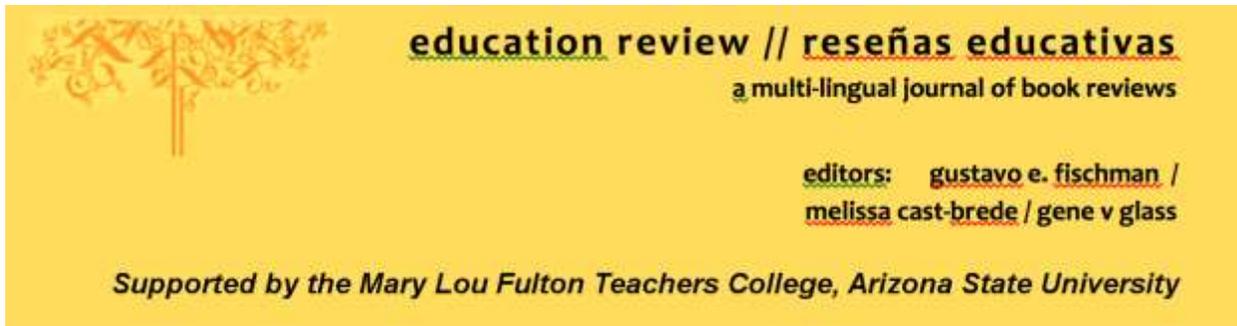
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