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***Pedagogy and Praxis in the Age of Empire: Towards a New Humanism* P. McLaren and N. Jaramillo. (2007). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers. 220 p. ISBN: 9077874844**

Review by: Paul R. Carr, Youngstown State University – July 7, 2007

A book that unabashedly unmask what many people know to be a crude and deceptive drum beat of immorality that plagues much of the planet, Peter McLaren and Nathalia Jaramillo have laid out, in *Pedagogy and Praxis in the Age of Empire: Towards a New Humanism*, a detailed and critically argued treatise about the dangers of not confronting US hegemony and its “permanent war” on terror. The book is not a light read, nor is it easily digestible in the obligatory sound-bites that pepper the cultural landscape of get-rich-quick schemes, reality shows, and fantasy sit-coms that serve to pacify and neutralize the proverbial masses.

The book takes on a number of broad themes and challenges pervasive beliefs about the need to dominate, to control, to be patriotic, and to make a profit. In typical McLarenesque style, much of the writing floods the senses with nuanced signification and humorous undertones about the incredulousness of what is accepted as mainstream fact (“In light of present historical circumstances, it was a bad idea for Iraqis to think that Washington’s vision of a post-Saddam Iraq resembled anything like Baywatch reruns” (p. 135).) The book does lead, ultimately and effectively, to a critical and fundamental analysis aimed at a “new humanism”. This new humanism requires political engagement, a *conscientization* as they point out, based on Paulo Freire’s work, and a radical transformation, not a simple shifting, of power structures. The authors are not shy about advocating for a humanistic and revolutionary socialism, one that centrally focuses on social class and all of its related appendages.

The book introduces a range of themes by way of comments made by mainstream media personalities, which struck me as somewhat unconvincing in reading the first few, but which had a significant impact when one considers that these people control the airwaves, and especially that their opinions, comments, moods, attitudes and dispositions do matter to a lot of people. They make the case that right-wing hate speech is protected under the Constitution while left-wing opinion is suppressed, maligned and pursued vigorously when it is made public.

The text is a blistering, yet sobering, assault on what might be referred to in polite terms as an abuse of power or dysfunctional leadership. The authors, however, are much more direct and incisive in their assessment of the Bush regime and American hegemony.

Here in the U.S. the aroma of corruption is as pungent as the flopsweat that graced the storied jowls of an on-camera Richard Nixon. Fear has become the big stick to wield in the service of patriotism, priming us with images and

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expectations of imminent attack, blurring the distinction between the imagined and the occurrent, desultory and carefully orchestrated threats, and producing through a sultry atmosphere of impending doom political lassitude among the hapless multitude. (p. 3)

Referring to the Bush government as being enmeshed in fascist enclaves of deceit and Condolessa Rice as the “warrior princess,” the book instructively dismantles any vague notion of legitimacy within a formal power structure that systematically aligns local, national and international interests into a turbine generating profits for a small but insatiably profit-hungry group of elites. The figures provided by McLaren and Jaramillo in relation to profit margins for US elites, combined with the quantity of funds extracted from developing countries, are staggering, especially in light of the overwhelming consensus among economic elites in favor of the liberalized market-place, which effectively puts developing countries at a distinct economic disadvantage.

McLaren and Jaramillo document what is rarely ever alluded to in the mainstream culture, namely, the gross and insidious manipulation of the media, which is paid for by unwitting tax-payers. As they put it,

More recently it has been made clear that purchasing journalistic mercenaries is not only a major part of a larger and well-fuelled government scheme to blur the line between legitimate news reporting and political propaganda here in the United States (as part of PSYOPS operations within the homeland itself), it is also an integral part of the so-called democracy-building efforts in foreign countries such as Iraq. (p. 4)

The linkage between the control of information and the limitation of debate is an effective and necessary lever for greasing the spokes of the neo-liberal wheel. Ultimately, the book makes a forceful and persistent case for revisiting Marx and Marxist notions of the control and distribution of capital, which is closely linked to political processes and the construction of cultural forces.

Without a critical eye, some teachers might conclude that the book is more about politics than education. However, that is the point that McLaren and Jaramillo make in a vociferously argued text that blends the political with the pedagogical, in effect laying the groundwork for a critical pedagogy that is not fearful of pushing the boundaries of revolutionary praxis. When they do discuss the state of educational policy in the US today, they make insightful and penetrating observations about the motivation, operationalization and effect of the far-reaching *No Child Left Behind* legislation. The level of analysis the authors provide, unfortunately, would often be considered a mute point by many educators who feel helpless, beholden to sheepishly maintain a dysfunctional education system that most believe is getting worse, not better. To be a little more precise, the problem lies in how intractable many people believe it is to

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challenge and confront injustice and, equally, poor pedagogy, not to mention the general context for teaching and learning. How do we teach about democracy, social justice, and citizenship in an era of supposed accountability? Accountability for what, and for whom? McLaren and Jaramillo eloquently remind us of the human dimension of education, that it is not simply a training-center for corporations or an incubator to gently coddle those who may have less social disadvantage than others. Here, the book provides some solid arguments in relation to the inadequacy of NCLB to address questions of social, racial and other forms of difference and identity. Neo-liberalism, as the book prominently points out, has a firm grip on the throats of educational systems across the nation.

This book offers a disturbing examination of the militarization of American hegemony, which simultaneously subjugates marginalized groups, minorities and the poor, and also serves to divide the world along blunt, unforgiving neo-liberal lines, all the while infusing public education with an inflexible business model that is weakly correlated to the needs of students. McLaren and Jaramillo speak of a neo-liberal citizenship to encapsulate the “permanent war” that has been generated to ingratiate elites while doing little to diminish poverty at home or abroad. The authors document how US corporate interests are able to ride shotgun in the side-car of militarization, boasting of the enhanced living standards and democracy that will surely result from contact with American hegemony. They state that NCLB “is a historical apparatus that serves to exert control over the largest and most vulnerable segments of the population in the interest of promoting capitalist consumption and the reproduction of the law of value and the value form of labor” (p. 65).

Another disturbing piece to NCLB that is not generally covered in its formally stated and rhetorical objectives—offering greater parental choice, increasing standards, basing progress on scientific research, and providing more accountability in the educational system—is the militarization of schools:

NCLB mandates that local authorities not only provide access to military recruiters on their campuses but that they provide them with student names and contact information. Marking an additional unprecedented shift in educational policy, schools that receive federal financial support risk having their funds withheld if they do not provide access to military recruiters. (p. 76)

The ramping up of patriotic fervor in the educational sector is rivaled by unprecedented profiteering on standardized testing by a few select conglomerates, which are tightly connected to the top decision-making level. The authors substantiate how NCLB has been a boon to portions of the corporate sector.

The chapter on “God’s Cowboy Warrior: Christianity, Globalization, and the False Prophets of Imperialism” provides a detailed look at how many in the Bush entourage are intertwined in the practice of world domination and religion. To buttress the Christian

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scaffolding, a climate of patriotic fear is infused into any and all actions approaching a critique of the Iraq War. McLaren himself has been identified by a right-wing organization as one of “UCLA’s most dangerous professors known as ‘The Dirty Thirty’” because of his views on US hegemony. Here, it is interesting to examine the Iraq War as presented inside and outside of the United States, and also consider how national educational systems engage with the issue. This raises the larger issue of what we learn, how, and to what degree. Moving past superficial notions of historical fact and an isolationist pondering of “our place in the world” requires critical reflection, interrogation and engagement, something that is generally outside the purview of the regular NCLB classroom experience.

The neo-liberal template is clearly brought into focus through the authors’ examination of Hurricane Katrina, which exposed serious class and race cleavages as well as, importantly, raised fundamental questions about how such a tragedy could happen in the first place. McLaren and Jaramillo dissect the processes leading up the Hurricane, why no action was taken when clearly officials were aware of the impending horror, and, importantly, provide a critical examination of the charade masked as media coverage during and after the waters swept through continental territory.

A moral panic ensued when the public was fed horror stories about what it was like to be trapped in the inferno of black anarchism, stories refracted in the cesspool of racism and fear that lies deep within the structural unconscious of a nation founded upon violence, slavery and genocide. (p. 9)

Is there a connection between Katrina, Iraq and suffering around the world? Decision-makers, officials and money-makers would not normally venture into such waters but the authors of this book present a cogent and sophisticated argumentation demonstrating the inextricable linkages. The massive, inescapable inundation of semi-mindless reality shows, juxtaposed against the non-coincidental reality of human suffering, is testament to the desire of many sectors in society to prefer the singing and dancing of the good times to the disconcerting video-clips of how the “other side” lives. To extend this point, it may be easier to be entertained than engaged. Similarly, the engagement—if it involves some of the critical work proposed by Freire and echoed by McLaren and Jaramillo—could result in movement and transformation out of step with the political hegemony. This brings the argument full circle in relation to why so many people who clearly do not benefit from the “permanent war” on terror are so patriotic. From an educational vantage point, the salience of democracy in education is an area requiring closer scrutiny, in line with the interrogation that needs to be brought to bear on the NCLB legislation.

In Hurricane Katrina, the Iraq debacle, and a host of other international calamities, the racial part of the equation cannot be emphasized enough. White power and privilege is a fundamental ally to the feeding-frenzy to protect property rights and to be fully ensconced in the labyrinth called the “fossil-fuel shortage,” which enables the

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“petrolarchs” to enjoy a very comfortable existence. The analysis in the book about the subject of natural resources and the environment is also poignant. It is interesting to note that the environment does not seem to be a very serious concern for the United States in relation to the Kyoto Protocol, the excellent trade relations with China, the supposed dependency on oil<sup>i</sup>, and other visible changes in climate and geography. Moreover, what is the environmental cost of the thunderous shelling of Baghdad callously referred to as *Shock and Awe*, as if it were a fire-works display? While all of the networks exhibited the obliteration of large segments of the Iraqi capital, there appeared to be little to no concern for the environment, especially the obvious future destruction and contamination of the water, agriculture and livestock. We are not told about the senseless deaths of innocent civilians from unexploded bombs, landmines, and other mechanisms of war, all of which ensure a long-term razing of the environment.

Capitalists accept collateral damage as part of the overall process, and whether this happens to be the deaths of thousands of human beings or eco-destructivity that leads to the elimination of large clusters of biospheres doesn't really seem to matter to the Masters of Capital—as long as this collateral damage has a minimal effect on the lives of the transnational capitalist class. (p. 18)

McLaren and Jaramillo cover a lot of ground but focus their sights systemically on the Iraq invasion because it provides an infinite number of examples confirming the illegal, unethical, immoral and even criminal nature of the invasion. The “preventive war” synopsis is considered as folly in the book, and the foreseeable pitfalls such as Abu Ghraib are similarly dissected, revealing a vested neo-liberal grip on regional domination.

The book provides another piece that is not as commonly revealed and understood elsewhere, namely the connection between US hegemony and Christian fundamentalism. As a Canadian who has only been in the US for two years, I am little awe-struck by the positioning and influence of organized religion on the formal power structure, as it is difficult to grasp the nuances and palpable reaction to discussion of such issues as sexual orientation, abortion, the role of the Church, and the sanctity of God from abroad. McLaren and Jaramillo's analysis skillfully unveils the multi-layered relationships that exist in and around the White House, and also illustrates how religion is used to assuage interest groups.

The authors make no secret of their affection for Hugo Chavez's Bolivarian revolution, and also make connections with the Cuban resolve to fight US imperialism despite almost five decades of psychological, economic and political warfare. Clearly, in the two cases, the mainstream American mindset, constantly cajoled by the media, is resolutely transfixed on the notion that the two leaders represent “despotic,” “dictatorial,” “Communist,” “rogue” regimes, and any other range of uni-dimensional *leitmotifs*. Their work in Venezuela with a government that has made tangible progress on a number of socio-economic fronts in a relatively short period of time is indisputable, as it is in Cuba,

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also faces challenges. Control of decision-making and resources is fundamental, but the process of changing the culture, especially in an era of neo-liberal extravagance<sup>ii</sup>, cannot be underestimated. Thus, the focus on critical pedagogy is pivotal to creating the conditions for a better, more decent society. Breaking down barriers, difference and inequitable power relations requires time and concentrated effort.

This discourse of critical pedagogy must not take an enigmatically risky path, relentlessly pursuing the intangible, a path lit with intricate theoretical coruscations but bereft of praxis.... The discourse of critical pedagogy needs to make clear what it means to interrogate meanings signified in the gap between class relations that has become the prime intermediary in how we understand and participate in our struggle for justice and freedom. (p. 198)

Intense, sustained critical educational work can build a better society, as anyone who has closely examined the Cuban example can attest, and the power of *conscientization* can lead to a flurry of trickle-down effects throughout society.

A common refrain about critical pedagogy by some folks in the teacher education and curriculum areas at some academic gatherings, one that I do not share, is that it does not lead to any solutions, that it is anchored in criticism, and that it is given to utopian visions of surrealism. Yet, the critical pedagogical analysis formulated by McLaren and Jaramillo is not commonly available in standard educational milieus. The underlying value to such an analysis and critique is clear: structured, methodical and systematic interrogation of commonly-held views, events and phenomena is not only a healthy experience to undertake; it is a necessary step in the process of individual and collective liberation. There is hope in seeking the truth.

Hope is the freeing of possibility, with possibility serving as the dialectical partner of necessity. When hope is strong enough, it can bend the future backwards towards the past, where, trapped between the two, the present can escape its orbit of inevitability and break the force of history's hubris, so that what is struggled for no longer remains an inert idea frozen in the hinterland of 'what is,' but becomes a reality carved out of 'what could be.' Hope is the oxygen of dreams, and provides the stamina for revolutionary struggle. Hope refers to the rejection of subjective idealism in favor of a materialist reading of social life in its totality. Hope mediates between the universal and the particular in grasping the concrete forms of our objective existence under capital. Hope is the medium of dialectical praxis. Revolutionary dreams are those in which the dreamers dream until there are no longer the dreamers but only the dreams themselves, shaping our everyday lives from moment to moment, and opening the causeways of possibility where abilities are nourished not for the reaping of profit, but for the satisfaction of needs and the full development of human potential. (p. 55)

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Whether or not one embraces the call to revolutionary thinking and action, *Pedagogy and Praxis in the Age of Empire: Towards a New Humanism* is a most enlightening and provocative companion on the journey to liberation. The message in this book resonates with a sincere and tumultuous call for change, something that is unquestionably required in a time of “permanent war.” McLaren and Jaramillo have presented an indispensable critique to the macro-level workings of politics that ultimately lead directly to the micro-level experiences in the classroom.

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> One political cartoon I saw following Bush’s 2006 State of the Union address in which he claimed that “We are addicted to oil” had an elderly, stereotypically working-class couple sitting in their living room watching the speech, with the wife turning to the husband and asking “Isn’t he our dealer?”. This anecdote sums up the general feeling that the average person has little control over the price of oil, yet is obliged to maintain a subservient relationship while Exxon executives reward themselves with exit-packages in the order of several hundreds of millions of dollars and Bush, Cheney and others enjoy an unscrupulously close relationship with the Saudi royal family and others employed in the oil industry.

<sup>ii</sup> One example of the intensity of the class segregation in Venezuelan society which Chavez is trying to reform is the fact that the country is the largest importer of Scotch Whiskey in Latin America, consuming over 2.6 million boxes of the liquor in 2006. Elsewhere, the presence of some 15,000 Cuban doctors in the country to attend to the basic needs of the vast majority of the Venezuelan population flies in the face of the record profits generated by the tightly-controlled oil sector. As was the case in Cuba, the elites in Venezuela are using every lever possible to stifle, dismantle and suppress the popular will for change.

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