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Last night I received word that the American Educational Studies Association will be crossing a picket line to host their 2016 conference, the theme of which is “Love, labor, and learning under the gun.” The call for proposals is littered with terms like “critical historical consciousness,” “at once personal and political,” and “intersectional understanding. These terms will be bantered about by presenters sitting in defiance of a boycott called for by the low-wage workers—predominately women of color—who make the conference hotel run. When those who profess a commitment to social justice so brazenly betray that commitment it can be disheartening, despairing, disillusioning. This all makes the counterexamples that we have that much more important, and Peter McLaren’s new book is exactly such a counterexample. In this review I want to relay the spirit and logic of the book, placing them in relationship to McLaren’s person, the field of critical pedagogy, and some of the critiques of the field.

McLaren’s overall project—developing a revolutionary critical pedagogy that is based in a socialist alternative—is the subject of good deal of misunderstanding and, it seems, lack of serious engagement by many in education writ large. Take a recent article by Jacob Neumann (2013), which gathers together and extends many of these critiques. Neumann begins by attacking the “exclusive” language of critical pedagogy, arguing that McLaren’s arguments “do not impact neighborhood schools in part because they usually fall upon ears deaf to such language” (p. 135). His general argument is that critical pedagogy is inaccessible to teachers and provides teachers a list of unrealistic mandates, ignoring the enormous constraints that teachers and students face. Critical pedagogy, he concludes, “is in crisis because it fails to connect to large numbers of teachers” (p. 143). It would seem, on Neumann’s account, that McLaren is holed up in his office, writing revolutionary decrees to absent addressees.

While there is no doubt that some scholars writing under the banner of critical pedagogy have made careers by endlessly producing empty critiques of neoliberalism, McLaren is not one of these, and *Pedagogy of Insurrection* evidences that quite well. In its pages we encounter a scholar and organizer who spends perhaps more time in the streets, shantytowns, and jungles of the world than in lecture rooms. When McLaren writes about struggles in Venezuela and Mexico, in South Africa and India, or in Greece and China, he conveys an embodied understanding of these struggles born from his experiences in the various trenches across the globe. McLaren, after all, was invited by the Bolivarian government in Venezuela to help integrate critical pedagogy into the country’s national education systems. He also directs a critical pedagogy program in China and has an institute named after him in Mexico. Neumann might be unable to understand what McLaren is saying, but clearly others are quite able to comprehend and keep up with him.

Pedagogy of insurrection represents a scholar and an organizer who can’t settle, who is restless, who is constantly agitated and, thus, compelled to agitate. The book is a product of McLaren’s incessant inquiry, an inquiry that takes the form of walking and building with others, establishing theoretical, organizational, and personal connections across time and space. In sum, it’s a book that seeks to expand the boundaries of the contemporary class struggle, defying borders of all kinds—geographic, theoretical, spiritual, and disciplinary. The book constructs a groundwork upon which educators can link arms with activists and revolutionaries across the

globe to bring a new order into being. Such a groundwork entails a critique of the present, a vision of an alternative, a process of ontological transformation, and—of particular concern to McLaren—the continual reconstruction of community.

In joining together McLaren's various theoretical and activist endeavors of the past three decades, *Pedagogy of Insurrection* is an ambitious work. The reader enters debates about materialism and post-structuralism, the knowledge society versus the knowledge economy, and the centrality of the state for social movements, and at the same time, engages in conversations about radical negativity and music education, temporality and progress, and ecopedagogy and socialist construction in the 21st century. In its ambitions the book is more generative than conclusive. In particular, the book provokes us to turn our attention to the formation of community and the humility and boldness necessary for transforming social life.

While McLaren has been critiqued for economic reductionism, for assuming the position of the enlightened one who has the answers, I disagree, and his latest offering is a testament to the exact opposite. McLaren doesn't think he has the answers. He does, however, acknowledge that there *are* answers out there, that there are answers that we, collectively have learned and that there are others that we absolutely can learn and, most importantly, enact. Thus, McLaren doesn't shy away from that one word that is a faux pas in academia: *must*. In fact, "must" is a word that appears frequently in the book. There is a reason for this. As McLaren writes,

critical educators recognize that pedagogical acts of knowing and engagement can neither be given in advance nor arbitrarily constructed by an analytic choice, but are, rather, necessarily implicated in and derived from particular interpretations that are grounded in our social life, that is, in our everyday experiences. (p. 35)

McLaren's *musts* stem from his unshaking assertion that we constantly *do* answer the problems that existence poses, and we answer them through collective struggle, not through theoretical reflection conducted in the ivory towers, not through the invention of new paradigms, not through the "newest" materialism.

But the book is riddled with questions that linger, questions that the reader will find constantly pressing in on her. In order to explore these questions, McLaren insists on every page, we need to construct a community of solidarity. A point he helps drive home by introducing several "comrades" into the field, the most interesting of whom is Jesus Christ. This is, at least, how I read his introduction of such an unlikely character into the book – a move that occurs in the book's first chapter. McLaren turns to Comrade Jesus not to convert his readers, but to demonstrate the universal longing for the construction of community, the ever-present desire for solidarity and collectivity. He is extending an invitation to those who profess or are attracted to Christianity in the US, while at the same time building a bridge between social movements in his own country and those of Latin America. Indeed, the rich tradition of liberation theology in Latin America remains a vital resource for those seeking an alternative order to capitalism.

This is certainly a risky move for McLaren, for he risks both the condemnation of the Christian right as well as contemporary atheists. Interestingly, these two groups have quite a bit in common. McLaren says that the Christian right have warped Christ's teachings to justify capitalism and imperialism. And yet, have not the "new atheists," in their abstract and a priori rejection of all religion, played a crucial role in justifying capitalism and imperialism? Christopher Hitchens, until his dying day, trumpeted the imperialist wars against Iraq and Afghanistan under the guise that "we're in a long war against Islamic terrorism." Hitchens wanted to extend this war to the "Iranian menace" (Hitchens, 2009). Sam Harris, too, another faux-intellectual, has taken Hitchens' imperialism further, arguing for preemptive nuclear war

against threats to “Western civilization” (Harris also wrote not long ago that he would rather have Ben Carson as president than Noam Chomsky...).

Unlike both the religious right and the atheist right, McLaren identifies capitalism and imperialism as the problem. Systems, not beliefs. What Christian thought offers McLaren is a way of basing a socialist project on immanence and the Messianic opening: the *injunction that the rupture with the present must and will happen*. This allows McLaren to transform the “what is possible” into the “what is necessary.”

One of the main contributions of this book is that it demonstrates how the building of what is necessary is already underway. The socialist project, after all, is taking place, right now, as we speak. Thus, one of the most important contributions that this book makes is by the introduction of the Cuban and Venezuelan revolutionary paradigms into critical educational praxis, which McLaren does in two chapters, “Comrade Fidel” and “Comrade Chávez.” McLaren draws out that both projects are, at heart, educational. “Venezuelan education,” he writes, “favored a multidisciplinary approach linking practice and theory, curriculum and pedagogy, with the purpose of creating social, economic, and political inclusion within a broader vision of endogenous and sustainable development” (169). In Cuba, the literacy campaigns early on wiped out illiteracy and empowered the Island’s people, allowing for the formation of a mass communist party that continues to direct the country’s affairs today. This campaign “was able to develop appropriate strategies and tactics that were part of both methodological and doctrinal fronts... Not only did the Campaign have a strategy—building socialism—it also created pedagogical tactics that were consistent with that strategy” (196). Thus, in introducing the figures of Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez, and the revolutionary projects that they led, McLaren does what so many critics of neoliberal education fail to do: point to concrete revolutionary alternatives.

I read *Pedagogy of Insurrection* shortly before returning to McLaren’s foundational ethnographic work, *Schooling as a Ritual Performance*, first published in 1986, for one of my own projects. I was surprised to see how much and how little has changed. McLaren’s praxis has sharpened, his militancy has intensified, and his commitment to socialism has deepened. Of course, McLaren has been publishing now for over 30 years, and so it’s not surprising that the theoretical tools with which he lives this praxis have changed. What has remained the same is his dialectical understanding of schooling as a site and process of reproduction and transformation, and his dedication to harnessing schooling and education to build an alternative world, a building that has to be predicated on the tearing down of the capitalist and imperialist order.

Derek R. Ford is a teacher and organizer currently living in Philadelphia. He received his PhD from Syracuse University in 2015. Recent work has appeared in *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, and *Policy Futures in Education*. He is author (with Curry Malott) of *Marx, Capital, and Education: Towards a Critical Pedagogy of Becoming* (Peter Lang, 2015). His next book, *Communist study: Education for the commons* (Lexington Books) will be published later this year. He is co-chair of the Education Department at The Hampton Institute and an organizer with the ANSWER Coalition. He can be reached at derekrford1@gmail.com.

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