

The Authoritarian Capitalist Market:

A Review of

Pedagogy and Praxis in the Age of Empire:

Towards a New Humanism

by Peter McLaren & Nathalia Jaramillo

Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers, 2009

Reviewed by Richard A. Brosio

Ball State University & University of Wisconsin Milwaukee

My interest in the book under review is due to the authors' engaging in Marxian thought and its possible relevance to the neoliberal form of capitalism, one that threatens every country and its people who refuse to succumb to the current authoritarian capitalist market. As I have read Marx, it appears that some of his most important insights are being played out much as he thought they would. I offer the fact of global proletarianization, which means that human beings have nothing to offer but their labor. If the bosses who own the means of production do not need or want you, there is little or nothing to fall back on in order to live. Marx saw capitalism as a globalizing and totalistic project. However, he believed that once ordinary people could see what this system wrought they would possibly organize against this brutal state-sponsored anti-democratic project. Naomi Klein has explained how this brutality operated in the last third of the twentieth century as well as presently.¹

McLaren and Jaramillo write:

We attempt to discuss critical pedagogy in the light of what we perceive to be the importance and efficacy of Marxist theory, particularly within the...humanist tendency. We have chosen to accomplish this as part of a larger discussion of Latina/o education in the United States. Our central point is that by grounding critical pedagogy in Marx's critique of political economy, educators are better able to challenge not only the exploitation of human labor that is endemic to capitalist society with its law of value, private property, and production for monetary return but also for the assault on civil rights and human dignity that can be traced

to the policy-making practices of the Anglosphere, not the least of which has been directed at Latina/o populations through institutionalized forms of White Supremacy and capitalist patriarchy. (pp.93-4)

The authors make clear that although “ancillary contradictions of capitalism” result in the antagonisms of “identity,” for example: racism, sexism, and homophobia; the system does not require these specific isms and phobias in order to maintain an unjust job stratification that punishes many more people than it rewards. I have tried to communicate this standpoint in the classroom and my writings as one of the most important thing to realize if we are going to achieve deep and authentic democracy in societies and schools. Walter Michaels (2008) adds to what has been stated above:

After half a century of anti-racism and feminism, the US today is a less equal society than was the racist, sexist society of Jim Crow. Furthermore, virtually all the growth of inequality has taken place since the Civil Rights Act of 1965—which means not only that the successes of the of the struggle against discrimination have failed to alleviate inequality, but that they have been compatible with a radical expansion of it. Indeed, they have helped to enable the increasing gulf between the rich and poor. Why? Because it is exploitation, not discrimination, that is the primary producer of inequality today. It is neoliberalism, not racism or sexism (or homophobia or ageism) that creates the inequalities that matter most in American society; racism and sexism are just sorting devices. (pp. 33-4)

He argues that the American ruling class is more comfortable with inequality no longer produced by discrimination.² Scott Adams’ syndicated cartoon, called *Dilbert*, helps us understand the selecting and sorting devices. Perhaps the bottom feeder “Elbonians” can rise a bit; however, “other” non-Elbonians will then fill the lowest depth as exploited workers.

The authors are correct to claim the Katrina disaster provides an important lesson for what educators face in neoliberal and imperial America.

Whether the rebuilding of New Orleans will follow the classic capitalist pattern of increased wealth for the few and misery for the majority is still to be determined. One of the challenges for critical educators is to make the interconnectedness among capitalism, ecosystem destruction and the racialization of the exploitation of human labor more transparent ... and to find ways of bringing about a socialist alternative. (p. 18)

The financial and overall economic crisis that has become dramatically evident since late September 2008 supports the authors’ analyses in their book. Those who are mainly responsible for this crisis may well turn it

to their political advantage just as they have about the wars against “terrorism”. Candidate McCain stated in a debate with Obama in the autumn of 2008 that the federal government must now spend money only on the armed forces, the veterans, and some other thing that do not address the reasons for, and the consequences of, the havoc deregulators have caused. The deregulators, championed by Milton Friedman, Reagan and their disciples, have claimed that “personal responsibility” must be stressed and enforced; therefore, making an “ownership” society possible. Columnist, Ellen Goodman, has it close to right: what we have got instead is an everyone on his or her own society! My small difference with her is that all too many still have protection that ordinary Americans lack.

Pedagogy and Praxis in the Age of Empire offers rich references and notes. Many of the specific arguments and facts are effectively articulated on larger canvases. Some readers may disapprove of the accusatory mode of writing: however it is aimed at the power elites in government, the economy, mainstream media, and the imperial armed forces. C. Wright Mills would enjoy this book. Specific word choices may cause some readers to accuse the authors of using overblown, foreign, and even neologistic words. Bring your best dictionaries, you will be fine, and may even learn how to enrich your own expressions. Furthermore, complaints of being pedantic and ostentatious are both in the eye of the beholder.³ Finally, the reader should be aware that parts of this book were published earlier and elsewhere, although some changes were made for this book.

I agree with the authors that critical theory, pedagogy, and action must be radically revolutionary in actual “material” ways. This is not a widespread notion among classroom teachers and teacher education professors. The authors and I think that most liberal critics do not hold to the ideas that one, and coalitions, must get beyond the parameters of the institutional market system—whose proponents call market democracy. This may set the stage for the need to discuss organizing and its possibilities. Our authors offer a section called “The Politics of Organization,” insisting that the theories and resulting actions must be dangerous to the powers that be in order to make real differences. Obama’s presidency and the Democrats’ majorities in Congress may provide some fertile soil for what McLaren and Jaramillo hope to achieve; however, the current political classes may not be equipped to even understand what our authors are saying, let alone striving to enact theories and suggestions they provide. Or, perhaps some of our political and economic leaders may understand, but view the book under review as something to be combated. Obama’s early 2009 choices for who will

run the economic part of his administration do not sound promising—to say the least. Political organizations must strive to become part of an international entity that provides the same kind of “solidarity” as most of the capitalist-imperialist ones have enjoyed. These radical organizations must be developed from “below.”⁴

I think the authors would agree with me on who and what some of the enemies of real democracy are—perhaps not in this order. It begins with today’s neo-liberal capitalism and its connections with contemporary colonialism. These constructs are connected by the use of race, gender, ethnicity, and other “identities” to choose who fits where in the global system. Obviously the dangers that capitalism poses to our health and to the overall condition of mother earth are of great importance. This includes the many wars that capitalist “democracies” wage—ones that kill and wound so many people and damages their ecosystems. Finally, the unending production of things that may not be in the best interests of people who have succumbed to the 24/7 blitz of advertising is an example of what Marx explained as the dangers of producing “things” that are not democratically decided upon. Are there more than a few liberals and progressives who agree with these assertions?

Much of the above is well known to the readers of this journal. I suggest that we must become more radical in the sense of getting at the roots/causes of what ails all too many people’s lives. This is not to say that one must be a Marxist: however, the failure of liberalism to provide liberty, equality, and “fraternity” for more than a few countries must alert us to go beyond what the former liberals and progressives offered—and still do.⁵ The consequences of the eight-year Bush II administrations should alert us that it is later than many people thought, later in the sense that things must be profoundly and systemically changed, starting right now.

In conclusion, the authors’ interest in Latina/o education in the United States also includes Latin America. They have visited various countries, among them Venezuela; moreover, not just as tourists. Their internationalism is based on the need to convince us that the world’s people are facing certain problems and possibilities that require a new “internationale.” Marxist humanism and cultural studies are compatible. This is because we must understand both structures and what is up close and personal—namely we the people—who live in the official political and economic order. In keeping with the “liberation theology” movement, McLaren and Jaramillo believe that the global youth must be focused on if a world liberation movement can be successful. Their book makes it clear that they know a great deal about kids and schools. The authors are not just “armchair” theorists; they also understand the

authoritarian capitalist market, and supporting system(s)—theoretically and from within the quotidian complexities on the ground. Perhaps some of you will also read the book; it would be my pleasure to enter into dialogue with you!

Notes

¹In her book, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), she contends that Milton Friedman championed the kinds of interventions that allowed Pinochet to overthrow the legal president of Chile in 1973. The shock and awe visited upon the Chilean people provided the space and conditions to bring in U.S.-sponsored neo-liberal economics under the heel of the fascist Pinochet government. “Disaster Capitalism” in Chile, Iraq, and other places—including the way the Bush II administration handled the Katrina tragedy—supports Klein’s, and my argument, that the neo-liberal phase of capitalism did not get voted in by majorities. This claim is a myth that is based on obvious lies. McLaren and Jaramillo use the Katrina effect on New Orleans as emblematic of neo-liberal capitalism and racist neo-imperialism. The plight faced by the city’s public schools is explained as the goal of many levels of governments to privatize everything and as much as possible. This is an example of the totalism inherent in the capitalist system.

²Editors Leo Panitch and Colin Leys write in the preface of the *Socialist Register: Fighting Identities 2003* (London, UK: Merlin Press, 2002) about how race and other identities are not epiphenomenal. During the West’s global domination—what historians call the “modern” age—various “other” identities have been bound up in the evolution of capitalism. Given this fact, we must recognize and understand their inside struggles against the system. “The need today is ... to take political identities seriously: not seeing them as ‘natural’, but also not consigning their significance to mere ‘difference’, disconnected from any historical and material analysis” (p. viii).

³Critical theorists—in the Marxist sense—have been criticized by others for many reasons. Philosophy and theory in general are held suspect by practical, hands-on, in the classroom, and on the job-site persons because they claim that theories are all too often obscure and not connected to reality. The disconnect between theory and practice has been a problem in the “West,” as far back as the ancient Greeks. This problem is not only a “Western” one. Although it is difficult to construct useful theories, and perhaps harder to “translate” theory into practice, it is not impossible. However, with regard to this dichotomy in school and education contexts it seems as though the many “how to” practioners are so involved in the everyday struggles to have the students learn the curriculum, that they fall into the trap of simplistic “lesson plan-ism.” Their teacher “training” provides little or no study of: theory, big pictures, history, sociology, philosophy, history, economics, politics, and other tools of discipline inquiries. In the U. S. the schools have been dominated by the capitalist imperative, in other words, preparing students for jobs along a class-based/driven verticality. The democratic imperative is much weaker and is incompatible with the former

imperative. I conclude this paragraph with an argument that in the last thirty years there has been a wealth of written material available to teachers and laypersons that helps to bridge the gap between good progressive theories and practices. Schools of education faculties must get back, at least, to John Dewey's attempt to reconcile theory and practice, if not yet willing to look further left into more radical (i.e., to the roots) theories and practices.

⁴ The historical meaning of from "below" is made clear in a classic article written by John Bellamy Foster and Robert W. McChesney, "A New Deal Under Obama," *Monthly Review* (February, 2009): 1-11.

⁵ Immanuel Wallerstein's *After Liberalism* (New York: The New Press, 1995) is of great value for those who want to learn more about what liberalism is, has been, and why it must be overcome. This does not mean "liberal" in the sense of open-minded, tolerant, and not bound by traditional/conventional ideas. My analysis, in the following, may also be of interest: "Marxist Thought: Still Primus Inter Pares for Understanding and Opposing the Capitalist System," *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (May, 2008), <http://www.jceps.com/?pageID=article&articleID=113>

Reference

Michaels, W. B. (2008). Against diversity. *New Left Review*, 52, 3.