

## The Abode of Educational Production: An Interview with Peter McLaren

Jordy Cummings

**Jordy Cummings<sup>1</sup> (JC):** You're from Toronto, and politicized in the era of the New Left, after attending grad school at Massey College and even taking a course with Foucault...Is there anything particular to Toronto's culture that has inspired you, as an educator, an activist and a socialist?

**Peter McLaren<sup>2</sup> (PM):** I left Toronto kicking and screaming since I couldn't find a tenure-track university position in Canada, but the renowned American educator Henry Giroux (what irony, he is now a Canadian citizen!) had helped me find a position in Miami University of Ohio, and who could resist that offer? Working with Henry was an education on its own that could never be purchased. Henry has a generosity of spirit that still staggers me. Toronto, ah yes. Well, as far as my perceptions of schooling and society goes, there was *This Magazine is About Schools* that I read in the late sixties and into the seventies, edited by George Martell and Satu Repo. It was housed, as I recall, in Rochdale College, where I frequently hung out with friends. It became *This Magazine* sometime in the seventies, I think. I learned a lot from reading that magazine but I was never a subscriber, but rather an intermittent reader. Which probably accounts for why I didn't have much of a coherent theoretical trajectory when I started to write professionally in 1979. I was never recruited by left organizations, nor did I really attempt to join political groups, even school activists.

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<sup>1</sup> Jordy Cummings is Interventions Editor of *Alternate Routes*, and a PhD candidate at York University.

<sup>2</sup> Peter McLaren is Distinguished Professor in Critical Studies, College of Educational Studies, Chapman University, where he is Co-Director of the Paulo Freire Democratic Project. He is the author and editor of over forty-five books and hundreds of scholarly articles and chapters. His writings have been translated into over 20 languages.

When I published *Cries from the Corridor*, my diary chronicling my experience as an elementary school teacher in the Jane-Finch Corridor, I was basically your missionary liberal educator with a rucksack stuffed with some radical ideas, and the Canadian left as I recall was pretty snobbish, maybe that residue of British colonialism, and I was told that my professors at OISE (where I did my doctorate) resented all the publicity I received from that book. I think, too, that when I left for the US, there was this feeling that I was abandoning Canada. And while I am a dual-citizen and might not be as thoroughly Canadian as Pierre Berton, I consider myself died-in-the wool Canadian. I was always hoping to receive offers to return and teach in Canada but they never came. I would have returned in a heartbeat.

Maybe the biggest political lesson I learned was walking down Yonge Street in Willowdale in 1968 on whatever the hallucinogen of the day was, and flipping off a Metro cop. I was thrown into a black and white and taken to jail, where I was systematically beaten with a flashlight during the night. I still have a raised section of my skull that you can feel – my wife Wang Yan calls it my “dragon forehead.” My subsequent trip to California that year was fraught with similar incidents, and I won’t list those now. But, thanks to the bohemian culture of downtown Yorkville, where I spent years in the coffee houses and hippie lofts, and romantic moments with pre-Raphaelite looking lovers in velvet gowns in the shadows of Philosopher’s Walk on the University of Toronto campus, you could confidently say that prior to leaving Canada, I felt I had imbibed the spirit of the Beat Poets, and consumed as much of underground culture that I could hold in one brainpan without flipping out – poetry, philosophy, Eastern religion, psychedelic drugs, all kinds of new ideas – gestalt theory, rational emotive therapy, Irving Layton, Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell, Buffy Saint-Marie, Gregory Bateson, R.D. Laing, general semantics, psychoanalysis, anarchism, acid rock, John C. Lilly, the occult, pyramid energy, theosophy, Darwin, Zen Buddhism, the Bloomsbury group, the Inklings, Dadaism, McLuhan, Gordon Lightfoot, Luke and the Apostles (my guitar teacher was Toronto’s own David Wilcox), Catholic saints, well where should I stop? Stompin’ Tom Connors?

Even throughout the torment and joy of those troubling and troubled years, I watched Hockey Night in Canada with my dad, and reminisced about how we would go curling together in matching sweaters during the four years my family spent in Winnipeg. I really miss those days. That eclecticism no doubt influenced my (thankfully short lived) attraction

to postmodernism in the mid-1980s. I think Toronto is one of the great cities of the world, and I have visited many of them. But perhaps my perceptions of the city are dipped in an all-too saccharine romanticism that from time-to-time plagues me and my thinking.

One thing that I learned from my countercultural days in Toronto was that you make your path by walking and before you can travel the path, you have to become the path. This is the essence of praxis. I had become the path away from Willowdale, away from my home in the Beaches, away from everything I knew in order to step into the void of the United States. But I had yet to find a path towards something, towards an understanding of capitalist society and what would constitute a socialist alternative. My first impression of the United States was of the vastness of the armies of the homeless, haunted by the slow death that stalked the dispossessed in the so-called most progressive democracy in the world, or so the US was described in those days. It would take me years to understand that when the spectre of progress twists his hourglass watch upside down to mark the death-rattle countdown of those millions who are dying on city streets of preventable diseases and who lay unattended in hospital beds crammed into the corridors of decaying urban medical centers, he is present around the world wherever the logic of capital prevails. The pitted and pock-marked lungs of his victims are now unfillable, their life force fading behind curtains of dust and dead memories. These casualties of 'progress' are not restricted to one country. And they are not necessarily living in the streets. They are in office buildings, schools, monasteries, sanctuaries, offices, and shopping malls. They are often our own children, our relatives, our friends, ourselves.

**JC:** The theme of this issue is "Capitalism in the Classroom". What does it mean, to you to be an anti-capitalist and a Marxist in a pedagogical setting, both in practical and theoretical terms? Relatedly, what kind of shifts have you been seeing, and how can Marxist theory account for these shifts? It seems to me, as an educator, that this is an uneven, dialectical process. On one hand, we see an increase in online courses and a casualization of the academic profession. On the other hand, the range of information available to scholars has increased. As a Marxist, what do you make of all of this, and how does it affect your praxis?

**PM:** Clearly from where I sit, a spontaneous wave of indignation has swept throughout the United States, an uprush of animosity against intolerable indignities suffered by the working-class, and people of color. The social character of our life-activity, forged by the hammer blows

of value-producing labor and stamped by the impact press of capitalist social relations, rests on the pervasive dependence and dehumanization of workers, the ever-increasing interdependence of capital and labor. The ontological conception of alienation was unpacked magnificently by Marx and that was what first drew me to his work. There is nothing more alienating than schools, which serve as conceptual, emotional, and epistemological prisons for too many students.

The miasmatic system of capitalism in which we are inextricably enmeshed is one whose flexibility, omnipresence and omnivalence of oppression has been as expansive as the air that we breathe. But our labor power is both key to our enslavement and our liberation. Everywhere people are clamoring for justice. We have been stricken to the quick by an outlawry and scoundrelism exercised with prideful efficiency by the ruling class but the problem is not with personal behavior of capitalists, as egregious as that might be, but with the structure of capitalism itself. Youth here in the United States are fed up with war, yet I teach classes where the entire population of students who enrolled in my courses have never not known a time where their country was at war. At this time of endless wars against terror, there are no wistful interludes between wars. Wars today are forever ongoing and we merely suffer between the exasperating diminuendos and crescendos of events.

Now, for instance, the latest crescendo is the push forward by the Islamic State. We are a society that fights symptoms and refuses to treat the root causes of our ongoing crises – of the environment, of terrorism, of resources, of personal security, of education and so on. One of the most entangling of these disconcerting relationships is how capitalism structures, organizes and mediates all of these antagonisms in contextually specific ways. In the current interregnum we are, for all intents and purposes, existing as human capital. We have sold our life-activity to other people and some sections of the population (such as the African American populations who are being replaced as cheap labor by the Latino/as), are relegated to surplus populations that are unable to sell their labor-power. To acknowledge that we live in a capitalist society is to tremble and shudder. Witness today the prodigious and virulent expansion of surveillance technology beyond the exigencies of any agreed-upon notion of decency, technologies that efface the divisions between the real, the hyperreal and the suprarenal and lock us into a scenario much worse than even Orwell envisioned, a scenario where we will become willing agents of capital.

We have sold our labor-power for a wage and we can only use those silver dollars squeezed out of the profit ledger of the capitalist to cover the eyes of our corpse and hope that the ferryman of Hades will convey our soul across the waters of the Styx or Acheron as quickly as possible. We are prone in this society to be critical of primary assumptions and of course to protect them from attack they are solemnly made sacerdotal, and hide behind religious prerogatives. As I have argued for decades, the capitalist marketplace is the new God. I live in Old Town, Orange, in California and the most convenient coffee shop for me is in a Wells Fargo bank. Truly, the building from the inside looks like a cathedral. My friend at UC Santa Barbara, Bill Robinson, notes that the negative of an anti-capitalist movement does not necessarily involve the positive (and here we can clearly see he is echoing Hegel's negation of the negation) of an alternative post-capitalist or socialist project. Which is precisely why, along with my Marxist humanist comrades, I have called long and hard for a philosophy of praxis grounded in absolute negativity. Here, I have been influenced greatly by the work of Hegel and Marx, and Dunayevskaya's theory of state capitalism. I've learned that you can't separate Hegel's dialectical method from this Absolute Idea (the transcendence of the opposition between theory and practice). Just as Hegel advised us to always, ceaselessly, call into question the grounding ideas from which a phenomenon is grasped, we need to break down external as well as internal barriers to liberation through a philosophy of praxis grounded in absolute negativity.

Regrettably, Marx's ideas have been ripped out of their revolutionary soil by decades of toxic bombardment by the corporate media and repotted in greenhouse megastores where, under hydrofarm compact fluorescent fixtures, they can be deracinated, debarked and made safe for university seminars and condominium living alike for highly committed twentysomethings who like to whistle to ballpark tunes in their faux-Victorian bathtubs. For me, Marx provides a dizzying macro-level montage of society filled with autonomous narratives that evoke ineluctable paradoxes that take on new meaning when put all together. In other words, what I find most useful in Marx is his dialectics of internal relations, how all of social life is internally related. To stick with a film metaphor, Marx gives you that tracking shot with voiceover spiked with the ambient noise of workers marching forward...a relentless tracking shot that won't let you escape...and you have to follow it. Once the setting of the drama has been established, you become the protagonist and you are obligated to play the drama out. As we struggle

for the supersession of property and labor determined by need and external utility, we look to Marx for direction in building a new society based on co-operation and production absent the pressures of external determination, where all manner of people interact and collaborate in freely associated, spontaneous and unpredictable ways.

As a teacher, I am interested in how global capitalism is dialectically interwoven with underdevelopment, and how this process is related to the production of knowledge, specifically in school systems and how such school systems teach us how to think, to research, and to develop our methodological skills that often leave us degage and docile. Prior to the ascendancy of neoliberal capitalism, the primary mission of mass schooling was to create the “deep character” of the nation state by legitimizing the superiority of elite culture, trans-coding the culture of the ruling class with the culture of the nation state so that both were essentially seen as ‘natural’ symmetrical reflections of each other. Schools were important mechanisms in the invention of the identity of the modern nation state in the era of industrialization and played an important role in developing the concept of the citizen (a concept always contested by many groups, including conservatives, liberals and radicals).

However, schools today (since the mid-1980s), are discernibly shifting their role from building the nation state and creating democracy-minded citizens to serving the transnational corporations in their endless quest for profits. The nation state, it appears, is losing its ability to control capital by means of controlling the transnational corporations. Corporations have become in many instances more powerful than nation states (although I am not diminishing the role of nation states here). Schools that were once an important political entity that had a public code-setting agenda in creating conventional rules and regulations to be followed by each citizen are fast becoming part of the private sector bent on creating consumers within the capitalist marketplace. As society abandons its outmoded historical garb and takes on new forms, the perpetuity of the existing social order is increasingly called into question. So-called non-political forces – those associated with financial and commodity markets – are now the dominant forces of indoctrination and code setting within our market society and this has greatly impacted education.

Our collaborative existence as consumers has produced a closure on meaning through the very activity of opening up our desire to consume market commodities by means of a default set of blinders created by a capitalist imaginary that provides the formula or criteria of choice. Industrial capitalist schooling was occupied with conventional problem

solving designed to provide students with the rules and conventions to solve particular problems via rule-based reasoning. Knowing the rules of the democratic state was the most important goal and this was often taught by means of a text book-assignment-recitation pattern. With the advent of consumer society and the replacement of Western high culture with transnational corporate culture (which relies on well-trained technical workers), the focus has moved away from conventional thinking to technical thinking. What this ultimately excludes, of course, is critical reflection, or producing knowledge from real-life problems or what Richard Quantz calls “meaningful action.”

Meaningful action does not always take place in situations where relevant knowledge is available or where people are aware what the right choices and actions might be. Meaningful knowledge does require some knowledge of technical reasoning but it requires as well the ability to interpret and critique – to make moral choices and to commit to some action even when relevant knowledge is not available. It requires larger patterns of understanding and reasoning – and it requires us to create and recreate its own foundations and goals as it goes along. Given the abandoning of political institutions such as schools by the state, the focus has been on technical problem solving as a means-ends reasoning that involves selecting from available rules those that will help individuals achieve a particular given end. In short, critical reflection is not a priority. It is in fact, the enemy of today’s education, even as schools tout the value of critical literacy and social justice agendas. Being a Marxist educator means that I see education as a path to socialism. Simply put, my struggle as a teacher is to create protagonist agency to fight three very powerful forces, what I call the ‘triplecides’—genocide, ecocide and epistemicide. I see capitalism as a form of genocide (see the work of Gary Leech) and a number of my students have been developing the field of ecopedagogy (turning traditional forms of environmental education on their heads) –addressing the issues of ecoside, sustainability, ecosocialism and alternative epistemologies found often in first nations cultures.

The moral imperative behind today’s neoliberalism reflects a distinct form of neo-mercantilism. The move in the US economy in the 1970s towards financialization and export production helped to concentrate wealth in the hands of CEOs and hedge-fund managers—and, as Chomsky and others have noted, this led to a concentration of political power, which in turn leads to state policies to increase economic concentration, fiscal policies, deregulation of the economic, and rules of corporate

governance. Neoliberalism as it factors the field of education reflects the logic of possessive individualism, urging all citizens or potential citizens to maximize their advantage on the labor market; and for those who are unable to accomplish this requirement – a requirement, by the way, that functions as a moral imperative – such as undocumented workers, they must as a non-market underclass live in a bottom-tiered netherworld of sweatshop labor that serves those of more fundamental worth to the social order – the more successful capitalist class.

All that is to have worth in neoliberal democracies must be directly linked to the functional needs of capitalism, so that capitalism and the capitalist class can reproduce itself along with capitalist society, and the capitalist worldview that legitimates the entire process. So here we can see neoliberalism linked to legal systems and mechanisms of legitimation that will help secure the market as the only authentically potent form of political and social organization. The state, in other words, becomes synonymous with the market. Certainly global financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank comprise the ramparts behind which neoliberal ideology is to be protected at all costs, and it is important to view these institutions as basically controlled by the wealthy western powers, the United States in particular. And it is in this sense that neo-liberal ideology is an imperialist ideology. Anything left outside market forces would be under suspicion of being subversive of civilization – after all, there is no alternative to neoliberal capitalism. We could even say that we are living in a neoliberal modernity, in which the capitalist class is gaining power by dispossessing the working-class and selling or renting to the public what was commonly owned.

Neoliberalism is a revolution from above on the part of the transnational capitalist class to give ever more structural advantage to the global capitalist production system. Between this global ruling-class and the working class still exists the shrinking middle class, a fragile buffer between the rich and the poor. According to sociologist Bill Robinson, we inhabit a loosely constituted historic bloc, a social base in which the transnational capitalist class produces the consent of those drawn into this bloc and exercises moral, political and economic leadership – hegemonic leadership in the classical Gramscian sense. My focus as a Marxist is on this emerging transnational hegemony – this new historic bloc based on the hegemony of transnational capital – where, of course, the US is definitely playing a leading role.

While national capital, global capital and regional capitals are still prevalent, the hegemonic fraction of capital on a world scale is now

transnational capital. The purpose of the transnational ruling class is the valorization and accumulation of capital and the defense and advance of the emergent hegemony of a global bourgeoisie and a new global capitalist-historical bloc. This historical bloc is composed of the transnational corporations and financial institutions, the elites that manage the supranational economic planning agencies, major forces in the dominant political parties, media conglomerates, and technocratic elites. Capitalism, which Marx portentously argued was written in letters of blood and fire, continues to be reproduced as robbery, as outlawry. As a Marxist educator, I raise these issues with my colleagues, with my students, but mostly I raise them in the context of arguing that critical pedagogy must not remain solely in the classroom but become part of a transnational social movement.

**JC:** The sixth edition of your classic *Life in Schools*, one of the few Marxist texts on teacher-education, has just been issued, updated for the Obama era. What were you trying to do with this book, and what kind of impact has it had? In turn, what kind of Obama-era shifts have provoked shifts or tweaks within the book? Finally, have you received any “pushback” or red-baiting around the impact of this book?

**PM:** The book has had a number of publishers, and the fifth edition was Pearson. Yes, the textbook and assessment company that produces standardized texts, that is singled out by progressive educators as one of the companies that is destroying public education. It owns Penguin Books and the Financial Times and operates in over seventy countries. I mention in the latest edition that after scheduling a meeting with a Pearson editor to discuss the new sixth edition, and after making copious notes and presenting them to her in the lobby of the Mark Twain hotel in San Francisco, she told me that my ideas were “too complex”, that Pearson was too “corporate” and that American students could not really absorb the difficult concepts I present in *Life in Schools*. There was not going to be a sixth edition, I was told. In fact, she told me that Pearson was dropping the book.

I asked her if it was because I critiqued the company in the fifth edition of the book, and she said no, that was not the reason. She tried to soften the blow by offering me twenty free copies of the book. And of course the rights resorted back to me, and within ten minutes I had found another publisher. How was it possible to find another publisher in that short time span? Well, my meeting with Pearson took place during the annual convention of the American Educational Research Association and after the book was dropped by Pearson, my wife, Wang Yan, and I

walked across the street to the lobby of the Hilton. Once inside, I noticed a grey-haired fellow frantically waving to me. It was my old friend Dean Birkenkamp, the head of Paradigm Publishers. He shouted across the room, "Is there any way I can get the rights to your *Life in Schools*?" I was taken aback at my good fortune and of course the deal was sealed within minutes. Yes, the book is updated but the problem is when you do a new edition of the book you have to remove the same amount of the old material as you add in the new material. And I have trouble losing what I feel is very good work. But I made room for Obama.

Obama has hurt education reform immeasurably. Obama has really carried over the George Bush Jr. initiatives and rebranded them with some cosmetic touches. You aren't a good educational leader when your Race to the Top initiatives tie federal funds for states and localities to their use of assessments of national "college and career readiness" standards; when you set yourself on a mission to privatize or quasi-privatize public schools through an expansion of charter schools; when you evaluate teachers by linking an individual teacher's salary and employment status to student test scores; or when you pink slip teachers and principals in schools that have been designated as failing schools; and especially when your entire philosophy of education is driven by the logic of assessment and competition that includes merit pay for teachers, etc. To use federal leverage to get your initiatives in place, to sow distrust of public schools and to give preferential treatment to charter schools (that don't do as well as public schools overall even though they can cherry-pick their students and can refuse to admit students with learning disabilities), to create such a mess that teacher drop-out rates are at an all time high – the voluntary drop out rate for teachers is higher than the failure rate of students as nationally, 16 percent leave after the first year and approximately 45 percent leave within five years – is to give educational reform another kick in the teeth. Whether it's a Democrat or Republican in the White House doesn't seem to matter – the Democratic will wear hobnailed boots to kick out your teeth, the Republicans will use army surplus store boots from the invasion of Iraq to do the job.

I'm surprised that the book is doing so well in classrooms across the US, because of the political climate here. The works of Paulo Freire and Rudy Acuna were banned in Tucson, Arizona's public school system, there is a wave of evangelical fervour percolating throughout the US, particularly with the Tea Party folks, and "socialism" is a hot word. University undergraduates and sometimes graduate students – and their parents – can get riled up if they think they are being encouraged

to criticize the United States. Again, at UCLA, I was labelled “the most dangerous professor at UCLA” during the Bush Jr. administration. Death threats, of course. Hate mail, yes. Not so much now as during the Bush Jr. administration but yes, it is there. There is at least one evangelical book that recently cited me as a grave danger to the young minds of America. And yes I get the usual Commie in the Classroom criticism, and the Cuban American community frequently gets on my case because of my book about Paulo Freire and Che Guevara. But the support I receive is so much stronger, and that is what keeps me going. And good friends. When you come under criticism you quickly learn who are your fair-weather friends, and who are your true friends.

And now I am teaching at Chapman University, a private university located in one of the most conservative and most ‘charming’ cities in the United States, the city of Orange. Well, after 20 years at UCLA I was made an offer by Chapman that I accepted. There is a small community of Freireans whom I very much enjoy working with and who walk their talk. You really do need other like-minded people to work with if you want to survive university life. That’s why I decided to join the faculty here. The College of Education Studies has a progressive Dean, Don Cardinal, who is just about the best leader you could imagine. If you enter Chapman from one side of the campus, you see a statue of Margaret Thatcher, then Ayn Rand, then Milton Friedman, and then Ronald Reagan, so your blood might curdle if you are a leftist. But if you approach Chapman from another route, you will encounter statues of Martin Luther King, Benito Juarez and, yes, Paulo Freire. I have found Chapman to honour diverse viewpoints and to encourage critical thinking. And the faculty here is highly committed to social justice. We also have Dodge College, one of the top film schools in the country. While I teach regularly, I often spend half the week working in America Latina with different organizations, teachers unions, indigenous populations, and more recently the Europeans have been inviting me to participate in discussions about education.

**JC:** You are very influenced by the work of Paulo Friere and emancipatory education. Can you tell *Alternate Routes* a little bit about how you came to be inspired by Friere and how academics can make use of his work?

**PM:** I met Paulo Freire through the esteemed educational scholar and public intellectual Henry Giroux and one of his close friends, Donaldo Macedo who is a professor of linguistics. Henry Giroux had helped bring me to Miami University of Ohio, after the controversy

over my book, *Cries from the Corridor*, made it impossible for me to land a full-time professorship in Canada during that time (although I did manage a one-year appointment at Brock University with help from John Novak, a prominent Deweyan educationalist). Henry introduced me to Paulo during a conference in Chicago in 1985 and later, Donaldo Macedo helped to facilitate and solidify our relationship. My formation as a teacher has been forged and tempered in the crucible of Freire's copious and courageous works and my life profoundly shaped and keenly affected by the leadership and teachings of Paulo Freire. Paulo in his formidable generosity of spirit wrote several prefaces to books of mine, invited me to Cuba and Brazil, and while in Brazil hosted me in his university and his home. A mentor and friend over the ensuing years, he modeled the kind of educator I wanted to become. I have been fortunate to have met several world-historical figures who exemplify the best of our revolutionary spirit, and I would consider Hugo Chavez another such individual. Freire, Chavez, Marx – these are figures of inescapable relevance for revolutionary critical pedagogy, all in different ways.

While the legacy of Paulo Freire stands immeasurably beyond us as individuals, his world-historical vision of a just and equitable democratic society nevertheless serves as a quilting-point and guide to the future of education for millions of progressive educators worldwide. Revisiting the legacy and vision of Paulo Freire today chillingly reminds us that the dreams that have been programmed into today's sterile educational instruments of test-taking, accountability, technocratic thinking, and managerial control have led to an abandonment of the search for what it means to live critically, creatively and democratically in the service of those who have been marginalized and excluded in today's immiseration capitalist society. We would do well as educators to read today's 'businessification' and corporatization of education against the liberatory vision of Paulo Freire with the hope that we can and will regain the vision of a critical democracy to which Freire's storied corpus of works points and build the kind of democracy that lives up to its principles and pronouncements. Whether this can be done within a capitalist society is doubtful; in fact, I do not believe it can be done. It has become clear to me in traveling to approximately thirty countries in the course of my educational work, that Paulo Freire is still very much alive in the hearts and minds of all those teachers, administrators, cultural workers, and students who still choose to dream. We need to read the world as well as the world, that is, we need to be able to transcend through absolute negativity those barriers that keep us from realizing our full humanity.

Teachers need to be spokespersons for agency, the embodiment of a critical praxis – I call this protagonistic agency. With wide-eyed awareness, Freire serves notice that not only must we raise questions that the world refuses to raise but is incapable of raising at this historical moment. There is always a quixotic aspect of risk-taking in our attempts to transform the world through critical pedagogy. And we need to remember that critical pedagogy is a necessary but not sufficient for bringing about the socialist revolution. Freire would advise us, his comrades, not to reproduce his work, to import his work as we would some foreign commodity into our classrooms but to re-invent his ideas in the contextual specificity of where we found ourselves in our struggles, and by this he meant, socially, economically, culturally, geopolitically and the like. Critical educators who have been influenced by Freire recognize that history is always open and refuse to postulate history as a determinate truth, relinquishing the subjective in the making of history. There are no iron laws of history, since history works backwards, retrospectively, like Benjamin's Angel of history, caught in the swirling storm from paradise. For critical educators, ends and means must be interdependent. We can't read off from science our moral goals. Even if scientific laws of history obtained they cannot a priori stipulate moral ends because that would make moral ends meaningless.

Freire clearly worked within a dialectical materialist epistemology that attempted to posit a dialectical relationship between the objective world and our subjective understanding and knowledge of that world. Freire was concerned with the 'dialecticity' between consciousness and the world where he views critical consciousness as a type of meta-consciousness or "consciousness as consciousness of consciousness," as what I have come to term, "protagonist agency" or a type of intentionality towards the world that is intent on transforming the world as much as understanding the world. This means seeking ontological and ethical clarity in our relations with the world and with other human beings.

**JC:** You have an international reputation, having worked with the Bolivarians in Venezuela, the MST in Brazil among many progressive elements in Latin America. What kind of innovation is happening, in particular, within the context of the Bolivarian process? Can any of these innovations be translated into a Canadian or American context?

**PM:** I'm not an expert on the Bolivarian process. For that kind of expertise, you would need to read the important work of Michael Lebowitz and Marta Harnecker. Recently, Instituto McLaren de Pedagogia Critica y Education Popular helped to sponsor a lecture in Mexico

City where Marta Harnecker appeared as the keynote – the conference is called *Volver a Marx*. We at Instituto McLaren are helping to organize that conference every year and we have been holding it in various cities throughout Mexico. We are trying to interest the general public – workers, students, artists, teachers, managers, farmers, indigenous groups, in the ideas of Marx as a way to initiate transformation and change. I certainly admire the potential of the communal councils of the Bolivarian Revolution, which serve as public pedagogical sites for socialism and endogenous development, and to what Michael Lebowitz calls ‘a vehicle for changing both circumstances and the protagonists themselves’, and deepening the struggle for socialism for the twenty-first century. Such a struggle is founded on revolutionary practice, famously described by Lebowitz as ‘the simultaneous changing of circumstances and self-change’. The new socialist society stresses that the control of production is vested in the producing individuals themselves. Productive relations are social as a result of conscious choice and not after the fact. They are social because, as Lebowitz (2013) perceptively notes, as a people we deliberately choose to produce for people who need what we can produce.

Since more than seventy percent of university students came from the wealthiest quintile of the population, Chávez instituted the Bolivarian University System, in which the students themselves were able to participate in the management of their institution. Education was designed to promote citizen participation and joint responsibility, and to include all citizens in the creation of a new model of production that stressed endogenous development, that is, an economic system that was self-sufficient and diversified. Misiones were created to create a social economy and a diversity of production, and designed to meet the needs of Venezuela’s poor and to counteract Venezuela’s oil dependency. Higher education was de-concentrated from the urban centers in order to assist rural communities. I remember how much I enjoyed teaching at the Bolivarian University of Venezuela, located near the Central University of Venezuela – part of Mission Sucre, which provides free higher education to the poor, regardless of academic qualification, prior education or nationality – housed in the ultra-deluxe offices of former PDVSA oil executives that Chávez had fired for their attempt to bring down the government. College enrolment doubled under Chávez. Student projects were insolubly linked to local community improvement. At a graduation ceremony in the early years of the university, Chávez famously said:

“Capitalism is machista and to a large extent excludes women, that’s why, with the new socialism, girls, you can fly free.”

Chávez set up a structure to offer employment for the graduates of UBV through a presidential commission that enabled new graduates to be placed around the country in development projects. The graduates would receive a scholarship that was slightly above the minimum wage. Some of these projects involved Mision Arbol (Tree Mission), recovering environments damaged by capitalism such as the Guaire River. When I was first invited to Venezuela by the government to help support the Bolivarian revolution, I remember speaking at the Central University of Venezuela. The students who attend this university are mainly the children of the ruling elite. Not many were Chavistas, well, at least not when I spoke there. After I announced to the students present that I was a Chavista (Soy Chavista!), I was told later that some students in retaliation had ripped my portrait off of a mural students had created of critical theorists. Yet I was able to have very good conversations with some of the students there in the years that followed.

Education under Chávez was education for the creation of a “multi-polar” world. For Chávez, education either meant giving life support to capitalism’s profit-orientation in such a way as to bolster the remains of the welfare state, or education meant recreating a socialism for the twenty-first century. Chávez was not concerned with incorporating the oppressed within the liberal-democratic framework, but rather in changing the framework through the reorganization of political space through education, that is, through making the state function in a non-state mode by reorganizing the state from the bottom up through the education and initiatives of the popular majorities. Socialism, Chávez understood, could be sustained only by the subjective investment of those involved in the process.

Under Chávez, Venezuelan education was not only geared to help provide universal access to education (as Venezuela’s poor had been shut out for generations), in particular, to those traditionally disadvantaged and/or excluded groups such as the urban and rural poor, those of African descent, and indigenous communities, but to help prepare the next generation of Venezuelans to enhance the conditions of possibility of a socialist alternative to capitalism. Venezuelan education aspired to be a combination of Freirean-influenced critical and popular education, where horizontal and dialogic (subject-subject) relationships were pursued using holistic, integral and transdisciplinary pedagogies and methodologies based on andragogical principles for a liberating and

emancipatory education. Under Chávez, little attempt was made to distance educational reform from a politicized approach. Education reform clearly directed itself towards an organic form of endogenous socialist development of the social-community context as part of a larger struggle for a participatory-protagonistic democracy. Against the privatization of education and approaches hegemonized by the neoliberal education industry, and its consumerist role grounded in egoism, competition, elitism and alienation, Venezuelan education aspired to be humanistic, democratic, participatory, multi-ethnic, pluri-cultural, pluri-lingual and intercultural.

The development of a critical consciousness among the population was crucial, as was an integration of school, family and community in the decision-making process. Venezuelan education favored a multi-disciplinary 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, and with the larger goal of transforming a culture of economic dependency to a culture of community participation. This approach, for example, underwrote the courses at UBV where mentorship was provided to students who undertook projects in their local communities. Over ninety-three percent of Venezuelans aged fifteen and over can read and write. The Venezuelan government has more than ninety institutions of higher education and remains committed to the idea that every citizen should be able to have a free education. Education was conceived within an integrationist geo-political conception of Latin American countries in a way that enabled Latin Americans to challenge economic dependency fostered on them by the imperialist powers, to resist colonialist globalization projects, and to create spaces where students could critically analyze local problems from a global perspective. Chávez's approach of municipalización refused to isolate universities from the rest of society and geographically de-concentrated the traditional university infrastructure and took the university to where the people are, to municipalities that had traditionally been underserved as well as factories and prisons. Canadians and Americas can learn a lot from these important initiatives.

**JC:** As of late, you have become a poet. As someone who does cultural analysis, I'm wondering if you can help me develop a Marxian take on the idea of "Poetic Knowledge"? How can we conceive "poetic knowledge" from a materialist standpoint?

**PM:** I like your question but I haven't produced any systematic analysis of poetic knowledge, although I am certainly drawn to the concept.

As an undergraduate at the University of Toronto, I was influenced by the power of myths, rituals, symbols and this was motivated in part in my study of Old English and Middle English and eventually Elizabethan drama. Later, I incorporated my interest in rituals and symbols into my own ethnographic work, influenced mostly through the comparative symbology of the anthropologist Victor Turner. When I was 19 I met the poet Allen Ginsburg, and spent time with Timothy Leary, and I was very much involved in the Yorkville scene in Toronto. Between San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Toronto, there was a lot going on. I was quite the fan of Andre Breton – and you know, the morning star anarchist rebellion work of Guy Debord and others. The Situationists International influenced me. So did Claire Cahun. My interest continued up through to my reading of Benjamin. Recently I visited the Trotsky museum (for the third time) in Mexico City and was quite captivated of the photos of Trotsky, Diego Rivera and Breton.

Writing for academic journals is painful, and to make it less so, I often use images from my dreams and approach topics in a very unorthodox fashion. Some readers like it, some don't, some think it is pompous for an academic to view his or her work as art, others appreciate it. Scattered throughout my dreams lately have been disturbing dystopian images; I recall one such dream recently where I discover myself squatting atop a Gothic cathedral, whose gargoyles perched below my feet are spouting the blood of history's time-enduring saints to quell the maelstrom of angry crowds below – crowds made up of the powerless, the forgotten, the excluded, victims caught in the crossfire of capitalism (the result of watching too many Zombie or vampire films, no doubt). I peer down at the collarless, blood-covered, and spindle-shanked figures below, shafts of brilliant light slicing through the clouds that hover hesitatingly over the entangled gloom, and then the noxious exhalation and clouds of putrid effluvia wafting upwards from the dank and pungent sewer mist rises to meet the light, and suddenly everyone is playing and celebrating in the city streets, like neighborhood kids who have yanked open a fire hydrant during a heat wave. It is then, in my dream, that a heaven-sweeping yearning to return the planet back to its pristine state wells up in me and I leap into the shadows below. That's about the time I usually wake up. Right after I have been swallowed by the darkness. For me, the challenge becomes thrusting our heads higher than cathedrals, through the confines that limit the imagination, through the boundaries of terminate optimism to a boundless hope so that we can create a world beyond our corrupted self-interest. Without

starting to sound or think like Obama. We all have our dreams and nightmares and while I tend to pain our unmooredness or rudderlessness as dystopian it could easily be described under a different name.

Life does not unfold as some old sheet strewn across a brass bed in the dusky attic of history; our destinies as children, parents, and teachers do not flow unilaterally toward a single vertigo-inducing epiphany, some pyrotechnic explosion of iridescent and refulgent splendor where we lay becalmed, rocking on a silent sea of pure bliss, or where we are held speechless in some wind-washed grove of cedars, in the thrall of an unbridled, unsullied and undiluted love of incandescent intensity. Our lives are not overseen by a handsome God who blithely sits atop a terra cotta pedestal and with guileless simplicity, quiet paternalism and unsmiling earnestness rules over his eager and fumbling brood, ever so often rumpling the curly heads of the rosy-cheeked cherubim and engaging the saints in blissful conversation. Were there such a God, wrapped in the mantle of an otherworldly Platonism and possessing neither moral obliquity nor guilt, who brings forth the world through supernatural volition alone, the world would be nothing but an echo of the divine mind. Hunger could be ended by merely thinking of a full belly and sickness eliminated by a picture of perfect health.

Most of us, Jordy, sling ourselves nervously back and forth across the great Manichean divide of the drab of everyday existence, where, in our elemental contact with the world, our human desires, for better or for worse, tug at us like some glow-in-the-dark hustler in a carnival midway. We go hungry, we suffer, and we live in torment and witness most of the world's population crumpled up in pain. We don't have to witness a final miracle of eschatological significance to reclaim the world. What we do have to accomplish at this very moment is organizing our world to meet the basic needs of humanity. I don't now if there is something poetic in this. If I have developed a poetics of revolution, then it attempts to endow critical pedagogy with a mission of reconciling love and justice. Is love without justice meaningless? Or could love without justice be complicit in the reproduction of deep-seated structural injustices? I approach the Bible as a work of great poetry. I find that I am able to reach students – don't forget that I live in Orange County, behind the Orange Curtain and there is an evangelical church on nearly every street corner – with the message of socialism through biblical references.

Recently I've re-engaged the work of the Jesuit thinker, Jose Porfirio Miranda, who argues with verve and passion that the official teachings

of the church falsify the gospel, since it is clear from reading the texts of the Bible that Jesus maintains an intransigent condemnation of the rich. Even liberation theology gets this wrong when it asserts that there should be a “preferential option for the poor” – it is not an option, but, as Miranda notes, it is an obligation. We cannot shirk from this obligation without imputation of culpability and still remain Christians. There is no abstention from this struggle. The condition of the poor obliges a restitution since such a struggle is injustice writ large. Jesus died for participating in political transgression aimed at liberating Judea from the Romans. According to Miranda, Jesus clearly was a communist, and this can convincingly be seen throughout the New Testament but particularly in passages such as John 12:6, 13:29 and Luke 8:1-3. Jesus went so far as to make the renunciation of property a condition for entering the kingdom of God. When Luke says, “Happy the poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20) and adds, “Woe to you the rich, because you have received your comfort” (Luke 6: 24), Luke is repeating Mark 10:25 when Jesus warns that the rich cannot enter the kingdom. The Bible makes clear through Jesus’ own sayings that the kingdom is not the state of being after death; rather, the kingdom is now, here on earth. Essentially Jesus is saying, according to Miranda, that the kingdom is a classless society. There is something revolutionary in this, and something immediately poetic.

While history may be indifferent to the pontifications and bloviations of both church pulpit and lecture hall, there are few places now to turn for poetic inspiration given the commodification of the life world, not even to the receding forests where death mocks us, dancing on the leaves of jimsonweed (you can see it if you focus your imagination).

**JC:** Any final thoughts on “capitalism in the classroom” in the post-2008 era of lean production and assembly line education? Are there any cracks in the facade that give you hope that a different education is possible in a North American context?

**PM:** I wrote *Cries from the Corridor* in the mid-1970s and it was published in 1980. It was a descriptive account of Jane-Finch that operated from an unconscious missionary, blaming-the-victim ideology. As I grew in my understanding, I remedied this situation by publishing *Cries from the Corridor* as *Life in Schools* nine years later, three years after *Schooling as a Ritual Performance* was published, which was a analysis of a Canadian Catholic school. *Schooling as a Ritual Performance* received the usual criticism but also many accolades as an example of critical ethnography, such as a glowing review in the *London Times*. But I always

knew that *Life in Schools* would have a larger and more lasting readership, so moving ahead and correcting many mistakes with *Cries from the Corridor* was important to me, and having the opportunity to create a text that is not just about pedagogy but also pedagogical in its format was welcomed. I hope there is another edition down the road, and what that road will bring is forbiddingly unclear. I often urge teachers under the press of modern social competition linked to capitalism not to be deceived by the timeless tenor of capitalist life. But, of course, an overtone of guileful distinction creeps into the comparison of capitalism and socialism, especially here in the USA, where Fox News equates socialism with the National Socialist German Workers' Party commonly known as the Nazis. Try talking about socialism in the corporate media and you won't get far, unless you are on one of the very few progressive programming slots.

Recently I published an article, *Education Agonistes: An Epistle to the Transnational Capitalist Class*, where I drew attention to the development, integration and consolidation of the transnational capitalist class, transnational state capitalism and the emergence of the superclass. These ideas, of course, have been developed by Bill Robinson, Jerry Harris and others. Some theorists think that the BRICS (India, China, Brazil, South Africa, and Russia) offer a counterweight to the G-7 countries. The BRICS are really helping to integrate global capitalism worldwide, although their political strategies vary and are indeed complex and their politics might appear counter-hegemonic at times. So my position is that any counternarratives we want to put forward, any revolutionary practices we wish to engage, must grasp the nature of transnational state capitalism in the current world-historical context. Take a look at the crisis of 2008. It was not created by the policies and whims of some cabal of banksters; rather the crisis was and is structurally rooted in the nature of capital. The crisis is structural. Some rightwing critics agree that the crisis is indeed structural but they think it has to do with public debt. On the contrary, the root of the crisis can be found not only or mainly in the reality of public debt and political corruption – clearly there has been a contagion of frantic recklessness on the part of banksters and hedge fund slime-masters – but in issues of profitability and renewed capital accumulation. As capital consumes a greater share of the social wealth, the only source of profit and value becomes living labor and as long as the share of living labor relative to capital declines due to increases in productivity and technological innovation, there remains a tendency of the rate of profit to decline. And as Peter Hudis and others

have noted, we have seen since the 1970s an acute situation whereby living labor at the point of production has been replaced by new and advanced labor saving devices (and sometimes this pushes us towards exosomatic evolution where we are compelled to give subjective selves away by transforming ourselves into a machine).

What we are seeing as a response to the falling rate of profit is a desperate and slovenly unimaginative attempt by governments to redistribute value from labor to capital by imposing economic austerity that is part and parcel of today's immiseration capitalism. We can't tame capitalism through planned production, or by trying to provoke the ruling class to recognize the clear intimation that their transitory powers are destroying the planet or by trying to resurrect Keynes from his ashes scattered on the Downs at Tilton, in Sussex; rather, we need to theorize how to abolish capitalism through a new kind of labor and human relations that has no use for value production. But we can't abolish capitalism and leave in tact the ideological causes that engendered it, or we will build even more exploitative systems of survival. But the road must lead to socialism or we will have to contend with the consequences of social dissolution on a scale never before imagined, of social convulsion that will shred the planet of all life.

Look what happened in Greece. Bill Robinson reveals how, in the wake of 2008, the transnational state failed to intervene to impose regulations on global finance capital. But it did intervene to impose costs of devalorization on labor. Goldman Sachs advised Greek financial authorities to pour state funds into derivatives to make their national accounts look good. This way they could attract loans and bond purchases. But then, as Robinson points out, Goldman Sachs began participating in "credit default swaps" (speculation on sovereign debt) which is a type of parallel derivative trading where they bet on the possibility that Greece would default. The cost of borrowing for Greece became prohibitive as a result, increasing interest rates dramatically. The whole situation raised the prospect of sovereign debt default while Goldman Sachs made enormous profits. And of course, all of this made it possible for the EU and IMF to offer Greece bridge loans on the basis of accepting massive austerity measures. The bailouts of transnational capital represent, as Robinson notes, a transfer of the devaluation of capital onto labor, onto the working and popular classes. So here we are, teachers, educators, living in the belly of the beast, watch all of this going on. We watch the actions of ALEC, or the American Legislative Exchange Council advancing precisely, this transnational corporate agenda. We see

connections between the state, corporations,, surveillance, militarization of the police. It is all frightening. When we look at the militarization of the police, we see the execution of young black males. As Robinson has noted, African-Americans went from being the super-exploited sector of the working class to being marginalized as employers switched from drawing on black labor to Latino/a immigrant labor as a super-exploited workforce. African-Americans are now structurally marginalized than they have ever been in recent history and they are slated for the school-to-prison pipeline of mass incarceration and police and state terror. Capital has fused with reactionary state power, and the white working-class awaits its salvation from the Tea Party and their ilk.

The road to socialism is made by the path of critical pedagogy. It is achieved by bringing teacher activists together with labor struggles at the point of production, political struggles at the point of reproduction, and political struggles in political society. Kees van der Pijl and Bill Robinson and others, have written more extensively about this. Richard Kahn, Sam Fassbinder, Tina Evans, David Greenwood, Steve Best and others have studied these implications in the context of ecopedagogy and animal rights. We have an enormous challenge before us. The best advice I can give to North Americans who want to improve education is to fight poverty. Study after study has shown that students fare better in societies that are more equal, where the gap between the rich and the poor has been appreciably closed. But even this is not enough. We must create a social universe where the idea of economic inequality is unthinkable. We will not be pulled into the future by a carriage with chestnut-coloured warmbloods with ribbon-braided tails. Likely we will be pushed into the unknown by our own ignorance and by meekly following the coattails of those who purchase our labor-power. Freire urges us to be a subject of history and not a casualty. The stakes are high. They always are.