

Revolutionary Educators Contrasted

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CHE GUEVARA, PAULO FREIRE, AND THE PEDAGOGY OF REVOLUTION,
by Peter McLaren (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000)

This book by one of the leading figures in critical pedagogy and the sociology of education seeks to counter the ideological dominance of neoliberalism by bringing together two figures who are often counterposed—Che Guevara, the martyred revolutionary guerrilla leader, and Paulo Freire, whose *PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED* helped inaugurate the movement for radicalized forms of education.

McLaren's concern is that at the moment when the inequities of global capital have never been more glaring, Freire's ideas are being so watered down that they pose no real challenge to existing society. He writes, "Where Freire was implacably prosocialist, critical pedagogy—his stepchild—has become (at least in classrooms through the U.S.) little more than liberalism refurbished with some lexical help from Freire (as in words like 'praxis' and 'dialogue') and basically is used to camouflage existing capitalist social relations under a plethora of eirenic proclamations and classroom strategies. Real socialist alternatives are nowhere to be found" (p. xxv).

While some "critical" educators who separate Freire's educational methods from a vision of radical social change may consider McLaren's effort to connect him with a revolutionary like Che to be somewhat scandalous, the real scandal, he rightly notes, is the way in which the original mission of critical pedagogy has been derailed.

McLaren seeks to counter this by recapturing both the radical vision of Freire and Che's advocacy of "revolutionary education from below."

McLaren does not ignore differences between the two figures. "Freire's pedagogy was fertilized more in the domain of critical dialogism than was Che's, and his vision of the new society was decidedly more open ended" (p. 189). And whereas Che grasped the importance of movements like the Black struggle in the U.S., Freire "rarely addressed the

ways that oppression on the basis of ethnicity, class and sexual orientation are intermingled” (p. 166).

What connects these two figures, McLaren shows, is that , “For Che, as for Freire, education needs to take on an extra-ivory tower, public sphere role in contemporary revolutionary movements and in politics in general ” (p. 187). Moreover, “For both Che and Freire, the dialectic must be disencumbered by metaphysics and grounded in the concrete materiality of human struggle. In the process of becoming fully human, everyday life must be informed by a theory and practice relationship that truly alters ideas and experiences within a larger revolutionary dialectic” (p. 202).

THE LEGACY OF CHE GUEVARA

The bulk of McLaren’s book recounts Che’s development, but from a new angle—the way his conduct as a revolutionary embodied an alternative form of critical education.

The Che presented by McLaren is a man deeply concerned with theory, insistent on ensuring that his comrades grasp its importance, and concerned about ending the division of theory and practice which is the hallmark of class society. He does not mention Che’s tendency to downplay theory, as seen in his famous statement in NOTES FOR A STUDY OF THE CUBAN REVOLUTION, “Even if the theory is not known, the revolution can succeed if historical reality is interpreted correctly and if the forces involved are utilized correctly.”

This does not mean McLaren is uncritical of Che. He notes that Che did not fully understand the indigenous peasantry in Bolivia in 1967, which helps explain his failure to generate support from it in his ill-fated guerrilla campaign. He also takes up, in a fascinating section, the differences between Che’s concept of guerrilla focus and the Zapatistas in Chiapas: “Clearly, the Zapatistas have broken with much in the Leninist, Guevarist, and Maoist traditions in order to follow the indigenous concept of ‘command obeying’” (p. 65).

Nevertheless, he finds Che’s uncompromising revolutionary spirit and insistence on learning as an integral part of the revolutionary process to be a vital contribution to any effort to reorganize society.

Less satisfying is McLaren’s discussion of Che’s attitude toward Stalinism. While he notes that in the early years of the Cuban revolution Che enthusiastically supported Russia, he says Che later completely broke with the “Soviet model”: “Che did not view Soviet society as qualitatively different from capitalist society...Che recognized that

Soviet style self-management, which treated individual enterprises and economic sectors as independent entities, would likely reinforce uneven development. Che's model, on the other hand, would allow the state to plan for the economy as a whole and promote more balanced development" (p. 76).

This indicates that Che did not break decisively from a state-capitalist model of development but instead opposed the failure of the Soviets to successfully implement one. This is further confirmed by the fact (acknowledged by McLaren) that "It was no secret that Che admired [Mao's] China over the Soviet Union" (p. 127). There is little evidence that Che held that production must be directly controlled by the workers in order for any regime to be considered "transitional" to a new society.

CHALLENGING CAPITAL'S DOMINANCE

McLaren makes a powerful argument that Che and Freire's contributions offer vital ground for a critical, anti-capitalist pedagogy. Yet today's emerging generation of revolutionaries is reaching to begin from even higher ground—one that projects the transcendence not just of capitalism but also of what Marx called "vulgar communism." This is clearly what McLaren is reaching for as well.

He writes, "The challenge is to work toward the expropriation of the capitalists but also to ensure the abolition of capital itself. The abolition of capital, it should be noted, is intractably linked to the struggle against racism" (p. 101).

He concludes, "The struggle, as I see it, from the standpoint of revolutionary pedagogy, is to construct sites-provisional sites-in which new structured mobilities and tendential lines of forces can be made to suture identity to the larger problematic of social justice... This requires breaking the imaginary power of commodified identities within capitalism as well as the forces and relations that both produce and are products of capitalism" (p. 187).

McLaren has written a penetrating and inviting study which will do much to aid those trying to develop a comprehensive theoretic and practical alternative to global capitalism.

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