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**Review of *Pedagogy and Praxis in the Age of Empire:  
Towards a New Humanism* by Peter McLaren and Nathalia Jaramillo  
(Sense Publishers, 2007)**

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Peter McLaren and Nathalia Jaramillo's *Pedagogy and Praxis in the Age of Empire: Towards a New Humanism* is most fundamentally an argument for why anyone interested in a book with that title must devote herself to confronting a "crisis in global capitalism" (5). More specifically, it is a blunt and sustained call for educators to quit abandoning the anti-capitalism of critical pedagogy in favor of so-called economic progressivism or reform. If you're skeptical of that call—indeed, if you wonder whether anti-capitalist critique isn't a tad "quixotic" (148)—the book is intended for you. And with lines like this one—"Here in the U.S. the aroma of corruption is as pungent as the fopsweat that graced the storied jowls of an on-camera Richard Nixon" (3)—it promises to carry you through its polemic on what might itself be called pungently crafted prose.

The argument develops by seeking to show that a capitalist logic of exploitation lurks behind and within contemporary U. S. political, foreign, and educational policy. The book begins with a chapter on the Iraq war, moves to two intermediate chapters that discuss the federal No Child Left Behind Act and national calls for English-only education, and closes with a chapter on the broader U. S. "war on terror." By moving through this organization, the book seems to argue implicitly that one can hope to address each of these issues only by tackling their capitalist common denominator.

I found the implicitness of this argument sometimes frustrating. I felt similarly about the fact that the framing chapter's connections to education were sometimes murky for many pages. In both cases, though, the arguments periodically erupt into sudden, cogent clarity with what seems like the perfect example. One case in point is an organization called Creative Associates International Incorporated, which McLaren and Jaramillo report won a U. S. contract to "instill 'politically neutral studies' [in Iraq] by removing the former Ba'ath party nationalist curricula"—to which the authors remark tartly that they "will want to see how politically neutral the curriculum will be towards the U. S." (31).

The middle two chapters of the book focus most directly on U. S. education policy. While plenty of criticism has been directed at NCLB, McLaren and Jaramillo's discussion adds to it by microcosmically reproducing their book's overall structure:

drawing together the many levels on which capitalist goals determine the (sometimes surprising) features of the act. For instance, they connect its interest in commodifying knowledge, its boon to testing companies, and its opening the door to privatization of public schools together with its demand for access by military recruiters to high school students—a provision connected by the authors to the recruitment of low-income teens in the service of (capitalist) empire. McLaren and Jaramillo’s analysis of the politics of bilingual education works similarly to uncover their economic implications. Their chapter emphasizes the way in which racist attacks on bilingual education have often taken the form of startlingly explicit claims that English is the language of economic success.

The ultimate point of these demonstrations is to convince educators that now is the perfect time to be working towards socialist goals, rather than to be deserting them. They acknowledge that they expect this argument to meet with skepticism, and point to the phrase “free-market democracy” as an example of why. In their analysis, this phrase captures the way that people across the political spectrum have acquiesced in viewing capitalism as the only credible political, as well as economic, system in existence. The acquiescence, they suggest, has allowed a problematic economic system to piggyback on an unassailable political system. I should confess that at times, I went through a phase of speechless bafflement at some of the authors’ professed socialist goals. However, even after getting through that phase, I still had some questions, and they are not all cheap shots motivated by the skepticism the authors anticipate. Rather, they go to the heart of the book’s claim to promote a “regeneration of Marxist theory” (111) and to create space for a new register of critical pedagogy.

For instance, the book claims that it seeks to refocus attention on the role of capital in capitalism (102), rather than to belabor the (to them somewhat false) opposition between “state (nationalized capital) versus neo-liberalism (privatized capital)” (48). McLaren and Jaramillo insist forcefully that “exploitation” is capitalism’s fundamental feature, its driving force and goal. They argue that it makes no sense to expect a system to renounce or significantly ameliorate its organizing principle, and conclude that in the wake of such a principle, the leftist embrace of palliative measures—such as income redistribution—is simply self-deceiving. But such attempts to reinvigorate an economic discussion are undermined by periodic claims and terms—such as when McLaren and Jaramillo casually endorse “the abolition of private property” (48) in passing. If there was a line of reasoning linking the reminder of capitalism’s exploitative “rule of value” (49) to the “abolition of private property”—a line of reasoning, that is, that does not rely on the connection’s self-evidence—I didn’t see it. To put this point a little more sharply, I’m not sure why one couldn’t argue that exploitation could also be addressed by taking what George W. Bush—the villain of this book—calls an “ownership society” to an intense extreme. Other moments echo this one. The authors concede that they “are not advocating the elimination of religion” (19), but with a brevity that suggests that such an advocacy would be a remotely reasonable position to take.

The most problematic of such moments, though, are those at which the book seems to pick unnecessary fights with critical camps that might otherwise, in a real reconfiguration

of theoretical landmarks, be useful allies. McLaren and Jaramillo take particular issue with post-structuralism, and especially Derrida and Foucault. They outline their differences in part by noting that post-structuralism emphasizes a “universal particularism,” while they embrace a “particular universalism.” This distinction is fine, but I find myself wondering how incompatible these things really look in practice. For instance, although the authors roundly “reject the notion, advanced by Foucault and other post-structuralists, that posing a vision of the future only reinforces the tyranny of the present” (57), I have trouble reconciling this blanket rejection with their own interest in “initiat[ing] a *dialogue and conversation* among progressive educators” (34, emphasis mine), in which they claim that they must ask not “how to address the exploited but how they can address us” (198). Are these not all gestures of fundamental uncertainty about where exactly the conversation is to go from here, and might such gestures not more productively acknowledge the ethic behind Foucault’s reluctance?

The potential advantages of grappling more openly with non-Marxist theory are on display in the last chapter, which veers far from pedagogical questions to discuss the religious language of global capitalism, especially as espoused by Bush. Here the authors delve into the roles of affect and emotion in driving the alliance between working-class white men and the Republican party in the U.S. This attention dovetails with recent interest by political scientists in theorizing what Brian Massumi has called non-ideological modes of power. McLaren and Jaramillo’s formulations are finally worth engaging for the ways that they skirt the borders of the familiar, the forgotten, and the incipient in facilitating political movement.