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A Critical Patriotism for Urban Schooling: A Call for a Pedagogy Against Fear and Denial and For Democracy

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**A Critical Patriotism for Urban Schooling:
A Call for a Pedagogy Against Fear and Denial and
For Democracy**

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We live at a time of intensified race and class warfare in U.S. society. The crisis is epidemic and readily visible in our schools. Taxpayer bailouts of the financial sector in 2009 have made billionaires of hedge fund managers but have increased class inequality overall. Currently we are faced with gargantuan cuts to school aid and an evisceration of programs designed to serve working-class communities, assaults on teachers and teacher unions, and a push for the privatization of schooling and test-based accountability. Under the rallying cry of accountability through test-based evaluations of teachers, wealthy entrepreneurs and hedge fund speculators who have never attended public schools or taught in a classroom have partnered with billionaires – who inhabit an ideological spectrum from Bill Gates to the Koch brothers – in order to advance a corporate reform agenda in our nation’s schools. Many of those responsible for the neoliberal economic policies that led to the current recession have anointed themselves as leading educational reformers. I intend to reflect upon the tragic irony of the current crisis of education that leads to Stan Karp (2011) to characterize it as follows: “If you support testing, charters, merit pay, the elimination of tenure and seniority, and control of school policy by corporate managers you’re a ‘reformer.’ If you support increased school funding, collective bargaining, and control of school policy by educators, you’re a ‘defender of the status quo.’” Largely as a result of

huge marketing campaigns in the corporate media, it is the ideological right wing who now claims the mantle of reformer and progressive teachers and defenders of public schooling have been placed on the defensive.

Critically-minded educators are not so easily fooled. Decades ago I sounded a little-heeded alarm that urban education in the U.S. increasingly was malleable to the intentions of neoliberal capitalism and a jaundiced corporate-infused perspective. Today, in a world where capitalism has monopolized our collective imagination as never before, befouled our bodies through a frenzied pursuit of narcotizing consumption, and turned education itself into a subsector of the economy, such a remark would be read by most critical educators today as a gross understatement. Because today, more than at any other time in human history, the perils of capitalism have been exposed. It is no longer controversial among many of us in the teaching profession to acknowledge that “governments seek to extend power and domination and to benefit their primary domestic constituencies – in the U.S., primarily the corporate sector” (Chomsky, 2013).

In a political arena where the Grand Old Opry meets slick beltway hustlers, grim patriots with sandpaper smiles under faded peaked caps are ready to believe almost any explanation for why their faith in America has collapsed. They lurch lockstep in drumbeat resignation that it must be the bankers who are to blame for their ills, or it’s Obamacare, liberals, socialists, multiculturalists, gays and lesbians or immigrants who have stolen their dreams. The focus is rarely on the real structural problems of living in a capitalist economy that is prone to crisis. Capitalism clearly is structurally incapable of permitting democracy to live up to its own definition even minimally, as it can no longer tolerate let alone absorb the principle of economic

justice and equality. Yet even in the face of this disquieting fact, there are few aspects of our teacher education programs or our graduate schools of education that focus on the perils of education reform in the context of examining the perils and pitfalls of contemporary capitalist society.

Any hope we have for a future that does not resemble the sets of *Blade Runner* (1982) is increasingly land-filled; we are heirs to a time when voices calling for reason and sanity are the new unreason and victims of corporate media blackout; the warnings of Marxists, ecologists, and environmental scientists about the impending crisis of the planet sound to many as irrational as the mead hall ravings of a besotted town crazy, and find an echo only in the conscience of those already considered part of the lunatic fringe. Potential conscripts for fighting those who are waging war on the working-class, the phalanxes of inner-youth who are consigned to big box retail stores like Target and Walmart where they are paid salaries well below the official poverty rate, are as dependent on The Man as corporations are on fossil fuels, and return home too exhausted to mount much of an opposition. Computers displace clerical workers and many middle-class jobs and college degrees, if the right kind, might give a tiny edge to recent college graduates resigned to a grim enslavement to the corporate wage as non-union workers. Unions have been eviscerated, except in some instances at the local level, but most are enfeebled by laws constraining labor relations and worker's rights that prohibit the right to organize and act collectively. Union strikes in the U.S. are far and few between.

The structural unconscious of "America" has an enormous capacity to assist the citizenry in escaping the reek and corruption of everyday life. It sends us skittering away desperately into hinterlands of social amnesia, far enough away from facing the harsh reality of our potential destiny as planet slum and entraining

us in the short-term gratification of media culture. Revenge scenarios in television shows, the proliferation of television sports, and collective mockery of ‘losers’ on reality shows are able to siphon away our energies that could elsewhere could be committed to creating sites of collective dialogue and political organization. We are, as the cultural critics tell us, libidinally invested in the delights popular culture, like the call of the wild from some mythic woodland in the darkness of an eclipsed moon that would always be gone by daybreak when we as a nation awake gravel-headed from our stupor.

Individuals are more unevenly positioned within our society today than ever before as far as recognizing their own objective location in a system of capitalist exploitation that colonizes the entire lifeworld of the planet. Mainstream education dresses America’s economic enslavement of its citizens in a religious frock of pretentious and pious words, dripping with a fetid and false paternalism: just allow for enough time and innovation and the market will sort out our problems. Hold tight and the virtues of the capitalist marketplace will prevent the American Dream from becoming the American Nightmare so long as we cooperate with Wall Street and trust in one percent of the population to come up with solutions for the other ninety-nine percent. To fall for this advertisement for the American Dream is to fall into sentimental self-deceit.

The Charge of the Financial Brigades

A full frontal assault on municipal services, federal government entitlement programs, and the system of public education is afoot. A brutal market-based charter schools initiative funded by private foundations such as the Walton Family Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation,

powered by high octane doses of novelist Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*, and her "greed-is-good" philosophy, and fanatically inspired by University of Chicago economist Milton Friedman's economic theory epitomized in books such as *Capitalism and Freedom* (2002 [1962]), have – thanks largely to a billion dollar public relations campaign that allows them to survive their graft-ridden attempts to privatize public education and fill charters with non-unionized Teacher for America recruits – forced many public schools to shutter their windows and close their doors across the country while corporate education reformers continue to indoctrinate our young on the virtues of capitalism.

Any crisis that these joined-at-the-hip Ayn Rand acolytes and Friedmanites can get their hands on or can fabricate to their advantage becomes an excuse to shut down public schools. The Chicago Board of Education's "underutilized school crisis" that supposedly edged the Board closer to a looming fiscal cliff is but one of countless examples across the country. Those who are not "creamed" into the charter system – those who are forced to live on food stamps in our growing homeland slums, those with limited proficiency in English, or with special needs – are left to scavenge through the debris of what is left of public education after the shock-and-awe effects of neoliberal market orthodoxy, which has created self-perpetuating mechanisms of educational success for the ruling class and their confederacy of patrons and immiseration education for the rest. It is a sad truism that one's objective location in capitalist society in terms of social class accounts for variance in inequality in lifetime earnings by age 18.

Urban educational reform is more than simply challenging the scandals involving state aid to build more schools, fighting the charter school advocates bent on enfeebling the teachers unions, and confronting the privateers and hedge fundsters who wish to turn education into a profit-making venture by running it as a business that adheres to the lowest common denominator or ‘bottom line.’ It was not long ago that we heard that 93 of 206 charter schools in Texas were in hot water for bilking the state out of millions of dollars by over-counting their enrollment. Approximately \$9 million of the \$23 million owed to the taxpayers was from shuttered “academies of learning” that the Business Roundtable intended to be funneled into the for-profit, or non-profit corporate tax credits, answer for the failure of public schools (Schools Matter, 2008). It is not enough to complain about the egoism of economic life with moral-advocative denunciations, although that is certainly a good beginning. What drives the logic of capital relentlessly forward at tremendous pace is not egoism alone, but the structural contradictions of the labor-capital relationship within advanced capitalist societies – the alienation of humanity’s labor and products from humankind through the commodification of everyday life.

Greg Palast (2013) exposed what he called the “End Game Memo,” which signaled part of the plan created by the top U.S. Treasury officials to conspire “with a small cabal of banker big-shots to rip apart financial regulation across the planet.” In the late 1990s the U.S. Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin and Deputy Treasury Secretary Larry Summers pushed hard to de-regulate banks, and they joined forces with some of the most powerful CEOs on the planet to make sure that happened. The “end game” was tricky and seemed indomitable because it required the repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act (1933) to dismantle the barrier between commercial banks and investment banks. Palast called it

“replacing bank vaults with roulette wheels.” The banks wanted to venture into the high-risk game of “derivatives trading,” which allowed banks to carry trillions of dollars of pseudo-securities on its books as “assets.” However, the transformation of U.S. banks into “derivatives casinos” would be hampered if money fled U.S. shores to nations with safer banking laws.

So this small cabal of banksters decided to – and successfully did – eliminate controls on banks in every nation on the planet in one single move by using the Financial Services Agreement (or FSA). The FSA was an addendum to the international trade agreements policed by the World Trade Organization that banksters utilized to force countries to deal with trade in “toxic” assets such as financial derivatives. Every nation was thus pushed to open their markets to Citibank, JP Morgan, and their derivatives “products.” All 156 nations in the World Trade Organization were pressured to remove their own Glass-Steagall divisions between commercial savings banks and the investment banks that gamble with derivatives. All nations were bribed or forced in other ways to comply and only Brazil refused to play the game. Of course as Palast (2013) noted, the game destroyed countries like Greece, Ecuador, and Argentina to name a few, and contributed catastrophically to the global financial crisis of 2008.

Solving the Problem of Inequality: The Market is Not a Community

Schools in the main reflect the inequality found in the structure of capitalist society. We need to face this grim reality. New standards and high-stakes testing will not solve the problem of inequality; in fact they could even intensify the problem. High-stakes testing for the promotion of cognitive ability is more likely

to create inequity than to eradicate it. The issue is not simply how the tests are used, but the very act of testing itself, which ignores non-cognitive factors which contribute to human (endogenous) development.

Schooling in the U.S. (and in most Western democracies) is successful to the extent that it refuses to examine itself outside of the hive of capitalist ideology and its cloistered elitism – its precepts, concepts, its epistemicides, and its various literacies of power through which ideas become slurred over time and actions on their behalf are guaranteed to remain as inactive as a drunken fisherman lost at sea. It accepts the fact that answers will remain predesigned before questions can even be formulated.

This vision of democracy is inevitably preformed and must be engraved on the minds of its citizens through ideological state apparatuses such as schools. As long as the ideas of the ruling class rule us – and they can certainly rule us with the help of the partnership between the state and corporate media – we will be apprentices to the anguish of the oppressed. Ideas for eradicating poverty and injustice will be guaranteed to remain vacant, hidden in a thicket of “feel-good” bourgeois aesthetics whose complicity with inequality bulks as large as its opposition to it, making it an appropriate ideological form for late capitalist society. Such ideas will be guaranteed not to transgress the ‘comfort zone’ of those who tenaciously cling to the belief that with hard work and a steeled will, we will be reap the rewards of the American Dream – regardless our race, class, gender, or geographical location.

If we want to participate in educational reform, then it becomes necessary to challenge the proponents of the competitive market whose corporate outlawry is driving the reform initiatives of education today. We barely can distinguish what augments and entrenches corporate power today from the brutal logic that

powers the narco-cartels that run havoc throughout Mexico. Today we not only are besieged by a world-historical crisis of capitalism, we face a crisis of human decency. The future proffers an ominous stillness, an illusion already sucked dry by gluttonous speculators and the new transnational robber barons.

We in the field of education should be gravely disquieted by the power of this claim. We see the wake of capitalism's devastation in the privatization of public schooling following Hurricane Katrina in the Gulf Coast to myriad ways that No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top transform public schooling into investment opportunities. We see it in the retooling of colleges in order to serve better financial and military industrial interests, in overuse and exploitation of contingent faculty, in the growth of for-profit degree-granting institutions, and in rising tuition and student debt (student debt in the U.S. now exceeds that of credit cards, totaling over one billion dollars, see Cauchon, 2011) not to mention the assault on critical citizenship in favor of consumer citizenship.

The crisis of the "free" enterprise system today, the naked money-grabbing practices that might accurately describe as gangster capitalism, or drive-by capitalism, is vacated of any sincere connection with human dignity and is reconstructed as a mere "greed-is-good" formalism and pandered to the American people as self-protection: a harsh and unavoidable reality of the times. This legally unrestrained self-initiative that enables all barriers to the market to be dismantled in the interests of profit-making by the few is built upon a negative definition of freedom, the freedom from having to enter into the necessary conversations with humanity that permits the full development of human capacities for fairness and social justice. Not only is this an acceptance of the current distribution of wealth and the transvaluation of social into individual needs, it is the freedom to

enjoy your wealth and success without having to accept any moral obligation for the suffering of others. Expenditures of any kind must be made from the principle of self-interest and individual advantage, and in proportion to that advantage – and all such brutal vindictiveness of the capitalist class towards the 99 percent is egregiously justified under the term “human nature.” People come to be judged solely in terms of human capital: for their economic contribution as measured by the market. There is no motive of social amelioration. Further, in times of crisis, it is the bankers and huge corporations that can ‘socialize’ their risk by transferring it to the taxpayers who are used by the government to bail them out.

But the market is not a community. It is only possible to realize your humanity if you are educated in an authentic community. And how do we achieve true community? Only by analyzing and understanding the distinction between how the social system understands itself, and how it exists objectively, that is in reality. In other words, only by working through false consciousness towards critical consciousness, towards a more dialectical understanding of how capitalism affects the very way we approach social problems, including educational problems. At present there is a huge disconnect between the two, that is there is a tremendous gap between how U.S. society comprehends itself and how it is structured to be coextensive with inequality. In a community, social wealth is distributed by means of the principle of equality in response to need. For me, education is about creating community in a society that has forgotten the meaning of the term.

It is often argued that that problem with working-class families has to do with the culture of poverty, in which it is assumed that there is an egregious deficit in working class culture when read against the values and cultural capital of bourgeois

culture. This is taking what is fundamentally a structural problem – capitalist-produced inequality, and turning it into a cultural problem: the problems of values, attitudes, and the lack of high culture and preponderance of low or middlebrow culture within working-class families, which suggests erroneously that class privilege has something to do with merit. It reflects a paternalistic presumption implicit in contemporary school reform approaches, namely, that the poor lack the proper attitudes and values to help them succeed in consumer capitalist society. Of course there is a racial dimension to all of these measurable inequities when examining the statistical facts of gaps between the outcomes of students disaggregated by race and affluence and comparing them with the statistical facts of disproportionate numbers of teachers among races. Moreover, when you compare these to the realities of the school-to-prison pipeline, and the re-segregation of schools, we see a national trend. Consider the following statement from Dr. Martin Luther King (2009):

We have come a long way in our understanding of human motivation and of the blind operation of our economic system. Now we realize that dislocations in the market operation of our economy and the prevalence of discrimination thrust people into idleness and bind them in constant or frequent unemployment against their will. The poor are less often dismissed from our conscience today by being branded as inferior and incompetent. We also know that no matter how dynamically the economy develops and expands it does not eliminate all poverty.

The Illogicality of the Market

In fact, the logic of the market as a regulatory principle of life within capitalist society creates dangerously fertile ground for forms of “soft fascism” that we saw increase exponentially throughout the United States, especially after September 11, 2001, and the global slump of 2008. As capitalism moves to reconstitute itself transnationally as a form of asset or finance capital, society must prepare itself for the anger and outrage of the 99 percent who are able to see through the veil of lies and propaganda propagated by the corporatocracy. It becomes an important goal of education in recent years to keep the American people shrouded in the notion that the U.S. is fighting evil empires around the globe in order to protect its vital interests, interests that must be met for it to continue as the prime defender of the free world. Yet, if we believe that equality is both a precondition and outcome for community, and a community is a precondition for true democracy, then we need to invite our students to ask uncomfortable questions about the extent to which the U.S. has been complicitous with terrorism and imperialism in an effort to retain its dominance in the global community.

Revelations by Wikileaks and statements by former U.S. military leaders, as well as FBI and CIA officials, confirm the fact that the U.S. has exported terrorism abroad, and continues to do so. To deny this is to deny a fundamental feature of U.S. foreign policy. Before revelations by Edward Snowden, many who now acknowledge the vast sweep of the NSA spying on U.S. citizens, likely would have believed the assurances of the U.S. government that the extent of this prying into the lives of every U.S. citizen was impossible in a country that is often touted as the world’s greatest democracy.

The U.S. ceased to become a democracy long before John

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Foster Dulles, who served as U.S. Secretary of State under Republican President Dwight D. Eisenhower from 1953 to 1959, helped to overthrow the democratically elected Iranian government through the efforts of the CIA. A significant figure in the early Cold War era who advocated an aggressive stance against communism throughout the world, Dulles sought to duplicate the CIA overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in Iran in the Congo, Guatemala, Indonesia, and Egypt, which later was used as a model in Vietnam, Guatemala, Cuba, Afghanistan, and Nicaragua. All of this can be verified in countless sources, the most vivid by ex-CIA agent who was directly involved, Kermit Roosevelt.

The U.S. has accepted “low intensity warfare” as its normal foreign policy. For instance, a vitally important and thoroughly documented report on the impact of Obama’s drone campaign was just released by researchers at Stanford University Law School and NYU (see *Living Under Drones*, 2012). The Stanford-NYU report details the effects of Obama’s drone assaults in Pakistan which not only targeted individuals, but targeted those attempting to assist and rescue those who had been injured, including those attending the funerals of those who had been recently assassinated. Can you imagine structuring a lesson plan around this in Texas or anywhere in the U.S. public school system?

Students are surprised to learn that the World Court in the 1980s issued a judgment in favor of Nicaragua, condemning the U.S. for what it called “unlawful use of force,” and ordered the U.S. to desist and pay substantial reparations for what was tantamount to terrorism (Cleaver & Tran, 1986). We are referring here of course to President Reagan’s support for the Nicaraguan Contras, whose sole purpose was to terrorize and kill men, women, and children (and especially schoolteachers) in the

countryside. How many students today know that the U.S. rejected a Security Council resolution calling on states to observe international law? Not understanding the history of imperialism and the instrumental role played by the U.S. can have devastating consequences in that we will continue to repeat that history.

Conclusion

As I write this article the U.S. is considering a bombing campaign against Syria because it claims that the Syrian regime used chemical weapons against rebel fighters. While this might be true, the U.S. government fails to consider that what it defines as conventional weapons – cluster bombs, napalm, depleted uranium shells, and white phosphorus (that melts the flesh from bones) – are condemned by countries worldwide for being tantamount to weapons of mass destruction. Why hasn't the U.S. joined the Convention on Cluster Munitions to this date? Didn't the U.S. military finally admit to using napalm during its invasion of Iraq? Is not depleted uranium, which the U.S. military used during its 1991 and 2003 invasions of Iraq to penetrate walls and pierce armor, a type of genotoxic chemical weapon that vaporizes upon contact and is inhaled? Did it not cause Iraqis who lived in the areas where shelling with depleted uranium was prevalent to suffer astronomical rates of genetic damage? Is it not the case that in cities like Basra and Fallujah, where U.S. and British forces used depleted uranium shells at the start of the war, it is estimated that over half of all babies conceived after the start of the war were born with heart defects? Should such questions form our ongoing debates in our classrooms? Or do we claim that classrooms must be “neutral” spaces devoid of political debates and discussions and leave such questions to the “experts”? Do we pander to those who claim that such discussions are anti-

American? Do we hide behind the lie that the U.S. military does not commit war crimes or do we hold our government accountable?

If you truly are a patriot and wish your country to be a force of real democracy and peace in this world, the first step you should take is to acknowledge the atrocities your country has committed in the name of democracy. To refuse to take such a step is to fall into an opaque attempt at offering a rational defense of those atrocities and offers a way of distancing ourselves from reality. It is a form of self-deception that “naturalizes” all behavior on the part of the U.S. as a force for good. But when we are working with students in our elementary schools, trying to help them understand their behavior towards others, do we not ask them to own up to their misbehavior as a first step in transforming themselves into more productive and considerate citizens? Regrettably, when we try to apply this principle to the U.S. as a whole, we are met with a fierce defensiveness and often warned to back off our criticisms for fear of being labeled anti-American or providing sympathy and solace to America’s enemies.

It is a regrettable characteristic of any plutocracy, but especially ours, that the wealthier you are, the greater influence you have in impacting public opinion. It is a tragic truism that only a fraction of a percent of the U.S. people determine the policy for the rest of the American people. So when we discuss U.S. democracy with our students, do we provide them with the opportunity to explore the current crisis of democracy that haunts all of us today? This is not a charge that I have simply stumbled upon adventitiously. This has been pointed out since the 1960s up to the present by Noam Chomsky (2013) and other intellectuals who are marginalized in the mainstream media.

Where do we engage this ugly reality in our schools? While a large percentage of the public and approximately half of the wealthy believe that the minimum wage ought to be indexed to the cost of living and high enough to prevent falling below the poverty line, why is the minimum wage far below this standard? Our health system has twice the per capita costs of other OECD countries and less than desirable outcomes yet opinion polls show that the public wants a national healthcare system (Toner & Elder, 2007). But that is unlikely to happen. Large majorities of the public believe that corporations and the wealthy should pay higher taxes. Yet, taxes on those groups actually have declined. So how is it that the U.S. as a democracy actually moves in the opposite direction of what the public wants? Part of it has to do with the opinion of the sentinels of the capitalist class that the American people are not considered intelligent enough to be the best judges of their own interest, but rather it is the role of the bankers and the intellectual elites to keep the American people from actually acting on their beliefs through the machinations of the public relations industry (Chomsky, 2013). Democracy is not a condition that the U.S. elites want to see obtained in this country. Far from it. They perceive democracy as too dangerous to their own financial interests. So the corporate elites and their government handmaidens want to keep the public in a state of terminal confusion. Chomsky (2013) noted that The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) is instituting a new program “to try to overcome the excessive rationality of the public” stating succinctly that:

It’s a program of instruction targeted for K-12 (kindergarten to 12th grade in schools). Its publicity says that the idea is to improve critical faculties – I’d certainly be in favor of that - by balanced teaching. “Balanced

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teaching” means that if a sixth grade class learned something about what’s happening to the climate, they have to be presented with material on climate change denial so that they have balanced teaching and can develop their critical faculties. Maybe that’ll help overcome the failure of massive corporate propaganda campaigns to make the population ignorant and irrational enough to safeguard short-term profit for the rich. It’s pointedly the goal and several states have already accepted it.

To the extent that liberating one’s own words becomes a basis for liberating one’s deeds, understanding the role that inequality plays in urban education reform is urgently needed for understanding both the perils and the promises affecting human life at a time of capitalist retrenchment and reconstitution. It also is a mechanism for working towards an alternative to the capitalist organization of human affairs. When a vocabulary of liberation takes root and a vision of common ownership becomes our herald, a path to action is created and a doorway is opened by the union of critique and possibility.

It is time for progressive educators worldwide to enter into serious dialogue with critical patriotism in order to advance the necessary re-ordering and reconstruction of the economy, society, and polity built on the imperatives of economic equality and social justice for all. Occupy Wall Street as well as popular social movements worldwide have put the concept of social and economic justice into the public vocabulary. Let’s not permit it to disappear, but rather begin to build upon it. Democracy will surely be a contested terrain during this global crisis of capitalism. Yet a democracy built upon critical patriotism, has a potential to thrive and grow; whereas a democracy distended by

the bile of social amnesia and denial will ossify and wither.

Ethical deficiency and logical contradiction are connected insofar as capitalism has dehumanized humanity and treated human beings as inert matter that can be swept under the toxic ruins of the world's industrial wasteland. It becomes therefore necessary to find an alternative to capital's value form – which is another way of saying that we need to consider an alternative to capitalism as a way of preserving democracy. This alternative need not follow the historical path of European or North American struggles, but can be illuminated by the many current efforts of indigenous peoples worldwide to protect the natural environment and build sustainable communities built upon the principle of reciprocity and co-operation.

By all means let's celebrate the positive features of U.S. democracy, but at the same time we must be willing to consider the fact that democracy's sweetheart deal with capitalism has become a liability for the vast majority of the wretched of the earth and continues to drown our hopes for a better world in the tears of the poor. Only when we can recognize the discrepancy between truth and falsehood will we be able to cease believing that slavery is freedom; only when we can create a renaissance of belief in humanity can we create that necessary and unflagging optimism of the will and stimulate the necessary emancipatory impulses among the insurgent masses of workers, youth, women, indigenous activists, and environmentally conscious groups that can bring about a better future. We must refuse to surrender our independence and integrity and willingly take up the struggle.

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