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A Forward to the Special Issue on Neoliberalism in Education The Long Road to Redemption: Critical Pedagogy and the Struggle for the Future

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**A Forward to the Special Issue on Neoliberalism in Education
The Long Road to Redemption: Critical Pedagogy and the Struggle for the Future**

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It should no longer be necessary for the left to spill gallons of ink in trying to make the claim that the purview of America's right wing governmental leadership and the well-channeled demagoguery of the decision-making elite is violent extremism. This now should be obvious to anyone half-awake to the shambles of today's public sphere and its national intoxication from fear and loathing that has led to the enthroning of demonic clowns in business suits as potential leaders of the most powerful bureaucratic-power apparatus in modern history. Whether in the form of bloviating Republican presidential hopefuls, demagogic theocrats, Second Amendment advocates, organizations empowered by Bible-driven racism and homophobia, repressive practices of a national security state, rampant violence against people of color, spontaneous waves of animosity directed at immigrants and refugees, the criminalization of the homeless, or attacks on students and protesters in the south who oppose the principles behind the Confederate flag—it should be clear to the American people by now that we live in a country divided by hatred and fear.

Yet we keep writing because there still remains an implacable persistence among mainstream Americans to refer to their country as “exceptional”, or, as the U.S. Army advertisements would have it, the “greatest nation in the world.” Whereas the intellectual vapidness and behavior of the leading Republican presidential candidates should be cause for national embarrassment, they appear to be attracting followers that are more than simply followers who exhibit a taciturn agreement with their respective candidates, but are more hateful, more extreme, more racist, more homophobic and more violent and gun-happy than the candidates themselves—creating spectacles of guileful toxicity more intense than any former presidential contests on public record. Witness the calls for more guns in movie theaters, university seminar rooms, shopping malls and public school classrooms; more cries for mass deportations of undocumented immigrants; more demands for databases of all Muslims; and government attempts at increasing the militarization of the police. These are not voices restricted to maniacs from the Deep South, but rather voices roaring through the chambers of capitol buildings throughout the country.

That America should be in control of the world's transnational capitalist state and openly defending white supremacy and a burgeoning proto-fascist politics should be enough to gobsmack even your most apolitical suburban dweller, but even more shocking is the fact that such an observation is no longer controversial. Rather than saving the country from a so-called theft of our freedoms by the White House administration that, for some, is putatively in league with the anti-Christ, Republican extremists, politicians are making sure the country is so democratically off plumb that it is difficult to distinguish where America as a *sui generis* ontology defined by our history textbooks ends and a neo-feudal plutocratic state begins. The strong correlation between what we define as terrorism and our own war on terrorism is unmistakable.

We now live in a “new” era where cheap fossil fuels are scarce and where easy access to

credit has become possible only for the already affluent members of the managerial class; where the final chips are being cashed in by low-wage and contingent workers, part-time job holders, and seasonal and migrant workers; where youth are marked by what Henry Giroux describes as ‘disposable futures’, including university graduates saddling the burden of student loans the size of home mortgages; and where foreclosed homeowners, wage dependent middle-class executives, and surplus humanity face a world in which fixed employment with social protections such as medical insurance is a dream of the past (discarded along with the bygone auriferous era that once cultivated the nanny state).

We didn’t face the ecological holocaust during the capitalist crisis of the 1930s. Today it is right on our doorstep, and we haven’t decided whether it is even necessary to close the door. We recline in our dogmatic assumptions about how capitalist technology will eventually save us, like a mogul in a leather chair blowing smoke rings from a Davidoff cigar.

It should be obvious to all that there is a new species of racism and racial strife afoot. In my view, this vile new species (there are undoubtedly more than one) has been spawned in the swamp of transnational capitalist social relations of production and capitalism’s attendant practices of racialized stereotyping, criminalization, and scapegoating that has divided the working class for many generations. What has emerged from this swamp has found life support among a clenched-fist citizenry outraged by what they maliciously perceive as job-stealing immigrants, welfare cheaters, socialists, Obamacare, big government and those who might have the audacity to oppose any position endorsed by the National Rifle Association. This “outrage” has clearly contributed to the grave problems that the U.S. is facing at this present historical juncture. We have seen these problems manifested in the most egregious fashion by the increasingly militarized police, by white supremacists, and by numerous supporters of the current stable of Republican candidates for the presidency—who tend to revile anti-racist protestors more than they do the racism that is being protested. Typically, many corporate media pundits and their dime-store demagogues blame outside agitators on recent attacks—from Ferguson to Minneapolis—on Black Lives Matter activists, and some even blame the protestors themselves. Charles Pierce has commented on recent poll results by the Public Religion Research Institute as reported in *The Washington Post* (Ross, 2015). The poll results reveal that half of White Americans and 60 percent of White working-class Americans believe that White people are being discriminated against as much as Blacks and other minorities. At the same time, 29 percent of Latinos and 25 percent of Black Americans agree with this assessment. Clearly, there is a wide racial/ethnic gap involving “perceived discrimination” against White Americans. But as Pierce (2015) points out, on nearly “every measure of social or economic well-being, White Americans fare better than any other group” (para. 1). Pierce (2015) reports that this is the case with respect to “housing and neighborhood quality and homeownership... overall health, health insurance coverage rates, quality of health care received, life expectancy and infant mortality... median household earnings, wealth (assets minus debt), retirement savings and even who has a bank account” (para. 1). Of course, is it so surprising that White Americans ignore the empirical evidence and cling to the view that they are now the new victims of social inequality and prejudice? Not when you consider the media reports over the past 60 years that are pushed by “people and by politicians who have profited handsomely from the dark energy of racial reaction” (Pierce, 2015, para. 2). We are not simply talking about the obvious here—Fox News—but much of the corporate media. Pierce (2015) notes that the exacerbated racial tensions over the past 7 years throughout the U.S. can be traced to “the context of racial opposition to the idea of Barack Obama’s election” which has “sharpened the racial edge of the

political dialogue on virtually every issue” (para. 4). Pierce (2015) is correct when he writes: “There is a wildness in our politics that goes back beyond this administration. But the election of this president— and his stubborn insistence that he be allowed to act like a president— has brought a focused volatility to that wildness that is unprecedented in the years since the turmoil of the 1960s” (para. 5).

I agree with Pierce (2015) that what has victimized White people and people of color alike “are economic and trade policies that have drained the country of decent paying jobs, the decline of organized labor, and a lot of sleight-of-hand political jibber-jabber that continues to this day” (para. 6). There are objective historical processes that are being ignored not just by White people but people of color as well, that entice them to support the very economic and political interests that are destroying them and tearing the nation—and the world—apart. The fetishes of the transnational capitalist state have been embraced by all and sundry because accompanying the social relations of capitalist production has been a sumptuous culture of consumption and mass entertainment that keeps people distracted from what is really happening to them in our social universe of value production: the capitalist is greedily dividing up the mass of surplus value which he is extracting from the labor of the workers that leads to absolute or relative pauperization. Culture wars are highlighted to take the focus away from the systematic economic exploitation of the capitalist state. Of course, cultural conflicts and cultural politics are real and we need critical cultural workers to engage them. But too often these struggles ignore capitalist social relations or accept them as a given and very little effort is spent linking current racial and cultural conflicts to the history of capitalist social relations. And while many critics do a powerful job of criticizing neoliberal capitalism, little effort is made to imagine an alternative social universe not predicated on value production.

Marx’s analysis of class exploitation offers a dialectical approach to our human condition, and it is interesting to note that much of Marx’s inspiration has biblical roots (especially his denunciation of money and its rule as a god) and there exists a striking continuity between communism and Christ’s denunciation of differentiating wealth, which is argued very convincingly in the works of the Jesuit theologian, Jose Porfirio Miranda (1980; also, see McLaren, 2015). I am not advocating here for classes in Marxism in teacher education programs—since Marx himself would have likely rejected classes in Marxism. Instead, I would support classes in teacher education that engage Marx’s critique of political economy and that utilize historical materialist approaches to engage the grave problems of the present moment in order to transform them. This stipulates critically engaging the formation of our self-understanding and self-deception with a dialectical concreteness and not simply with a humanist Marxist phraseology, which capitalists are even tolerating and in some instances encouraging.

We call for a new social universe in polemical contradistinction to the barbarism of capitalism. The bleeding out of industrial capitalist society through the historical cracks of its crumbling state formations of securitization and market regulation, and capitalism’s structural demands for a return on investment, has put pressure on the U.S.-led transnational capitalist state to reimagine itself as a sizzling knowledge economy, albeit swaddled in a ticker tape blanket of militarized accumulation, financial speculation, the centralized expansion of surveillance state tactics and a diversion of the social surplus to fewer and fewer hands of the ruling elite. Such conditions have notoriously destined the new generation of workers to the status of high tech vassals tied to lifelong learning (which is in the process of being redefined to mean a lifetime of trying to find a decent job, if indeed you can find a job at all). Using workers in the service of capital’s cult of efficiency simply habituates workers to the capitalist production process, to

further alienating them as marketable commodities in the conflictual arena of accumulating value when workers could be struggling for a productive system owned and democratically controlled by labor.

This crisis-ridden state of affairs is further symptomized by the wholesale disappearance of autonomy and self-determination resulting from the corporatization of everyday life and a managed democracy that demands political apathy and isolation among the electorate; the subsumption of work to the logic of human capital; a dramatic redrawing of the relationship between freedom and necessity; the dissolution of the labor movement and the looming threat to unionized work; and the racialization of the underclass and an exponential growth of intractable hatred towards foreigners—all of which have intensified the existential perplexities of the heart and created a guaranteed suffering for the masses through unemployment, precarity, and alienation brought about by the vicissitudes of the free market.

At the time of this writing at least 29 Republican governors—and even one Democrat—say they want to close their states to Syrian refugees. Indiana's governor has already turned a family away. Presidential candidates are caterwauling that they will shut down mosques and sort out refugees on the basis of religion.

There is much today to constrain the building of a socialist architecture for the 21st century, whose political richness has been excised by the demands of a transnational opposition. As William Robinson (2011) reports, the new structural dimension of 21st century capitalism has locked out nearly one third of humanity from productive participation in the capitalist economy. The transnational capitalist state's role in creating social cohesion through capitalist accumulation is fracturing as a result of the crisis of capitalist overproduction; consequently, the state is losing its legitimizing function, and must therefore motivate citizens to affectively invest in a logic of displacement, exclusion, criminalization and hate. It must demonize its surplus population through a logic of fascism overlain with techno-narcissistic fantasies of a consumer paradise. It uses such fantasies as an ideological cover while it engages in the nefarious practices of mass incarceration (disproportionally of African Americans and Latinos), prison privatization and the school-to-prison pipeline.

We need, as Charles Reitz (in press) argues, a labor theory of ethics that locates the world's first moral/philosophical precepts as emerging from the world's first peoples in ancient African partnership cultures. Charles Reitz's (in press) notion of sensuous living labor here is important, and Reitz defines this as follows:

[S]ensuous living labor is the substrate of our identity and being as humans. It is the foundation of our affective and intellectual capacities and our vulnerabilities as developed bio-ecologically...within the history of our species. It constitutes humanity's dynamic, dialectical and material core. As a species we have endured because our sensuous appreciation of our emergent human powers: our power to subsist cooperatively; to create, communicate, to care communally.

As a species on the verge of extinction, we have an ongoing obligation today to commit ourselves to build a network amongst the working-class, the peasantry, and the urban cognitarians and precariats in order to break down the immutable hierarchies of power and privilege concomitant with the workings of capitalist society. We need more than the critical aesthetics that are developing out of the arts and humanities, as important as these developments have become. We need an organic philosophy of praxis grounded in absolute negativity and a dialectics of transcendence that is historically situated in a critical geopolitics of knowledge. We survive as a civilization only if we understand all communication as overlain with ideological

content, which is not always expressed manifestly but just as often tacitly—and often subliminally—through symbols, icons, metaphors, images and analogies, behind the diversity of surface appearances. It is not that these messages are inaccessible to ordinary conscious recall; rather, it is because the paradox of ideology stipulates that we can be conscious of something, even if we are not aware of it, even if it does not register as meaningful in our memory. While some information is dimly legible beneath the palimpsestic surface, like scratchings on a plant-stalk papyrus fashioned in a medieval scriptorium, it can be uncovered and made meaningful for collective struggle through a dialectical analysis. We need dialectical reasoning more than ever before today, to help learners navigate through the ideological mystification enhanced by new digital technologies.

Back in the years 1913-1914, approximately 1000 Ludlow Colorado coal miners and their families were causing John D. Rockefeller and his investment in Colorado Fuel & Iron Corp a lot of problems. From their tent city, they managed to hatch a strike. On April 20, 1914, Rockefeller hired vigilante gunmen and National Guardsmen to spray with machine-gun fire the remaining men in the mining camp, killing 66 people, including women and children. Facing a public relations disaster, Rockefeller turned to the “father of public relations”, corporate spin doctor, Ivy Lee, for assistance. Lee was able to blame the massacre on outside agitators and eventually rehabilitate the reputation of Rockefeller in the public eye using the same techniques that he later shared with Adolf Hitler and storied Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels. Today, corporate spin doctors play a crucial role in managing U.S. politics, although the right has an entire media conglomerate to do most of its bidding: Fox News.

We are living at the cusp of another rebellion of labor against the social abuses of capitalism. This precarious situation is reciprocally related to accumulation and concentration of capital in a world irredeemably disfigured by private property and wage labor. *Pace*¹, Habermas, we have tried to negotiate out of existence the material contradictions in the social relations of production. And we have failed. We must now move from words to action. By action, I am referring to the praxiological dimensions of critical pedagogy.

Critical consciousness is not, as Hollywood's archaic illusions would have it, all bells and whistles. Critical consciousness is not born of the electrical charges from a Jacob's Ladder or the luminescent vapors and steamy heat of Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory. It cannot be initiated by the turn of a knife-switch, captured in a steampunk glass distilling apparatus, measured by a Bakelite voltmeter or in graphs that rise and fall like the temperature outside your window during an ill-timed vacation. Critical consciousness is not a motley aggregate of smaller insights jelling into a mathematizable motherlode of mentation, because such a view vigorously assaults the social-world correlate. Rather, critical consciousness is a fructifying force that emerges through praxis; it is the outcome of our engagement with the totality of our being and our becoming. We participate in the creation of critical consciousness through our actions in and on the world. One of the hallmark gestures of critical pedagogy is that out of our participation with the Other, we create the reality in which we participate. Thus, we must unchain ourselves from any form of thinking that habituates us from participating in the world in order to transform it.

Because critical pedagogy is so antithetical to longstanding and commonsense versions of the classic virtues of objectivity and neutrality, it has become a battleground where hearts and minds are arrayed apart from each other and are fighting for the soul of the planet. Marxism, especially, has been contemptuously dismissed for revealing hidden laws of tendency in the terrain of political economy, for pandering to those already converted to destruction and who wish to tear down the walls of democracy—a gratuitous assumption fueled in part by a fear that

perhaps the Marxists are right in their assessment of the workings of capitalism and in giving issues of class exploitation and struggle such widespread currency.

While the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the largest nationally representative and continuing assessment of American students' knowledge in various subject areas, starts to complain about the recent statistically significant declines in U.S. students' math and reading scores for the first time in more than two decades, educational spokespersons continue to champion the current entrepreneurial push in today's schools. It appears that what makes for success in today's educational environment is to learn as many value added instructional and entrepreneurial leadership skill sets as possible from the world of business management and financial accounting. Business fellowships for principals to help them meet state standards, improve graduation rates, provide college- and career-readiness and excel strategically in the competitive marketplace of today's schools are all the rage. Reducing the school professional to fine-tuning teacher accountability schemes, strategic marketing, and entrepreneurial skill sets constitutes, in effect, the death of education, and according to this definition education has been dead for a long time.

In the world of educational reform, there is little or no vision of the role of education as an agent for challenging widespread poverty, for stepping outside of the box and trying to understand the larger role played by education in a capitalist society; there is no room for addressing the challenge put forward by George Counts's (1932) *Dare Schools Build A New Social Order?* And the conditions such as the Great Depression that concerned Counts in his day are as bad, if not worse, today. And today, the one international movement that attempts to seriously address this issue—revolutionary critical pedagogy—is about as discernible on today's educational horizon as a mote of dust in a dust storm. Proponents of revolutionary critical pedagogy in the United States continue to be viewed as lacking credibility, while the reach of transnational capitalism, which has colonized almost every social group on the planet, remains virtually unquestioned. Where is the concern for these world-historical problems by today's education reformers?

Critical pedagogy cannot serve any master, no matter how seemingly benevolent. It can only grow in the fertile foam and froth of the social seedbed, where barriers to our full humanity are continually negotiated by the critical agency of the people. Otherwise, we condemn critical pedagogy to a sterile and narrow-minded apologetics, bureaucratic schematism, and moral bankruptcy that makes of us dim philosophers and servants of despair helplessly trapped in one of history's blind alleys and stamped with the hallmark of political resignation.

We do not truck with those whose immutable admonitions preclude the possibility of error, or who wish to know the answer to their questions in advance, or who wish to apply *a priori* valid laws or prefabricated models or blueprints for a new society. Instead, we wish to cultivate a philosophy of praxis, not a philosophy of propaganda. We do not leave fate to the supra-historical whims of metaphysicians, but to the struggle of humanity as history-making beings, as beings who create their own meaning in and through history. We are not unchanging beings that exist in a platonic playground outside of history. We exist in a dialectical unity with ourselves and our world as we make our own pathways by our own walking and our collective pathways by walking side-by-side with our comrades in struggle.

The political lacuna of our democratic heritage has been the refusal to consider alternatives to capitalism. Any rehabilitation of critical reason in U.S. society will have to tackle this problem. Here I wish to address a misapprehension which is clearly rampant in many of the attacks on revolutionary critical pedagogy—that it operates from a Marxist position, that it is

economically reductionistic and reduces all forms of oppression to class. On the contrary, among revolutionary critical educators, a Marxist historical materialist analysis is a powerful way of understanding the dialectical relationship among race, gender, sexuality and the social relations of production.

Critical pedagogy is fully knotted to a longstanding and implacable aversion to economic exploitation, racism, homophobia, sexism, imperialism, the coloniality of power and White supremacy. It takes the position that capitalism defaces the ontological meaning of what it means to be human. Critical pedagogy is designed as a counterweight, or corrective to, and a necessary but not sufficient basis of recovery from this symptomatic destruction of our humanity by capitalism and the multiple antagonisms that are predatory upon it.

Critical pedagogy is not a degenerate educational approach where, as some might claim, the political sandbags the pedagogical; on the contrary, critical pedagogy is progenerate, representing the most critical instantiations of knowledge production and forms of critical consciousness, those that cannot be reduced solely to forms of mentation—to a bevy of classificatory concepts or logical inferences or explanatory hypotheses—and which exist as praxiological engagements with the material world. Such engagements always carry with them certain presuppositions about the social good—traits of character and habits of the mind—that are related to an ethical commitment to self-and-social transformation, to a world free from the value form of labor. Otherwise put, critical pedagogy is directed at the political transformation of the social world through revolutionary praxis.

This struggle for social transformation—for a socialist alternative to capitalism—has been in the works for generations and has been stopped in its tracks many times. But it is only through such a struggle that society and the diversity of people that constitute it can be redeemed by creating a new field of being where we, as brothers and sisters, are called to confront history in its totality. And it will be a long road to redemption. The revolution cannot be eternally pre-existent nor eternally future. The revolution must be now, in the moral imperative of justice and love for all. We cannot afford to postpone this truth any longer. Jose Porfirio Miranda (1974) asserted that “the meaning of the past and the present depends on what in the future we will make them to have been” (p. 52). This only makes sense if we begin fighting not only for a better life in the future for the poor and dispossessed, but for the right for all to have a future.

The essays that follow by Henry Giroux, Angelo Letizia, Curry Malott, Noah De Lissovoy, Arturo Rodriguez and Kevin Magill, and Rich Gibson, all attest to the urgency of the struggle ahead for a world absent of the ravages brought by neoliberal capitalism. As evidenced by these important works, the struggle takes many forms and occurs on numerous fields of contest and cannot be waged in isolation from determined efforts to seek beyond present forms of capitalist accumulation to a new socialist horizon.

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¹ Latin for "with all due respect to " or "with due deference to"