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Review: *Capitalists and Conquerors: A Critical Pedagogy Against Empire* by Peter McLaren

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**Capitalists and Conquerors: A Critical Pedagogy Against Empire** by  
Peter McLaren. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005. 351 pp.  
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Ever since Hardt and Negri's now famous study of empire that places the global capitalist system within a rhizomatic landscape, the debate about the organizational structure and political consequences of capital has been prolific. For autonomous Marxists, such as Hardt and Negri, struggle and contestation is located in a Deleuzian world of a "thousand plateaus" in which resistance is formed in the "multitude." Yet, others see the project of articulating a revised Marxist analysis of global capitalism as futile. Still others either lament or celebrate the supposed crumbling of modernity and its fall into a sea of fragmentation, ambiguity and indifference. Amidst the confusion, Peter McLaren has been an incendiary and decisive beacon for the critical pedagogy movement here in the United States and across the globe, giving hope to those who seek an alternative to the capitalist form of life. Thus in the same spirit as Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche who not only challenged modernity but also put forth a radical reconstruction of the emancipatory thought that constituted its foundations, McLaren and his collaborators in *Capitalists and Conquerors: A Critical Pedagogy against Empire* have set out to provide a revolutionary map for critical pedagogues who must negotiate the increasingly complex and contested terrain of global capitalism in its mature form of empire.

There are a variety of themes in McLaren's collaborative work in *Capitalists and Conquerors* that make up a unique constellation in which to view education in the contemporary moment. These include analyses of class and capital social relations with Valerie Scatamburlo-D'Annibale, Paula Allman, and Glenn Rikowski within the contemporary educational context; ecological interventions into critical pedagogy with Donna Houston; a critique and analysis of the propaganda and militarism of the "Bush Gang" with Gregory Martin; and a scathing examination of Bush's global Evangelicalism with Nathalia Jaramillo.

Instead of dodging into a symptomology, the selection of essays that comprise this book deliver analyses that draw out the concrete material conditions of a system that has run its course on the backs of the many, while delivering prosperity and privilege to the purses of the few. The focus of attack is on the augmenting reproductive strength of the logic of capital in the sphere of education that is exemplified in the assessment and standardization movement in educational policy such as the No Child Left Behind Act. At the heart of McLaren's project of critical pedagogy, and that of his latest book, is his sustained effort to define and enact new practices within the sphere of education that allow for the cultivation of more fully conscious and revolutionary subjects within the present historical context where critical thought continues in rapid

decline. By historicizing the sociology of schooling, *Capitalists and Conquerors* reveals a distorted expression of democracy that extends itself through the global reach of what McLaren and Jaramillo have poetically labeled “God’s Cowboy Warrior.” The fight to recolonize the sphere of education has, when considering the bleak educational context set forth in *Capitalists and Conquerors*, reached a new level of urgency. This collection of essays articulates the advance critical pedagogy must make in its continued effort to reclaim democracy from a militarized, evangelical, and damaging form.

As a pioneer of the critical pedagogy movement Peter McLaren has focused resolutely on centering education in a democratic project that aims to produce radical subjectivities among students as opposed to pacified, disempowered individuals that contemporary capitalist social relations continue to require and produce through the institution of schooling. Indeed, *Capitalists and Conquerors* remains faithful to the project of the generation of a robust democracy through education: “It is this hollow form of democracy—defined by the shameful ferreters working for the corporate media—against which critical pedagogy fights an uphill battle, calibrating its project of social transformation” (p. 6).

Another facet to critical pedagogy’s struggle, as McLaren indicates in his book, is the fact that radical thought within the professionalized environment of academia has found itself in a difficult place. The hostile reaction to Marxist analysis within educational theory brought on by the hegemonic dominance of the standardizing ethos of neo-liberal educational policy, confounded by the politically uncommitted symptoms put forth by postmodern theorists of education, challenges the critical pedagogy movement at every turn. It is under such conditions that *Capitalists and Conquerors* advances the argument for the necessity of the critical pedagogy project while delivering clarity for those who remain hopeful in the emancipatory potential of education as a socially transformative process.

The theoretical lynchpin that drives McLaren’s *Capitalists and Conquerors* is a dialectical framework that illuminates the internal relations that have come to fossilize within the substance of the educative experience. McLaren’s dialectic rests in the manifold of the Marxist labor-class dynamic that, for him, is the most definitive characteristic of contemporary society. For McLaren, this is exactly where critical pedagogy’s intervention must take place—striking at the reproductive core of capital that continues to stamp its defining mark on our institutions of education. To be sure, McLaren effectively deflects reductionist interpretations of this model by arguing that it is precisely the “predatory” nature of capitalism that feeds off the production of alienated forms of life and the insatiable need to increase labor’s surplus value where critical pedagogy needs to focus its assault. McLaren’s analysis is very persuasive.

However, the question of praxis still remains. That is, given the reactionary and counterrevolutionary times, critical pedagogy is up against a leviathan of resistance. Schools and universities allow increasingly less room for emancipatory (or even “liberal”) practices within the classroom. So how then can critical pedagogy find a space to enact its theoretical perspectives? Furthermore, what does a classroom look like that is allowed to organically generate and bring to form the sensibilities of critical pedagogy? This reality seems far from the ground as neo-liberal logic continues to edify. Of course this challenge is not critical pedagogy’s alone. Indeed, as the darkness grows, as *Capitalists and Conquerors* aptly documents, the need for the theoretical groundwork for revolutionary change through education is needed now more than ever.

McLaren’s response to the present educational system that creates the conditions for the production of a newly anesthetized labor pool and disaffected citizens is a demand for its replacement by a pedagogy that resists these very social relations through the cultivation and practice of new political sensibilities within the sphere of education. The dialectic moment of negation within schooling in the critical pedagogy framework is thus reflected in McLaren’s question that asks “Do we, as radical educators, help capital find its way out of crisis, or do we help students and teachers find their way out of capital? The success of the former challenge will only buy further time for the capitalists to adapt both its victims and its critics, the success of the latter will determine the future of civilization, or whether or not we will have one” (p. 54). The fate of our civilization, to be sure, hangs in jeopardy given the Bush regime’s brand of imperialism that has been, as one of the dominant themes of this book suggests, touched by the hand of God. Undoubtedly, *Capitalists and Conquerors* provides a framework for the development of a critical pedagogy that can combat the cultural conditions that have brought forth a reign of madness.

Reminiscent of the political and social conditions that brought Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer to characterize advanced industrial period as one that “radiates disaster triumphant,” McLaren places the global spread of irrationality within the sights of a “revolutionary critical pedagogy” that seeks to reverse the production of a damaged form of life. *Capitalists and Conquerors* provides historical context for the critical pedagogy movement and elucidates new challenges that have arisen in an era of global imperialism and unbridled militarism. In the concluding essay, McLaren and Jaramillo suggest the direction critical pedagogy must take in such perilous times: “If we are to make inroads that will transcend the divide, our discourse of critical pedagogy must shift into another register, forming itself around new axes of commitment and solidarity and understanding” (p. 323). Part of forming these new axes of commitment and defining critical pedagogy’s evolving project requires an understanding of political and cultural norms that have sunk into the common sense of our

historical conjuncture. This latest book from McLaren is a resounding call to shatter such forms of cultural and political thought through a revolutionary pedagogy and, as such, is exemplary of his sustained effort to define the project of critical pedagogy. The perspective offered in *Capitalists and Conquerors* thus provides critical pedagogues with a vista where, like Hegel's beloved owl, we can view a form of life that has grown old and continue to fight for the day when we can spread our wings to fly to a better place.

### **Reviewer**

Clayton Pierce is a Ph.D student in Education at UCLA, with a specialization in philosophy and history of education. He is co-editor of the *Douglas Kellner Reader* with Paradigm Press and has authored an encyclopedia article with Douglas Kellner for Blackwell's *Encyclopedia of Sociology* on media and consumer culture. His scholarly interests include critical theory, critical theory of technology, critical pedagogy, and political theory.