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Review of *Pedagogy and Praxis in the Age of Empire: Towards a New Humanism* by Peter McLaren and Nathalia Jaramillo (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2007)

Abraham P. DeLeon

Pedagogy and Praxis in the Age of Empire: Towards a New Humanism is a book that has produced a lot of inner emotions within me, as it contains both rigorous political critique and some positions that, as an anarchist, are also quite troubling. Firstly, I have followed the work of Peter McLaren with great enthusiasm as his discourses of critique and liberation fit well within a neo-Marxist vision of social transformation and revolutionary practice. Although I am only vaguely familiar with the work of his co-author, Nathalia Jaramillo, their combined voices produce a powerful critique of capitalist production, the U.S. military-industrial complex, Hurricane Katrina, and the aftermath of the Bush & Co.'s oppressive and highly resourceful political and economic regime. Through this manipulation, these forces have bludgeoned the poor and working class with high taxes, abandoned New Orleans pre- and post-Katrina, supported imperialist and economic ventures in the invasion of Iraq, invoked Christianity to lend further support to their political programs, and supported policies steeped in a socially and neo-conservative ideology that reproduced the State and other oppressive practices.

The book follows a post-9/11 political, economic, and social landscape that is riddled with false pretenses, lack of evidence for pre-emptive strikes, and a past presidential cabinet that supported repressive practices, such as CIA tortures embellished in a cloak of secrecy. For example, the authors write

the invasion of Iraq was a shameful attempt to capitalize on the events of September 11, initiating a savage assault on a country weakened by sanctions for over a decade on the contrived assumption that the Iraqi regime posed a direct military threat to the United States. (p. 29)

Although these facts may be common knowledge to many radicals, it is refreshing to read about them in an increasingly repressive academic environment that privileges empty, status quo, and mainstreamed research mired in positivism and statistical measurement. This type of critique litters McLaren and Jaramillo's overall analysis of the Bush regime

and the larger capitalist system that it supports. Often using cynical caricature, with thick descriptions, they do entertain us with their colorful and clever language in “calling out” Bush & Co. without fear and reservation.

It is through this discourse of critique that McLaren and Jaramillo situate their claims in the highly oppressive political climate after September 11th. Besides the events in Iraq and Afghanistan, the authors also turn their attention to Latin America. Their focus on resistance movements that have arisen to resist U.S. hegemony in Central and South America includes an informative discussion on the Bolivian context (p.106-107). The authors’ love, admiration, and respect is evident in the ways that they present their experiences with people they have met in these places (providing personal photographs throughout the text) and their support for reform efforts already underway in places like Bolivia, Mexico, and Venezuela. They also provide an analysis of events under Chavez as signs of hope for the establishment of more socialist forms of social organization. As they write, “We side with the Chavista position on direct and participatory democracy and continue to support the efforts of the Chavistas to build socialism for the twenty-first century. We support the struggle to advance socialism worldwide” (p. 46). Throughout the book, McLaren and Jaramillo push for politics grounded in radical critique, critical pedagogy, and a rigorous socialist political vision. For example, they state:

We believe that the Bush junta is so self-discrediting that it doesn’t need a commentary such as ours to make a case against it. Yet we offer our perspective, nevertheless if only because of the shameful lack of venues available these days for an analysis of the Bush administration. (p. 141)

Through their exploration of the Bush family’s ties to Nazism and huge oil profits, to how major Republican players like Dick Cheney were able to amass vast amounts of power and wealth in a relatively short amount of time using fear tactics and propaganda to advance their various conservative and economic positions, it becomes apparent that radicals and activists need to actively counter this conservative onslaught. One of the strengths of the book is its full engagement with a particular moment of time in a long line of U.S. Presidencies that are responsible for grave injustices, destruction of the environment, and under any other circumstances if it was not the United States, war crimes against humanity in the civilian deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan alone.

However, I have serious issues with the social vision and organization that McLaren and Jaramillo advocate through their work. As we already know, McLaren (2002, 2005) is firmly grounded within a Marxist framework and the authors’ reliance on State structures in their revolutionary goals and aims is readily apparent. This Marxist framework appears to lend itself to supporting some sort of real or theoretical State structure. They also appear to champion the likes of Chavez and others who support a socialist State. As they indicate in the following excerpt:

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

wrongheaded. 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 oppressed. We side with the Chavista position on direct and participatory democracy and continue to support the efforts of the Chavistas to build socialism for the twenty-first century. We support the struggle to advance socialism worldwide (p. 46).

The false hope that the State can be remade rests upon huge assumptions about its role, legitimacy, and hierarchical form of social organization. Their hopes that, “the state can be remade” to “serve the interests of the poor and oppressed” does not seem to match with the historical reality of how States have functioned in upholding the status quo and repressing radical social movements. Although they problematize the role of the State by claiming that critical pedagogy must, “operate outside the social universe of capital, a vision that goes beyond the market but also one that goes beyond the state...[and]...must reject the false opposition between the market and the state” (p. 39), their support of traditional hierarchical leadership and their overall commitment to a Marxist politics still puts the State at the forefront and is a tension that remains unresolved throughout the book.

As a domesticating institution, the State renders us invisible and lost in the hierarchical maze of discourses, surveillance mechanisms, and other ways social change/critique is enveloped within larger dominant social and cultural forms. McLaren and Jaramillo, although probably beyond the scope of their work, also willfully ignore anarchist histories and theories of social organization and praxis. For example, smaller, localized collectivities or federations that are temporary can be formed to fill the roles of a large and bureaucratic State without reproducing a rigid hierarchical structure. By keeping the old structures and frames of reference, we run the risk of falling into the same ways of thinking that have gotten us to where we are in the first place. *We cannot accept anything from the old world in a new social or revolutionary movement. Everything must be rethought, dismantled, and eventually changed.* Even if radicals would be able to “capture” the power of the State and try to “utilize” it, the relationship still mirrors the older structure we are trying to dismantle and replace. It is this antiquarian notion that we need to hold or wield power that appears to be at the center of the debate. I urge those interested to explore the anarchist literature for a different vision that is situated outside Marxist theory that dominates critical pedagogy and radical theory in education in particular. For example, anarchist theory provides a rigorous critique of capitalism, the State, coercive institutions, and other hierarchical forms of social organization responsible for oppressive social and economic conditions (Amster, et. al., 2009; Chomsky, 2005; Day, 2005; DeLeon, 2006, 2008; Gribble, 2004; Guerin, 1970; Suissa, 2006).

I was also surprised to see the authors cheerleading for the reforms that Chavez is implementing. Although I am aware of how Chavez has been constructed by the U.S. media for example, I am highly skeptical of any leader, boss, or other hierarchical position that claims to be committed to social justice and revolutionary rhetoric. For example, I would be very interested in the reactions of those liberals who were

cheerleading for the Obama administration now that he has committed fresh troops to the unending war in Afghanistan causing further damage to the Afghani people and the U.S. soldiers who will be maimed and psychologically traumatized because of their wartime experiences. The individual does not change the structure of the institution. The institution is intact despite a change in staff. Supporting a regime, leader, or president runs the risk for having to answer for their actions, as these types of social organizations are still mired in the ideology that gives rise to the same oppressive practices that we are fighting to dismantle and change. Reform does not seem to be an option at this point and there is a current of reformist language that underlies some of McLaren and Jaramillo's claims. Unfortunately, the socialism they appear to advocate does not push us far enough and holds onto romantic visions of an ultimately benevolent Socialist State.

Along with this, there is also a very traditional conception of how power operates. Throughout the book, the authors refer to the idea of "seizing power." As they write, "in addition to cultural solutions, workers need to seize political power on behalf of workers" (p. 108). Although I understand how some can argue that Foucault's concepts often do not lead to a committed political action (although I do not subscribe to this idea), it does allow us to avoid a simplistic understanding of how a capitalist system (like the one that exists in the United States) is able to reproduce itself. Power is much deeper than a direct form, but is diffused through multiple sites, nodes, experiences, discourses, positions, spatial realities, ideologies, social organizations, and social interactions. Although they do address Foucault and what they call "other post-structuralists" by rejecting their claim that "posing a vision of the future only reinforces the tyranny of the present," they assert that engaging in endless critique is "self-defeating" (p. 57). The anarchism I, and some others in the movement, subscribe to is the need for a politics steeped in autonomous anarchist direct action politics simultaneously engaged in a rigorous discursive critique that effectively breaks the barriers between anarchist theory and post-structuralism (DeLeon & Love, 2009; May, 1994; Morland, 2004). In this way, critique is combined with activism that addresses the need for developing scholars and activists and bridging the often-perceived gap between theory and practice.

I believe this point is where anarchist theory can not only address the needs of activists, but also insurgent theorists who are pursuing scholarly sabotage within the narrow confines of the present neo-liberal university. Anarchism, and its adaptability to integrate other theoretical traditions, is much needed today when radical critiques are easily co-opted to become the new en-vogue radicalism within academic circles. Through a systematic and vigilant anarchist politics, we can avoid domestication, form small collectivities that are localized and autonomous, participate in direct action, and avoid the ideologies of the State that seem to permeate politics grounded in Marxist theory and critique. Rethinking, dismantling, and changing these social structures will allow us to escape the confines of our past mistakes and frameworks, while also allowing the integration of new ideas that invigorate our present political commitments.

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