



Review of Marc Pruyn, Curry Malott, and Luis Huerta-Charles (Eds.). (2020). *Tracks to Infinity, the Long Road to Justice: The Peter McLaren Reader, Volume II*

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What Is This Book About?

With a subtitle like *The Peter McLaren Reader, Volume II*, one might think *Tracks to Infinity, The Long Road to Justice* is going to be excerpted old material, previously available in other formats. Nope, much of this is, if I remember correctly, new stuff, fresh, and clarifying [though I do recall reading the ‘Critical Rage Pedagogy’ (McLaren 2020a) article in a previous work, *Pedagogy of Insurrection* (McLaren 2015), and the chapter co-authored with Petar Jandrić, which forms the basis of a separate volume, McLaren and Jandrić’s *Postdigital Dialogues on Critical Pedagogy, Liberation Theology and Information Technology* (2020)]. So, what kind of prose is one likely to encounter in the book?

This is, as the preface has it, a collection of ‘raw materials for re-imaginings’ (Ford and Alexander 2020: xv). Of course, if the world has to be imagined for the society within it to function, then it must be reimagined if society is to behave differently. And the society of the future will behave differently, just as the society of the present is behaving differently with Covid-19 and with the ravages of climate-change-inflamed disasters. The specific different behavior, at the time of this writing, will likely be one of various responses to the desolation spreading around us, with our mass death increasingly imminent if we are members of the differentially unprivileged working class. McLaren’s goal is of course different. Since *Tracks to Infinity* is focused upon a ‘utopic struggle for an otherwise to oppression and exploitation’, as Ford and Alexander put it in the preface (2020: xvi), creating new re-imaginings in McLaren’s vein acquires an urgency against this background.

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So, we must re-imagine the world. Where to start? Of course, a fair amount of this book is in the admission of how bad it's gotten—our utopic struggle will succeed if we live in an age of utopian dreaming, and the previous age of utopian dreaming reached its twilight stage 40 years ago. So, it's bad. McLaren, for his part, is a much-celebrated and much-experienced professor of education at Chapman University in Orange, California—though his attitude toward education is unorthodox. For example, in a great essay titled 'The Beat Goes On', McLaren (with Pablo Cortez-Gonzalez) argues:

As I have said many times, I am not interested in making education more effective, or efficient, or smooth-running, or successful. It is already too successful. But what is it successful at doing? That is the question that haunts this generation and all preceding generations. In its present form, education is successful at creating the conditions of possibility for capitalism to reproduce itself. My job as a critical educator is to disturb the process and re-direct the process of education to rebuilding a democratic socialist alternative to capitalism. (McLaren and Cortez-Gonzalez 2020: 187)

Thus, it's bad. One is reminded of a John Lennon (1971) lyric, from the song 'How' on the *Imagine* album: 'How can I go forward if I don't know which way I'm facing?' This is the question which the patrons of America's public school systems need to ask themselves. But this book is not really about just public school—more than anything else, it's an engagement with the ideological cores of American life [the chapter 'Theorizing the American Dream' (McLaren and Sardoč 2020) fleshes this engagement out in a targeted way].

How to Read This Book

Here, a brief generalization of McLaren's style, as well as the style of the collaborators in the project of *Tracks to Infinity*, is apposite: leaping from insight to insight, so that adept readers might fill in the spots with experiences of their own. This is the tactic adopted in the preface and the introduction: Cole (2020) writes about 'Peter's Return to Marx' and about ecosocialism. Curry Malott, Marc Pruyn, and Luis Huerta-Charles write, among other things, about Jacques Rancière. Thus, in writing a substantive book review of a McLaren book, one might, starting from the above quote from the 'The Beat Goes On' essay, consider McLaren with the task in mind of moving forward toward an illustrative goal. What else is there to do? The following is a reading conducted in that fashion.

Indeed, it is true, following McLaren's critique of institutional schooling, that teachers today appear as technocrats of subordination who themselves must make a living. Within today's educational systems, teaching as such leaves students with no integrated student identity, because the schools themselves are so fixed in routine that the students can 'blow it off' as a necessary chore like doing the dishes. In working-class K-12 schools, students are just *there*, molded for brief and repeating clock-times by quotidian and totalitarian logic toward no end of any importance outside of brief encounters with cognitive complexity intimately associated with libraries or field trips.

They are millennials without a cause. Mandatory online instruction due to Covid-19 will destroy this structure, leaving the students still without a cause. What counts as real learning in such contexts? People learn all the time; but mostly what they learn is immediate participation in a ritual continuum, as depicted in McLaren's much earlier work, *Schooling as a Ritual Performance* (1986). Ultimately, we might say that institutional learning under capitalism is generally about being what Jason W. Moore calls 'cheap nature' (for instance Moore 2014), a mass of someones become a 'human resource', exploitable and disposable. (The common concept of a 'Department of Human Resources' explains how labor in general, and academic labor in particular, is regarded.) Administrators and owners buy educator labor power low, sell student diplomas high, and pocket the difference. The across-the-board capitalist organization of education, then, is why the standard motive behind systemic education matters so little to McLaren.

And what is the result of such educational organization? Learning as merely the performance of scheduled chores in order to fit in with capitalism becomes adaptation to the reality of life under obligatory corporate rip-offs and exploitative work practices, all headed toward what adepts of economic life call 'crisis'. McLaren and Cortez-Gonzalez (2020: 189) argue that for-profit colleges, the most honest participants in the learning market are 'legitimate educational institutions in name only. In reality they are only dream factories intended to make their investors and managers wealthy.' Of course, it does not stop there. Present-day 'liberal arts' education as a whole persists primarily on the basis of promises of higher earning potential for its graduates, while the majority of its college professors are described in grim detail in books such as Herb Childress' *The Adjunct Underclass* (2019). Thus, McLaren and Cortez-Gonzalez (2020) cite the most obvious examples of school systems warped by capitalism. It is, following the style suggestion above, up to the adept reader to fill in capitalism as it pertains to the rest of schooling.

The Macrostructural Unconscious as a Unifying Thread

The various and sundry essays of *Tracks to Infinity* deal with a number of topics of intimate importance to the historical formation of consciousness-as-it-stands. There is a chapter about Trump, a dialogue with Derek Ford about Marxism, a piece titled 'Critical Rage Pedagogy', an essay on public education (in Spanish) with Luis Huerta-Charles, a poem, a review of the work of Carlos Bulosan, discussions of postmodern 'difference' and of liberation theology, discussions of the 'American Dream' and of 'what unites us', and an afterword. What thread unifies them? The place to answer this question is McLaren's first chapter, 'Revolutionary Critical Pedagogy: Staking a Claim Against the Macrostructural Unconscious' (2020b). This chapter begins with a discussion of critical pedagogy and its marginal status within a world described in grim terms by William I. Robinson as 'sadistic capitalism' (Robinson 2016 in McLaren 2020b: 4). McLaren concludes with a reflection of when he became a nonconformist, of his 'Junior Fellow' days at Massey College in Toronto. The observations make sense, as always, when they participate in confrontations with life experience. Here, McLaren presents the experience first—the unifying concept is to come.

The next section of the McLaren essay is about what he is calling the 'macrostructural unconscious'. It seems that McLaren chose that term, and not 'social imaginary',

because he wanted to insert a discussion of the unconsciousness and, tangentially, of Lacan into the mix—because the macrostructural unconscious is the social imaginary. Indeed, the social imaginary, as one might read of it in the works of Cornelius Castoriadis, Charles Taylor, and many other authors, shares this unconscious attribute because is not really imagined so much as it is pre-imagined. The macrostructural unconscious or social imaginary, like Habermas’s version of the *Lebenswelt* (Habermas 1987: 119–152), is the taken-for-granted aspect of the world. What McLaren has in mind as regards the macrostructural unconscious is this: ‘My argument is that we need to address both the subliminal (superconscious) and supraliminal dimensions of the Self in transforming our own consciousness in order to create the kind of protagonistic agency that can transform capitalist macrostructures of oppression.’ (McLaren 2020b: 13) McLaren inserts into this discussion an intriguing anecdote of a visit to Colombia he undertook, in which a group of Colombians appropriated his work without the subtext of ‘Marxist rhetoric’ (14). It’s fascinating.

Later in McLaren’s chapter, it is observed that capitalism dresses itself up in corset-like vocabularies of common sense. It can adapt to and absorb any language—even the language of the left. It works in discourse in the service of its self-expansion, having no master to serve but itself. Its favorite language is the language of mystification, of progress, of democracy. By fashioning itself out of the contradictory logic of progressivism and traditionalism, it can confuse and obfuscate unobstructed. (McLaren 2020b: 22)

We can see how this works by pondering how value operates as an autonomous process, directing people’s lives between childhood and death. This critique of value is at the core of Marx’s critique of political economy and thus also of McLaren’s extended narrative. The key literary document for capitalism, illustrating the domination of value over everyone, is the curriculum vitae—the ‘course of one’s life’ in Latin. One’s curriculum vitae can be as postmodern as you please, using any rhetoric one likes, but its assembly of life artifacts is meant to show that the individual composer has spent her or his life pandering after value, so as to extract an extra something of value (money, a wage, a recommendation, a sponsorship) out of the reader. Thus, in the form in which it is most important in capitalist culture, writing takes the form of the CV.

The CV is the paradigmatic literary genre of capitalism, of which the bestseller, the coffee-table book, and the academic monograph are merely derivative forms: writing to fetch money. Perhaps, the simplest form of such rhetoric is the GoFundMe appeal, the primary rhetoric used in the USA today to pay for unpayable medical expenses. At any rate, this is how speaking and writing incorporate themselves into the dominance of value over people. The game of value extraction, of course, achieves its *reductio ad absurdum* in the domination of capital, which is value meant to fetch more value in what Karl Marx called ‘capital accumulation’. Capital has far more power than any form of writing. As regards specific forms of capital accumulation, moreover, today the domination of capital employs what David Harvey calls ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (McLaren and Sardoč 2020: 242). With accumulation by dispossession, one recalls the old saying ‘a rising tide lifts all boats’, sometimes attributed to John F. Kennedy. Well, today, the rising tide does not lift enough boats to make the owners of capital happy, so capital must dispossess people.

McLaren asks at the end of the section: ‘Is it too late to re-enchant the world?’ (23) and in the following portion of the essay, dealing with critical pedagogy: ‘can we organize our social, cultural, and economic life differently so that we can transcend the exploitation that capital affords us?’ (37) The interview with Derek R. Ford goes into detail about what McLaren has himself been doing, the networks he has created, and the places he has visited, in order to answer those questions.

What Can Be Done?

The essay titled ‘Critical Rage Pedagogy’ (McLaren 2020b) is, I gather, an extended meditation upon the idea of reactive prose, prose that makes something good out of reaction.

Please don’t let me be misunderstood. I’m not interested in blaming the wealthy. Everyone knows some wealthy philanthropist who donates socks and golf clubs to the local town assistance league. I’m interested in uncovering the process that enables people to become wealthy through the exploitation of the labor power of others. (McLaren 2020b:128)

In this sort of writing, McLaren can make into revolutionary critical pedagogy observations on a wide variety of topics, from Obama to high-stakes testing to Zapatismo to Venezuela and more.

There is not much in this book on ecosocialism or ecopedagogy. If critical pedagogy is to cast its boats into the great sea of neoliberal capitalism, there must be some sort of ecosystem at the other shore, to make the adventure worthwhile. In this book, there are occasional recognitions of an ecological crisis, but McLaren’s focus is upon the critique of capitalism within a ‘Marx revival’ vein. In this regard, perhaps future McLaren volumes could focus upon the Cartesian dualism of ‘society’ and ‘nature’, derivative of the ‘mind-body split’ of the *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Descartes 1639) and the substantive concern of the history of capitalism in the works of Jason W. Moore. It is because we live within a Cartesian architecture of the world defining us, it is an aggregate of ‘natural resources’ that our picture of what lies beyond capitalism remains clouded. Environmental crisis cannot be viewed as a side issue which will go away by itself once the post-capitalist utopia is established; there must be an improvement upon the concept of ‘ecological reparations’ as discussed in Patel and Moore’s *History of the World in Seven Cheap Things* (2017: 202–212). Arguably, an ecosocialism develops out of all this reasoning, in which production is ‘ecological production’, directed as conscious intervention into ecosystems. McLaren has read Kovel’s *The Enemy of Nature* (2007) and much of Moore; an academic intervention awaits.

An ecopedagogy is an education pursued as if ‘the environment’ mattered. Since we live in the environment all of the time, education that is not ecopedagogy is revealed as ‘the emperor’s new clothes’, a verbal façade meant to pretend that the emperor is not naked. Non-ecopedagogy is not about our collective future in the environment, but rather about the transmission of skills in an ideological context. Offering the students a better ideological context than the capitalist one, say a critical ideological context in

which student entrapment in capitalism is made manifest, would not sufficiently change the systemic heedlessness toward the future which afflicts all participants in education today. Ecopedagogy must therefore be basic to McLaren's project, awaiting a more serious treatment in his work. One ecopedagogy approach, from a North American context, would be threefold, past-present-future, as laid out in the 'Greening Education' essay in the collection *Greening the Academy* (Fassbinder, Nocella, and Kahn 2012). The past can be represented by traditional ecological knowledge, as gifted by indigenous peoples. The present can be represented by agroecology, the art and science of sustainable agriculture. The future can be represented in ecologically conscious science fiction, to the extent to which it dramatizes present-day dilemmas in hypothetical futures. Such an approach would make manifest the goal McLaren suggests in the interview with Derek R. Ford:

I believe we should struggle for cognitive justice, and that we should be engaging in decolonizing pedagogies, and learning from epistemologies that have been developed over the centuries by indigenous groups, including those from America Latina. I am a big proponent of the concepts of 'buen vivir' and 'communalidad' (you can find these terms written into the constitutions of Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador) and recently spent time in Chiapas in communities supporting the Zapatistas. (McLaren and Ford 2020: 108)

The last chapter of *Tracks to Infinity* is an amusing dialogue between McLaren and a libertarian professor at Chapman University, and the afterword, by John Baldacchiano, confronts McLaren's question of whether or not the world can be re-enchanted. What we have, then, with *Tracks to Infinity, the Long Road to Justice: The Peter McLaren Reader, Volume II* (Pruyn, Malott, and Huerta-Charles 2020) is an excellent confrontation with today's capitalism which, with background reading and work, can provide a wide variety of readers with a way of moving the conversation forward. Otherwise, it's what we have, which is economics for permanent debtors and politics for lesser-evil candidates.

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