

Teaching Against Global Capitalism and the New Imperialism: A Critical Pedagogy

By Peter McLaren and Ramin Farahmandpur

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Capitalism can generally be understood as necessarily expansive. As it produces more and more capital it also accumulates a surplus, which increases the urgency to find new ways of investing the excess capital. It is this mania of needing to spread to new hosts and proliferate that has led many to locate the fatal crux of capitalism in its need to *spread*. It does so knowingly, even at the detrimental cost of impoverishing millions upon millions and thereby creating a global army of potential adversaries. Yet by also laying waste to natural resources it further creates its own limits to growth. But it is the frenzy, especially over the last twenty years or so, to eliminate all trade barriers and preventions against investment that has quite benignly come to be known today as *globalization*. By trampling over measures set up to protect smaller or less developed countries, globalization has been a modern *all-access pass* for powerful corporations and the ruling elite. It has allowed them to extend their grasp into unexploited natural resources (mostly in the developing world) and uncover a vast array of inexpensive, exploitable labor (also, mostly in the developing world).

As many have stated, globalization, the expansion of new markets, is not new in world history. However, the current manifestation is unique as we near world-wide crises of the depletion and even exhaustion of natural resources. This contradiction was recognized by Marx. If the “spirit of capitalist production”, as he wrote, was the immediate gain of profits, than nature or agriculture, was completely antithetical to this drive. Rather than immediate rewards its purpose was the long term production of material needs capable of sustaining generations of human beings. Globalization, today, can perhaps then be seen as a more reactionary state of late capitalism because the horizon of its expansion is now near. In *Teaching Against Global Capitalism and the New Imperialism*, globalization is all of this yet also unable to hide its imperialist mark.

So it is both within this frantic state of globalization and amongst the “contented” defenders of late capitalist reality that we encounter the educators Peter McLaren and Ramin Farahmandpur. More specifically we locate them in the current morass of U.S. military and economic power. In *Teaching Against Global Capitalism and the New Imperialism*, McLaren

and Farahmandpur offer a comprehensive argument for combining a contemporary Marxist theory *with* critical pedagogy as a means to interrogate current forms of higher education. Such an endeavor offers, according to the authors, the last viable defense against the pervasive spread of capitalist logic within education.

A critical revolutionary pedagogy combines the unrelenting Marxist critique of capitalism with the Freirian refusal to detach the educational from the social/political. McLaren and Farahmandpur's argument for a pedagogy wholly invested in social, political and economic determinants is straightforward. Education creates future workers and what is most crucial is the "kind" of worker that is emerging from this educational system. McLaren and Farahmandpur explain that, "Education is involved in the direct production of the one commodity that generates the entire social universe of capitalism in all its dynamic and multiform existence: labor power" (207).

What is apparent today, given the increasing inaccessibility of higher education and the inundating of campuses with corporate influences, is that the worker that education is producing is one literally "manufactured" to be an uncritical, apathetic and obedient consumer. This education is one the authors identify as "capitalist schooling". They write, "capitalist schooling participates in the production, distribution and circulation of knowledge and social skills necessary for reproducing the social division of labor and hence capitalist relations of exploitation" (51). Not only is the classroom as contested space at stake but the very students who populate them; the would-be consumers or a potentially active political citizenry. As Henry Giroux has noted, the possibilities for public spaces that encourage critical thinking, awareness and debate are fast becoming difficult to find in this country. The loss of the classroom to capitalist logic therefore threatens the very future of democracy in the United States. These effects can and have led us into the debacle of our present administration.

The authors, however, are frank in admitting the difficulties of using Marx in light of current academic trends away from politics, meta-narratives and other *totalities* in what they describe as "Post-Marxist Times". Throughout the text one reads and feels the undercurrent of post modernism as the recurring antagonist to Marxist theory within academics. Yet the authors ask us to truly contemplate how far we have really come under such "theories". Fredric Jameson ironically enough once implied in *A Singular Modernity* that capitalism *was* modernity and though elements of the "post-modern" may exist we have by no means overcome capitalism or become post-capitalist. However one chooses to define post modernism it has clearly been influential and in many respects still permeates the halls of academia, frowning upon anyone who dares resuscitate the words "Socialism" or "Marx".

It should be said, however, that the authors devote a fair amount of time in engaging post modernism. They display a fair, albeit critical, position towards post modernism that is not wholly dismissive. Whether or not too much is attributed to post modernist "theory" and practioners, I think, is also a fair question to ask. But the authors nevertheless explain their grievances with post modernism. They write, "Post modernism theory's stress on

micropolitics transforms what are essentially social struggles into discursive struggles that over value economies of desire at the expense of political economy and a philosophy of praxis” (23). Because of post modernism’s obsession with highly aesthetic and individualistic expressions of identity and particular experiences, it allows many to drift away from trying to collectively affect policy or demand economic justice and merely settle for such discursive forms of “resistance”. In other words, compared to the allure of post modernism or any *fad* for that matter, Marxist concerns over economics, politics and class oppression seem completely unglamorous and outdated.

It is also interesting to note that the fragmenting of various identity based social movements is not addressed by post modernism but rather embraced and celebrated as part of having accepted capitalism’s alienating “reality”. The authors posit a more class orientated and optimistic role for people of color. They write, “The cruelest forms of violence and exploitation have been reserved for people of color. Surely, it is among the people of color where the leadership will arise to lead the assault against capitalism and its racist formations and practices” (213). Marxism can then be seen not as a subordination of various racial, ethnic, sexual or gender issues but rather as the means in which to reconnect all these issues and their groups to the economic and political structures that enable various forms of oppression.

The task for educators and students on the left is to refocus our methodology. But it also remains a task that before *re-introducing* Marx we may have to wash ourselves of the post modernist legacy. McLaren and Farahmandpur, as I mentioned before, are much more open than I am to the possibilities that may be inherent with certain *strands* of post modernism. Yet they too feel, for the most part, that post modernism on the whole is insufficient in providing a viable political platform. They assert that, “the educational left in the United States can nevertheless begin to revitalize educational reform efforts by assessing the limitations of prevailing leftist paradigms built around post modernist forms of cultural critique” (92).

What one takes away from this book is the constant relevancy of Marx today. It is not however a Marxism employed to critique capitalism and then leave it standing as it was. The Marxist analysis and critique employed by McLaren and Farahmandpur is not meant to rival other more *sophisticated* literary theories. Its honest (but now supposedly cliché) goal is still adamantly to change the world and therefore *replace* capitalism. The fall out from post 9-11 and the second term of George W. Bush are signs that imperialism, or globalization, are all symptomatic of exploitative capitalism. Contrary to what some may say about “the end of history”, as long as capitalism has not disappeared then surely Marxism will remain as its only real threat.

Teaching Against Global Capitalism and the New Imperialism combines crucial Marxist analysis along with a decent blend of humor making it anything but a dry Marxist text. Its applicability can not be overstressed and therefore provides perfect reading material for courses in pedagogy, cultural studies and composition writing. But it is also a text that provides critical examples, explanations and pedagogical models for teachers and students

trying to resist what can feel like an overpowering corporate and right wing influence on education today. Its authors, in trying to present and explain capitalism through vivid contemporary references and by using delirious post modernist metaphors, seek to reveal the grotesque reality of human experience under capitalism. This distorted, carnivalesque reality of late capitalist global imperialism remains the dual sibling of the *normalized* concepts of profits, competition and free markets.

In the various chapters, McLaren and Farahmandpur encapsulate globalization, education, U.S. imperialism, neo-liberalism and the post modern debates as understood and articulated by a Marxist analysis in dialogue with current formations of class, gender and race. In calling for forms of resistance both through educational practices and community activism, McLaren and Farahmandpur are also thinking beyond the United States. Understanding lessons from Latin America as well as other global locations still fighting corruption, oppression and Neo-Colonialism the authors posit a welcomed and realistic commitment to the battles to come not just with words but force. The struggles to come both here and abroad should be understood as necessarily struggles of class positions. The authors recognize this and align themselves with the fight to come “both in the classroom and in the streets”. For those of us here, not yet fully inebriated by U.S. nationalism, it remains our task to use education to unmask the monsters behind current euphemisms.