

Reflections on love and revolution

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“Most people don’t understand what they have been part of here,” said Command Sgt. Major Ron Kelley as he and other American troops prepared to leave Iraq in mid-December. “We have done a great thing as a nation. We freed a people and gave their country back to them.”

“It is pretty exciting,” said another young American soldier in Iraq. “We are going down in the history books, you might say.” (*Washington Post*, December 18, 2011)

Ah yes, the history books, the multi-volume leather-bound set of “The Greatest Destructions of One Country by Another.” The newest volume can relate, with numerous graphic photos, how the modern, educated, advanced nation of Iraq was reduced to a quasi failed state; how the Americans, beginning in 1991, bombed for 12 years, with one dubious excuse or another; then invaded, then occupied, overthrew the government, tortured without inhibition, killed wantonly, ... how the people of that unhappy land lost everything — their homes, their schools, their electricity, their clean water, their environment, their neighborhoods, their mosques, their archaeology, their jobs, their careers, their professionals, their state-run enterprises, their physical health, their mental health, their health care, their welfare state, their women’s rights, their religious tolerance, their safety, their security, their children, their parents, their past, their present, their future, their lives ... More than half the population either dead, wounded, traumatized, in prison, internally displaced, or in foreign exile ... The air, soil, water, blood, and genes drenched with depleted uranium ... the most awful birth defects ... unexploded cluster bombs lying anywhere in wait for children to pick them up ... a river of blood running alongside the Euphrates and Tigris ... through a country that may never be put back together again.

William Blum, *The Anti-Empire Report*. January 12, 2012

<http://killinghope.org/bblum6/aer101.html>

Resumo

Este ensaio constitui uma reflexão de Peter McLaren sobre a importância da obra de Paulo Freire, hoje, especialmente durante a crise global do capitalismo. O autor contextualiza o amor existente na relação entre Paulo e Nita dentro de uma

forma mais ampla a abranger o amor pela humanidade onde ambos buscam criar um contexto educativo em que o oprimido possa liberta-se das várias formas de opressão. O autor relata seus primeiros encontros com Paulo e reflete sobre o projeto socialista que ele acredita que serviu de base para a pedagogia da libertação de Paulo.

Abstract

This essay constitutes a personal reflection by Peter McLaren about the significance of Paulo Freire's work today, especially during the global crisis of capitalism. The author situates the love that animated the relationship between Paulo and Nita within the context of a wider love for humanity and their joint quest to create an educative context in which the oppressed can liberate themselves from forms of oppression. The author recounts his early exchange with Paulo and reflects upon the socialist project that he believes served as a foundation for Paulo's pedagogy of liberation.

Each day I witness my adopted country, The United States of America, slowly unraveling. I'm writing these words while listening to a song by one of my favorite bluesmen, John Hammond Jr., who is rasping the words, "It's hard to believe the condition the world is in." And who could disagree with that? With little public debate, Congress has now passed the National Defense Appropriations Act, accompanied by Amendment 1031, which legalizes the military detention of American citizens and provides a staggering \$662 billion for the US war machine. Signed by President Barack Obama, this indelible landmark in U.S. history stipulates that any American citizen — politicians included — can now be arrested anywhere in the world and detained indefinitely — even for life — without due process or any legal recourse. The oldest democratic right (codified in the course of the English Revolution in the 17th century), habeas corpus (requiring the government to present evidence to a judge or court to justify taking a person into custody) has been systematically revoked. Anyone resisting ongoing US wars in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia, or any future US wars initiated by Obama or Obama's successors could be incarcerated by the military.

For political activists and protesters fresh from the police batons reigning down like Katrina on Occupy Wall Street camps all across the country — whom the political right is trying to label as 'terrorists' — this can't be good news.

The marble pillars of democracy have crashed around our heads, leaving us ensepulchered in a graveyard of empty dreams and singing throatless canticles to an absent God; we are serried in a boneyard of anamnesis, in a mythical waterfront bar where throughout eternity we are compelled by history to sit on our stools sharing pickled eggs and "remember when" stories: Remember when the United States used to be a democracy? Remember when we fought for civil

rights? Remember when we saw the light of freedom shining on the hill? Remember the days before we handed the powers of Congress over to the military? Before the police state became official? Remember the days of lucent hope before the torture and secret prisons? Remember the halcyon days before the Great Recession, before the collapse of the eurozone, before the banks and businesses crashed? Before the vacillating actions of Obama gave way to felony and then rank treachery? The conditions of unfreedom in which we now find ourselves did not suddenly creep up on us out of the void, they are the solatium granted to a people who have given their faith over to others, who have let the little maledictions and solecism of daily political life over time culminate and abrade the flesh of our hope so completely that we resignedly give over the power of our agency to others to run the engines of democracy. Those of us in the academy are trapped in our own peculiar way. The wet-sock formlessness of postmodern theory has domesticated resistance in the academy.

As bad as it is in the United States, we cannot compare it to the political conditions that existed in Brazil from 1964 to 1985, a time of political repression when dissidents were routinely tortured and killed, a time when Paulo Freire was exiled for his 'subversive' educational theories and activities. A time when the Dzi Croquettes, an androgynous besterial theater troupe of avant-garde carioca artists led by Lenny Dale, took to the stages of Rio, using ambiguity, paradox, campy costumes, nudity and virtuoso dancing to satirize Brazil's sacerdotal institutions and defy the Brazilian dictatorship under the motto: "Not men, not women. People." Yet while we cannot compare today's conditions in the United States to the days of Brazil's infamous military junta, there is every indication that such a comparison may one day be likely.

Despite the best efforts of professional spin-masters working tirelessly at the nation's Ministry of Propaganda (also known as FOX News), the poor are straining at the leash to explode their pent-up cargo of vitriol aimed at the nation's corporate bloodsuckers: the rent-extractors, rich financiers, money-for-nothing bankers, kleptocrats, rogue traders, subprime malefactors, neo-feudal overlords of commerce headquartered in Wall Street, Paleolithic demagogues working as CEOs, and hedge fund slime masters, whose corporate machinations collect like massive gobs of rancid spittle in the melting pot of capitalism we call America. Those are the 99 percent, who do not control most of the country's wealth, who have become the victims of the great recession, and have organized themselves as the Occupy Wall Street movement (and various other Occupy movements). But the anger directed at the banking and finance establishment, or at the government's bailout of these institutions, while understandable, is nevertheless misdirected. The social relations that have victimized the poor are not simply the result of greedy bankers who over the last few decades have decided to overreach themselves in the frenzy of market deregulation; rather, the social relations that

are largely responsible of the current economic crisis are those produced by the regime of capitalism itself. Paulo Freire would have clearly understood this. And while the anger of the 99 percent may be misdirected, this historical moment presents itself as an opportune time to reflect upon capitalism and to explore alternatives to it. I believe that if Paulo were with us today, he would be encouraging us to examine the capitalist system and find democratic alternatives to it. He would also be supporting the young people who are educating themselves about the global power complex, including the transnational neoliberal financial system, and who are now organizing against new regimes of oppression that can be traced historically to the social relations of exploitation under capitalism.

I would like to share a description that I made of Paulo for a book edited by Tom Wilson, Peter Park and Anaida Colon-Muniz called *Memories of Paulo* (McLaren, 2010):

He was a picaresque pedagogical wanderer, a timeless vagabond linked symbolically to Coal Yard Alley, to Rio's City of God, to the projects of Detroit and any and every neighborhood where working men and women have toiled throughout the centuries, a flaneur of the boulevards littered with fruiterers and fish vendors and tobacco and candy stalls, the hardscrabble causeways packed with migrant workers and the steam punk alleys of dystopian dreams. This man of the people was as much at home in the favelas as he was in the mango groves, a maestro who would cobble together the word and the world from the debris of everyday life, from its fury of dislocation, from the hoary senselessness of its cruelty, from its beautiful and frozen emptiness and wrathfulness of its violence. And in the midst of all of this he was able to fashion revolutionary hope from the tatters of humanity's fallen grace. This was Paulo Freire. (p. 173)

It is impossible for me to think of Paulo in a strictly prosaic way. This is because Paulo is very much a poetic figure. This is not tantamount to saying that Paulo is larger than life, that he strides the world like some unmatched pedagogical colossus, or that he is immune to critique. It simply means that I carry Paulo in my heart and memories of Paulo are stored by me in the language of poetry, not only to be emotionally caressed but to be unpacked, interrogated, analyzed and understood with whatever theoretical tools I have available and under the historical conditions in which I am working.

I met Paulo for the first time at an AERA conference in Chicago in 1985. In 1986, his beloved wife Elza died. Shortly after Elza's death, Paulo wrote me a letter expressing the great sadness that had enveloped him completely. I was surprised to receive a letter from Paulo, and especially such a personal letter, having at the time met him only once. Years later, I came across the letter in my office at UCLA and I remember thinking to myself that I wish the letter would be lost,

as I no longer wanted the temptation to show such a letter of such intimacy to friends or to colleagues. Within days of finding the letter, I lost it, and have never been able to recover it. I also remember the unmitigated joy Paulo felt when he married Ana Maria Araújo Freire, and became a devoted husband to “Nita” who blessed his life with a reciprocal devotion, a fierce intelligence and a relentless dedication to social justice. Nita became an inspiration for Paulo, their mutual love saturated both their lives and their work. One might be tempted to compare Paulo and Nita to Sartre and De Beauvoir, Luxemburg and Kautsky, or Karl and Jenny Marx, but that would be romanticizing a relationship that needs no comparison to other historical couples. They were simply Nita and Paulo, lovers and intellectuals who combined both dimensions in their protagonistic actions in the service of the people and their needs. And in doing so, they created a moral affinity that constituted the conditions for the possibility of love. This is the true meaning of revolutionary love, recognizing that love can only exist between free and equal people who share similar ideals and a commitment to serving the poor and the oppressed. The revolutionary love of Nita and Paulo thrived in such conditions.

I remember meeting Nita in an airplane in Rio, quite accidentally, and asking her what she thought of my idea about writing a book about Paulo and Ernesto Che Guevara. Nita replied that she thought Paulo would approve of such an idea, and Nita’s enthusiastic support helped to give me the confidence I needed to complete the book. Eventually, Nita wrote the Preface to *Che Guevara, Paulo Freire, and the Pedagogy of Revolution* (McLaren, 1999) in an emotionally riveting style that set a beautiful tone for the work that followed.

During the decade that I came to know Paulo professionally and as a friend, I was particularly impacted by Freire’s discussion of university professors, since at the time I was frustrated with finding a place for myself in the academy. Freire, I noted, directed some harsh criticism towards university professors who maintained a willful ignorance about the dialectical relationship between pedagogy and politics (Freire, 1985):

I feel so sad concerning the future of these people who teach at universities and think that they are just professors. They don’t put their hands into politics because they think that it is dirty. It’s precisely in escaping from politics that you have to know that you are a politician, and that your tactics are not merely pedagogical ones. But we cannot escape from this fact that politics and education are interwoven. You must develop your tactics there in response to the situation you confront in the field, not here, in the university, unless you wish to stop the project. In that case you don’t need tactics. You could just come back home and leave the project. (p. 19)

Freire was especially disdainful of those professors who chose to remain isolated from the social contradictions of the day, and who ignored the historical conditions that helped to exacerbate those contradictions. To such professors, modes of inquiry and concepts are generally irrelevant to the pedagogical process. What matters most is how the teachers and students feel — not what they think or do — but whether or not they are enjoying what they do. Consequently and tragically, such professors exercise a “post” class pedagogy based on lifestyle, and irony, in which it is difficult — if not impossible — for students to confront the reality of others whose misery is the condition of their prosperity. At the very most, these professors muster their energy in order to free teachers and students from emotional distress rather than teach them about the social totality and its fatal entanglement in capitalist social relations. Such a pedagogy of domestication enforces anti-intellectual and trans-social individualism based on sharing one’s lived experiences. Both Paulo and Nita recognize that a critical pedagogy needs to accomplish more than to facilitate the sharing of lived experiences with one another. What is needed is a concrete and critical analysis of experience, of experience effects, an analysis that, in fact, goes beyond experience, that teaches us something that we don’t already know. This requires a language or languages to interpret experience, languages that can help us unpack the material conditions of experiences. Knowledge from our lived experiences cannot simply be read on their own terms; rather, critical educators must help students relate these experiences to their outside historical and social conditions. But also, we need to understand the loss of experience, including inner experience, as Walter Benjamin has distinguished this. Modernity has helped to replace remembering with memory, that is, collective memory (a magic disclosure of the world often accompanied by synesthetic experience and self-forgetfulness) with memory in the service of the intellect (a purely instrumental form of lived experience expressed in corporeally established habits and mechanical and purposive rationality). Like Benjamin, Paulo understood the need for political and moral redemption as a step in restructuring our modes of experiencing a world that has been shattered by modernity. It was this lesson that stood out early in my university work and my task was to provide students with the most powerful theoretical tools for students to understand their own self and social formation in relation to larger social relations of capitalist production, relations created within a brutal and systematic extraction of surplus value from proletarianized regions of the world (usually festering in a climate of bourgeois-comprador nationalism) culminating in an condition of substantive inequality and an egregiously unequal division of labor. In my early work I would deploy contrapuntally critical pedagogy, neo-Marxist critique and cultural analysis and in my later work I utilize a revolutionary Marxist humanist perspective with a focus on the role of finance capital and the social relations of production.

During this time the growing solidarity I felt with Paulo, Henry Giroux, Donaldo Macedo, Nita Freire, Antonia Darder, Joe Kincheloe, and Shirley Steinberg, among others, was helpful in anchoring me in the halls of academe while at the same time forming a bridge between the process of becoming a professor (which I increasingly viewed as a political project rather than as a career) and maintaining a working relationship with communities and constituencies fighting against the ravages of capitalism, with all the attendant antagonisms of racism, sexism, and homophobia. Paulo graciously wrote a Preface for my book *Critical Pedagogy and Predatory Culture* (McLaren, 1995). In his Preface he reflected upon our “intellectual kinship” and our relationship as intellectual “cousins” while at the same time lamented the preoccupation of so many academics and politicians with fighting amongst themselves when they should be uniting against their antagonists (Freire, 1995):

If someone should ask if intellectual kinship is a *sine qua non* to our ability to influence or be influenced, to work together, to exchange points of view, build each other’s knowledge, I say no. When such a kinship develops we need to cultivate within ourselves the virtue of tolerance, which “teaches” us to live with that which is different; it is imperative that we learn from and that we teach our “intellectual relative,” so that in the end we can unite in our fight against antagonistic forces. Unfortunately, as a group, we academics and politicians alike expend much of our energy on unjustifiable “fights” among ourselves, provoked by adjectival or, even worse, by purely adverbial differences. While we wear ourselves thin in petty “harangues,” in which personal vanities are displayed and egos are scratched and bruised, we weaken ourselves for the real battle: the struggle against our antagonists. (p. x)

Freire was able to break free from such “petty harangues” and the contemporary postmodern discourses that domesticate both the heart and mind, so that he could remain focused on his efforts to help students unlearn those myths produced by the dominant ideology that deform humanity.

If there is a spark of light in these very dark times, it can be found in the practices of resistance of which Paulo and Nita Freire speak, a resistance that I maintain is tethered to the fusty iron chassis of socialism. Too often, the term socialism evokes an image of spindle-shanked gangrels working the shop floor and agitating for better wages and improved working conditions, watched over in the panopticon of the factory by grim-faced men in dark frock-coats who report any infractions to the factory owners. Today, we have an example of the “electronic whip” — giant flat screen monitors that hang in the laundry rooms in the basements of the Disneyland hotels in Anaheim that serve to keep track of the fastest and slowest workers. But socialism is not something that can only or mainly be found in the European tradition. It is alive and well in indigenous communities

throughout las Americas. I believe that a socialism for the twenty-first century will need to look to indigenous communities for ways to fight what Anibal Quijano calls “the coloniality of power” and to secure an ecologically sustainable socialist alternative to the barbarism of capitalism.

For those who believe that it is human nature for some groups to dominate and control others, the goal of liberation is to make both the despot and despotic regime more benign. For Freire, such a solution is tantamount to cutting off our legs in the hope that one day we shall grow wings. If we make the road to emancipation by walking then we need to know at some point if we are on the right path in freeing ourselves from the many antagonisms that beset us. For Freire, being on the right path is to have a coherent and consistent vision toward which progress is directed and which can serve as a template for living fearlessly, knowing that moving forward implies overcoming many obstacles. It is to be guided by a vision that ultimately and irrevocably can bring justice to a world in perilous imbalance. Grave changes are warranted in our political civilization — not only the abolition of the commercial helotry of the factories and sweatshops but unclenching the fists we call our hearts, freeing us to reclaim our stolen humanity. Freire’s struggle was to be humble enough to wonder yet courageous enough to defy, to be sufficiently self-assured to rebel yet possess enough self-doubt to keep from backsliding, to have the audacity to be creative yet remain unburdened by socio-cultural dogma, to be vigilant against the new faces of tyranny yet ever conscious of the flaws and insufficiencies of our own struggles. Freire worked with the generic potential to posit a world that does not make capitulation and defeat inevitable. Those liberals and conservatives alike who preach the virtues of democracy without recognizing that their vision remains beyond the recuperative powers of the prevailing capitalist system are laying the foundation for plutocracy, and in so doing sawing from the tree the branch upon which they are perched: wizened old vultures masquerading as feathery companions of Minerva. For Freire, understanding the alienation of human labor is the skeleton key that unlocks the bone yard of capitalism and makes it vulnerable for transformation into its opposite — a world of economic, social, cultural, racial, sexual and gender equality. Freire’s pedagogy is connected to the utopian impulse, freed from utopia’s instrumental and petrified systematizing and idealist, totalizing form. It is a pedagogy committed to the historical, material, and situationally specific needs of humanity. It is a pedagogy of and for our times.

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