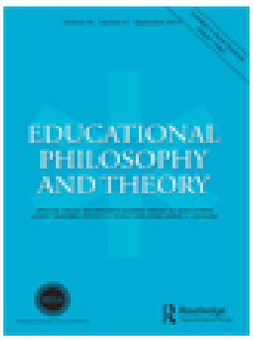

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Educational Philosophy and Theory

ISSN: 0013-1857 (Print) 1469-5812 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rept20

The future of critical pedagogy

Peter Mclaren

To cite this article: Peter Mclaren (2019): The future of critical pedagogy, Educational Philosophy and Theory, DOI: 10.1080/00131857.2019.1686963

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2019.1686963

EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY AND THEORY
https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2019.1686963

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

EDITORIAL

The future of critical pedagogy

I have been invited to comment on the future of critical pedagogy. What is the future of critical pedagogy? Has its tacit and enduring framework of liberation of the oppressed from forces and relations of exploitation been slowly and painstakingly whittled away by the unalloyed inertia of a long and protracted struggle that has lasted numerous decades. Or by the seemingly inexhaustible forces of the right? Has critical pedagogy been reduced to a shadow of its former self which once proclaimed an earth-shaking message so inhospitable to the laws of motion of capital that it was just as easy to imagine it was carried on a beam of light from the Pleiades star cluster than from a tiny schoolhouse in Pernambuco, Brazil, filled with sugarcane harvesters intent on reading both the word and the world. Is critical pedagogy at this present moment but a fleeting residue of its former association with Paulo Freire, whose pathfinding intervention into the dross and drudgery of the banking model of teaching brought hope and promise to those thirsting for liberation and helped teachers find their backbones in confronting the breathtakingly superficial pageantry of commodity culture and the swindle of neoliberalism that had formed its sacred center in capitalist relations of production, in the commodification of our subjectivity, in the transformation of relations between people into relations between things? Have critical educators been reduced to circuit preachers bullwhipped by their congregations who have stubbornly refused any message that stipulates that they sacrifice the comforts of this world? Has the critical educator, personified by Freire, become the impotent interlocuter of times past, who has now gone to seed in distant pastures. Has Freire become the educational talisman for students to cite, so that they can earn their credentials as criticalists? Is the potent brew of critical consciousness afforded by a pedagogy of the oppressed now just a cup of thin gruel passed from student to student in what remain of critical pedagogy seminars in the age of Trump?

Those are far too cynical questions, in my opinion, yet they deserve a response.

If Freire's work has been decaffeinated over the years such that it no longer proves a threat to the ruling class any more than the work of Freire's educational precursors, then why, moments before his inauguration in early 2019, did Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro tweet, "One of the goals to get Brazil out of the worst positions in international education rankings is to combat the Marxist rubbish that has spread in educational institutions." And why, on the campaign trail, did Bolsonaro say that he wanted to "enter the Education Ministry with a flamethrower to remove Paulo Freire" (Bolsonaro to Erase Freire and Feminism from Textbooks, 2019)? Clearly Freire is a figure whose work needs to be reckoned with. If anything, his work is more relevant today than at any other time in its history.

If we look at the Chicago teachers who have recently inspired a national teacher uprising, then surely the critical tradition is holding sway. Whether they identify as Freirean educators or not, these rank-and-file teachers clearly have embraced Freire's spirit in challenging the corporate-driven takeover of public education. Disgruntled and fed up Chicago teachers have made striking respectable again. And they have made teachers excellent role models to follow once again. And what about the cadres who turn out books about or inspired by critical pedagogy? Are they just keeping up with educational fashion? The issues facing humanity are too serious

for critical pedagogy to continue as a fashion statement. Clearly, it is the case that critical pedagogy has found a home in America Latina. In fact, writings produced by critical educators are often translated and used as a bulwark against fascism throughout countries spread across the world. While it may seem to some that critical pedagogy does not have a direct link to policy decisions traceable to local, regional or national arenas of education, it has impacted the field of education organically, by serving systematically and habitually as a moral compass for the way we treat each other in the classroom and by contributing to the epistemological, ontological and axiological stances we take in the production of knowledge and how we situate our actions in the larger environmental ecosystems that nourish us. And very often the impact is not necessarily felt in our own geopolitical backyards but in policies and practices developed by educators in other countries.

Critical pedagogy uncovers or otherwise identifies the enduring historical forces in educational discourses, practices, and values. These discourses, practices and values have been transformed over time and their common sense outcome in many instances has been historically relativized to encourage us to see what isn't there. Critical educators polemically reposition their critiques of education in capitalist society according to the contextually specific challenges that are unfolding at significant historical junctures and in doing so engage in dialectical reversals of received common sense such that the strange becomes familiar and the familiar strange. The challenge is to fathom not only why individuals remain ensepulchered within their received ideological formations—sometimes called the prison house of language—despite being presented with unwelcomed truths but also why they participate in the very activities which generate those dangerous truths while maintaining the appearance of being unbiased and open minded. Those of us who use the language of critical pedagogy in our work have been accused by the punishingly self righteous doyens on the right of being manipulated by proponents of "cultural Marxism." Here, the alt right maintains that the books of the Frankfurt School and some postmodernist theorists have allegedly served as ideological "anchor babies" smuggled into university libraries and planted on the shelves by communist sympathizers in order to carry out the unfinished work of the Soviet Union's assault on American freedoms. In other words, critical educators are accused of being knowing participants in the destruction of the United States after the Soviet Union disappeared into the quicksand of history. According to this logic, critical educators are functioning as witting puppets carrying out the orders of their Hidden Master (George Soros? The ghost of Hugo Chavez?) who is unleashing forces of destruction on the free world from some secret hideaway, perhaps located in the Vatican or in the catacombs of Paris.

Someone might intemperately ask at this point: Should an educational philosophy turned pedagogical movement be employed by teachers to challenge unassailably the growth of fascism here in the US and around the world, and shouldn't the bully boy populism of Donald Trump be dealt with at the ballot box rather than by cadres of teachers working from an ethics of social justice? I would simply answer this question with the following provision: If you feel compelled to ask this question, then perhaps teaching is not the right calling for you.

Freire's conceptual categories created by naming the world in order to transform it are always heuristic, and while they cannot capture the totality of the world they are useful in identifying certain important aspects of the world that can be transformed. Freire's work, grounded in a thoroughly Marxist, or dialectical materialist, theory of knowledge is also influenced by his Christian faith. Over time the exhausted epistemics of critical pedagogy have been supplemented by a conceptual polyamory that has tried at times to pull Freire's work more towards the left (revolutionary critical pedagogy) or towards the center (progressive liberal pedagogy). The work being produced in the field of liberation theology (McLaren & Jandrić, in press) puts a singular demand on those who have religious faith, the centerpiece of which is a demand for freedom and social justice. The knowledge co-created among students and among teachers and students working together in critical encounters with freedom is designated for use in developing social

justice programs designed to bring structural change in an oppressive society. But what does political praxis in the service of permanent human liberation entail?

It means recognizing that the structure of reality is never permanent and although it is often reified in order to appear to be permanent, that can never really be the case because the structure of reality is never finished. Changing the structure of reality means acknowledging the alterity which permeates the world and understanding that knowledge never reflects the world but always refracts it and we need to take responsibility for this refraction, this reduction of the strangeness of the world to the familiar. In challenging the social relations that structure reality, we necessarily change the very formation of our own selves in the process, and this dialectical exchange flies directly in the face of what many feel about popular religiousness—that it foments helplessness in the face of the "perversity" and "antisolidarity nature" of capitalism and its "absolute insensitivity to the ethical dimension of existence" (Frieire, 1997, p. 88). Freire writes:

> The issue around liberation and its practice is not fighting against the religiousness of the popular classes, which is a right of theirs and an expression of their culture, but rather overcoming, *with* it, the vision of a God at the service of the strong for a God on the side of those with whom justice, truth, and love should be. What marked popular religiousness—resignation and annihilation—would be substituted with forms of resistance to outrage, to perversity. This way, submission-faith toward a destiny that would reflect God's will makes way for a spurring faith of loving rebelliousness. In this process, there is an understanding of the body—for those who have evolved in their faith—as the dwelling of sin turns into an intelligence of the body as the temple of God. (1997. p. 103)

Freire is cautious about those who use their faith in situating themselves above the interests of those who lack it. He writes:

> I cannot see how those who so live their faith could negate those who do not live it, and vice versa. If our Utopia is the constant changing of the world and the overcoming of injustice, I cannot refuse the contribution of progressives who have no faith, nor can I be rejected for having it. What must not be accepted in those who proclaim their faith is that they *use* it at the service of the popular classes' uncriticalness. This is how I have always understood God—a presence in history that does not preclude me from making history, but rather pushes me toward world transformation, which makes it possible to restore the *humanity* of those who exploit and of the weak. (1997, pp. 103–104)

For Freire, there is an urgency to confront the "pornography of our lives" by denouncing injustice which simultaneously awakens in ourselves and in others, the need and taste for hope. Freire is worth quoting at length on this issue:

> Once more, in Brazilian history, it is urgent for purity to manifest itself against two-faced moralism, and for translucent seriousness to shine through against the audacity of shamelessness. In order to preserve hope, it is necessary to identify also as examples of deterioration the disrespect for popular classes, the indecent salaries paid to teachers in basic education, the lack of respect for public property, the excesses of government, unemployment, destitution, and hunger. These truly constitute the pornography of our lives. And so does discrimination, be it against blacks, women, homosexuals, the indigenous, the fat, the old. It is imperative that we maintain hope even when the harshness of reality may suggest the opposite. On this level, the struggle for hope means the denunciation, in no uncertain terms, of all abuses, schemes, and omissions. As we denounce them, we awaken in others and ourselves the need, and also the taste, for hope. (1997, p. 106)

What, then, is the "pornography of our lives" that we, as critical educators, need to confront on a daily basis? For me, living in the US, it is the struggle against fascism. Throughout history, fascism has often been the default response of those capitalist politicians who fear the economic universe in which they rule is facing an interminable crisis. Or when their sponsorship of the evangelical community—one that normally keeps their base ecstatically compliant and speaking in tongues by promises of a Mar-a-Lago Club afterlife—provokes enough citizens to raise ethical questions surrounding the legitimacy of the prosperity gospel. Dancing with the Stars is one thing, but how about Golfing with the Saints in Neverland, where the golf caddies look like Tinkerbell trussed up in Stormy Daniels dominatrix-style apparel. When politics and religion

begins to go this far south, which it has in the U.S., then it's time to have a military parade and a photo of yourself taken cuddling an American flag. Which Trump has done.

Those whom we categorize as filthy rich, who loathe the parasitical poor whom they complain are grubbingly panhandling outside big-box retail stores and CVS pharmacies, frightening the children of the affluent with their blackened teeth and muddy opioid eyes, are especially ripe for fascism because they lack empathy for others' suffering and have no understanding—and no wish to understand—the role that the contradictions of austerity capitalism play in the creation not of trickle down affluence but rather of structured hierarchies of power and privilege.

What could be more pornographic than the Jesus industry being taken over by big-dollar evangelicalism? Or suffering a president whose corrupt business ethics have permeated the entire logic of his presidency? What could be more pornographic than listening to William Consovoy, an attorney for President Donald Trump, in a hearing before the Second Circuit Court of Appeals in Manhattan, argue that President Donald Trump is immune from prosecution if he literally shoots someone on Fifth Avenue? We live in a pornographic universe where captains of the nation's industry still profess admiration for Ayn Rand, who modelled her capitalist will-to-power hero on a real life serial killer, where Education Secretary Betsy DeVos has said states can decide whether school districts can use federal funds to arm teachers, where the Trump administration's environmental reviews stubbornly acknowledge the extent of today's environmental devastation but minimize the connection between that damage and human-caused emissions, wording policies so as to protect fossil fuel interests, where neo-Nazi and white supremacist organizations are proliferating throughout the country (the far right accounted for 73% of extremist murders in the U.S. between 2009 and 2018, according to information taken from the Anti-Defamation League's Center on Extremism, compared with 23% by Islamic extremists—the result, in part, of a lack of appropriate domestic terror laws that would criminalize being a member of domestic terrorist organizations such as Atomwaffen or Feuerkrieg Division), and where the prosperity gospel of Christian evangelicals led by Franklin Graham, Paula White and Jerry Falwell Jr. have aligned themselves politically with the hate-filled anti-immigrant policies of Donald Trump. When, under such circumstances, we ask ourselves if critical pedagogy has become so dehydrated that it can no longer function as a serious counterpoint to the rise of fascism in the U.S. and worldwide we have to side with Freire, who writes that there can be no critical pedagogy without hope:

> Whatever the perspective through which we appreciate authentic educational practice—gnoseologic, aesthetic, ethical, political—its process implies hope. Unhopeful educators contradict their practice. They are men and women without *address,* and without a destination. They are lost in history. In an effort to maintain hope alive, since it is indispensable for happiness in school life, educators should always analyze the comings and goings of social reality. These are the movements that make a higher reason for hope possible. (1997, p. 107)

And where we find history being made by us, rather than for us, there is hope.

Critical pedagogy will remain a vital force in shaping the future of our collective commons when teachers assume the role of public intellectuals, of social activists, of political protagonists who are able to work with the insight that what happens inside the classroom cannot be disconnected from what is happening in the local community, the school district, and the wider precincts of democracy, including state and federal levels of governance—all the way to transnational movements for change. In this manner we can include as active, protagonistic agents those 43 teachers in training from Raúl Isidro Burgos Rural Teachers' College, that overlooks the village of Ayotzinapa in the poverty-stricken southern state of Guerrero, Mexico, who were forcibly abducted and then disappeared in Iguala, Guerrero, Mexico, and who have been missing since the night of September 26, 2014. As a critical educator, I admire and support the post-revolutionary educational movement known as the Rural Normal Schools, through which schoolteachers are introduced to critical pedagogy and trained in political organizing in some of

Mexico's most impoverished communities. In the 1950s and 1960s, Lucio Cabañas, who founded the Party of the Poor in 1967, studied at Raúl Isidro Burgos Rural Teachers' College. The teacher and guerrilla fighter, Genaro Vázquez, was also a graduate from Ayotzinapa. Misael Núñez Acosta was a graduate of the Rural Normal School in Tenería and in 1979 he founded the Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación teachers union and was killed two years later. Graduates of the rural schools are trained to educate poor "campesinos" or peasant farmers through a tradition of socialist education. Attacks on students are far from a rare occurrence in Mexico. We cannot forget the hundreds of brave students who were beaten by police and massacred on Oct. 2, 1968, in Tlatelolco square in Mexico City. Or the struggle for land of the Manoba peoples in the Philippines. Or Brazil's landless peasants movement, the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, or the Abahlali baseMjondolo, or shack-dwellers' movement in South Africa. Or Idle No More, or Black Lives Matter. And there are more, so many more movements.

What is the future of critical pedagogy? The answer can be seen on the streets, on the picket lines, among young and old alike working to save communities assaulted by corruption and neglect and striving amidst great odds to create sanctuary cities for immigrants under assault by the Trump administration's group of fanatical and ruthless aides-de-camp and adjutants, and his Freikorps group of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents. And lest we forget, the future of critical pedagogy can also be found in cramped university offices jammed with metal desks and cheap Office Depot swivel chairs, where lecturers, sometimes working as adjuncts and forced to survive on food stamps, write their articles and books and heat up the conversations in seminar rooms, which in turn get reinvented, reappropriated and repurposed by teacher educators, and then teachers, in classrooms across the country and this helps to fuel the process of conscientização (conscientization) among students. They are the educators who teach about the 1921 Tulsa Massacre in Tulsa, Oklahoma, when Tulsa's "Black Wall Street" in the Greenwood District, home to black millionaires, was burned down and some estimates put the slaughter of black people—men, woman and children—that day at 300. They teach about the intersectionality of race, class, gender and sexuality without reducing difference to identity. And in so doing they will continue to make history. Young people today are more readily able to distinguish the dangerous cost of choosing a humanizing capitalism over a socialist alternative, and are willing to participate in the mobilization of the working-class rather than to remain content with participating in a reciprocal and balanced relationship between business, labor and the state, with creating better policies rather than an oppositional politics. The future is open for the creation of national working-class parties and critical pedagogy needs to be at the ground level of this revolutionary struggle if it is to remain vital and relevant for the future of humanity. They teach about the Greensboro Massacre, which occurred after the Klu Klux Klan made common cause with American Nazi Party in North Carolina. On November 3, 1979, the Nazis and Klansmen confronted a group of communist protesters at a rally, brought out pistols, rifles and shotguns from the back trunk of a car, and shot to death five members of the Workers Viewpoint Organization and injured ten others. They teach about movements in the global south, such as the struggle to create popular baccalaureate schools in Argentina. The struggle to create popular baccalaureates—such as the Workers University at IMPA (Industrias Metalúrgicas y Plásticas Argentina) and the Maderera Córdoba, which are housed in factories recovered by the workers (fábricas recuperadas)—is no easy task, especially in the current era of neoliberal urbanization. Such a challenge is of vital importance in the ongoing fight for a radical democratic and socialist alternative to the enduring crime of capitalist exploitation that has divided the world between the transnational capitalist class and those who depend upon wage slavery to survive. The creation of popular baccalaureates in Argentina must be seen in the context of unleashing the emancipatory potential of the larger struggle for workers' rights. This struggle cannot and must not make invisible the major contradictions that define today's austerity capitalism–the systematic transfer of wealth from labor to capital which has had a devastating effect on housing, food, health care

and education in poor, marginalized communities. In addition, this struggle must necessarily involve a diverse alliance of political and cultural actors that include the workers from the recovered factories, students, teachers, professors, artists, lawyers, government legislators and unionists–all who agree to a politics of "unity in difference" in supporting and strengthening the workers' cooperatives, in creating expropriation laws in favor of workers, in reforming the Bankruptcy Law, in assisting workers in their acquisition of state subsidies to purchase necessary factory equipment and in supporting new innovations in modes of production. Popular baccalaureates that have been born out of the struggle to recover the factories, especially those driven by revolutionary critical pedagogy, make explicit their resistance to capitalist exploitation and foster a strong link between learning and praxis. It is a emancipatory praxis that employs theater, music, cultural activities, community-building, and critical literacy—as well as an emphasis on science and mathematics taught under an ethical stipulation that all learning be dedicated to improving the lives of the population in a world threatened by planetary extinction. This work could not be accomplished without the valiant efforts of groups of teachers, workers, community members and other supporters in forging an alliance that gives both the youth and their families the opportunity to exercise their creative capacities in becoming critical citizens who can dream beyond the limits imposed on them by the neoliberal state.

So far critical pedagogy has shown itself to be durable and enduring. It will survive and continue to develop in the coming years, as the struggle for a democratic socialism becomes more fierce and fraught with danger. In this, one of the darkest hours of our national life, critical educators take no pleasure in censuring the most desperate and loathsome designs of neoliberal administrations, designs fueled by the political bloodlust of a bourgeoisie in crisis, designs that can only be described as a tryst with the devil. What defeats we have experienced recently are not irremediable, are not inevitable. Critical educators have come to recognize that only by sheltering the persecuted, and only by creating the conditions of possibility for new and emancipatory forms of praxis in all spaces of human sociability can we obtain as a people a new birth of freedom.

References

Associated Press. (2019, February 19). Bolsonaro to remove Freire and feminism from textbooks. TeleSur. Retrieved from https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/Bolsonaro-To-Erase-Paulo-Freire-and-Feminism-From-Textbooks-20190212-0018.html

Freire, P. (1997). *Pedagogy of the heart*. New York, NY: Continuum.

McLaren, P., & Jandric, P. (in press). *Postdigital dialogues on critical pedagogy, liberation theology and information technology*. London and New York: Bloomsbury.

Peter Mclaren
Chapman University, Orange, CA, USA and Northeast Normal University, Changchun, China
peter.mclaren1@gmail.com