

McLaren, P. & Farahmandpur, R. (2007). The pedagogy of oppression. In M.

Yates (ed.), *More unequal: Aspects of class in the United States*. New York:

Monthly Review Press.

The rhetoric associated with the term "democracy" which currently saturates the political landscape of civil society has lurched so far to the right that debates not easily situated within the clashing extremities of good and evil have been effectively sidelined, if not permanently excluded. The apocalyptic grandeur permeating the public spectacle of fighting terrorism has forced Americans to succumb to the fervor of the sound-and-fury packaging of the message rather than to question its substance, thus providing ideological cover for what Henry Giroux calls the "terror of neoliberalism."¹

Like a vast all-permeating sea, capitalism increasingly is swallowing all aspects of social and cultural life. The assault by big business on the public trust proceeds apace with little mainstream opposition, as corporations relentlessly pursue the highest margins of profits on their investments with little or no consideration for the welfare of the millions of the working poor; the war in Iraq is looking more like a replay of the expansionist agenda of 1890s America, with Bush Junior taking his cues from William McKinley's Philippines playbook; education, now synchronized to the pulse of Wall Street, is forcing millions of students in public schools to compete against one another through high-stakes standardized tests; the Bush camarilla has set feathers to the heels of the military industrial complex's wildest fantasies, pouring trillions of dollars into fighting Iraqi insurgents and securing production-sharing agreements that will enable the United States to control Iraq's oil. Such acts of largess, accompanied by skillful propaganda and strategically located military bases, will secure the U.S. military presence in the Middle East for decades to come.

Back in the Homeland, where the banner of free-market democracy flies the highest in a chilling vacuum of political probity, millions of Americans experience chronic homelessness and unemployment. Much like the war on terrorism, capitalism is ratcheting up the brutality of its deployment, creating a proletariat workforce, but on a grander scale than has been seen in recent decades. Religion, racism, and the ruling class continue to provide the motifs that shape our social universe. The state senate of Georgia recently passed a bill providing money to high schools that offer elective classes in Bible studies; anti-Muslim sentiments are on the rise along with activity by the Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis, and other vigilante groups that share ideological propinquities; and the public has learned about the tenacious ten-year efforts by eighteen super-wealthy families (with their accumulated wealth estimated at a staggering \$185.5 billion) to repeal the federal estate tax.² The current climate is ripe for an assault on not only immigrant groups of color but also on the educational system to which these groups often turn as a means of providing a better future for their children.

It is true that we no longer live in a country where Blake's "dark satanic mills" fleck the landscape of America's heartland. We have exported those mills elsewhere, but still profit from the misery of those forced to work in them. The transnational capitalist class still adheres to the "vile maxim" of the masters of mankind, condemned by Scottish political economist Adam Smith, that of "all for ourselves and nothing for other people."

We now face some of the most urgent problems of the twentieth century, one of which Manning Marable identifies as "the problem of global apartheid."³ This Marable describes as "the racialized division and stratification of resources, wealth, and power that separates Europe, North America, and Japan from the billions of mostly black, brown, indigenous, undocumented immigrant and poor people across the planet." The processes of global apartheid within the United States are represented by what Marable refers to as the "New Racial Domain." This new

domain of exploitation and suffering is different from the old racial domain of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, ghettoization, or strict residential segregation that were grounded in the political economy of U.S. capitalism, where antiracism was grounded in the realities of domestic markets and the policies of the U.S. nation-state. Whereas the struggles involving the old racial domain were debated "within the context of America's expanding, domestic economy, and influenced by Keynesian, welfare state public policies," the New Racial Domain, by contrast, "is driven and largely determined by the forces of transnational capitalism, and the public policies of state neoliberalism."⁴ Marable describes these forces as "an unholy trinity" or "deadly triad," which he names as unemployment, mass incarceration, and mass disenfranchisement. What is important about Marable's insights is that he avoids excessive subjectivism and traces this process to the point of capitalist production. He links the processes of the New Racial Domain to the advent of neoliberal capitalism and to the emergence of the transnational capitalist class. He sees the social consequences of these policies inside the precincts of the United States as the creation of "an unequal, two-tiered, uncivil society, characterized by a governing hierarchy of middle-to-upper-class 'citizens' who own nearly all private property and financial assets, and a vast subaltern of quasi- or sub-citizens encumbered beneath the cruel weight of permanent unemployment, discriminatory courts and sentencing procedures, dehumanized prisons, voting disenfranchisement, residential segregation, and the elimination of most public services for the poor." Exacerbating this already perilous condition is the racism that operates under the cover of race-neutral, colorblind language as well as the dismantling of unions and a xenophobia and ethnic and religious intolerance against Muslims and Arab Americans that fires the new American hyper-patriotism in a way that could "potentially reinforce traditional white racism against all people of color." Marable sees hope for the future, as we do, in a broad united front that includes the valiant struggles of those who fight on a daily basis against police brutality and mandatory minimum sentencing laws, the work of prisoners' rights activists, the efforts of those who advocate for a living wage and workers' rights, the work undertaken by those who struggle for day care, health care, public transportation, and decent housing, and the accomplishments of those who participate in the anti-globalization movement.

The anti-WTO protests in Seattle in 1999, the widespread demonstrations against the G8 summit in Genoa, Italy, in 2001, and the many anti-globalization protests since that time (including the recent G8 summit in Heiligendamm, Germany) have not only enlarged the compass of public understanding about the transnational sweep of contemporary capitalism but have also sparked the growth of coalitions composed of social movements, progressive organizations, labor unions, community activists, and ordinary citizens who are collectively engaged in various forms of struggles and resistance against global capitalism and U.S. imperialism. The recent anti-immigration Sensenbrenner Bill, named after its author and leading sponsor, Rep. James Sensenbrenner, which criminalizes undocumented immigrants and makes living and working in the United States illegally a felony, has outraged and angered many immigrant communities across the United States. In Los Angeles, for example, more than 500,000 demonstrators poured into the streets in protest against the anti-immigration legislature on March 25, 2006. The following day, more than 36,000 students in the Los Angeles Unified School District walked out of their classrooms. Similar student demonstrations and walkouts were reported in Dallas, Detroit, and Phoenix.

The fight for immigration rights could become one of the largest and most influential social movements in decades, a protracted struggle that draws from the ranks of the most oppressed and exploited layers of the U.S. working class. Although actions set in motion by immigrant rights organizations throughout the country—known variously as *paro economico* or *boicot economico* (economic stoppage or boycott) or *paro civico* (moratorium)—continue to be effective in fighting proposed state laws that would not only victimize undocumented workers but also their employers, and the businesses that deal with them, such actions treat the symptoms of neoliberalism rather than the disease. They do not, for instance, address Latin America's lack

of inclusive economic growth vis-a-vis the more developed capitalist countries; more significantly, they do not challenge the nature and persistence of predatory capitalism and imperialism.⁵ The protest marches against draconian immigration policies are sure to rekindle debates over the effectiveness of bilingual education (President Bush has denounced the recent singing of "Nuestro Himno"—a Spanish variation of "The Star Spangled Banner"—by claiming that the national anthem should be sung in English) and the goals of multicultural education (with its recent emphasis on critical citizenship), but they are unlikely to motivate large numbers of U.S. citizens and non-citizens to question the legitimacy of capitalist social relations, at least not in the foreseeable future.

Along with the recent mass protests in the United States against the domestic policies of the Bush administration and his cronies (which Bush has warned might cost Americans the loss of "our national soul"), there has been a growing and increasingly visible international movement against neoliberal social and economic policies (that continue to force unskilled and skilled wages downward). In France, for example, over a million workers clashed with police over the new labor laws that allow private corporations more flexibility to release or fire workers under the age of twenty-six. In Argentina, the workers' autonomous movement has emerged as a response to the country's recent financial downfall. More than 20,000 unemployed workers organized and took over and reopened factories that were closed down and abandoned by companies that had moved their operations abroad to China, where labor costs are much lower and profits are much higher than in Argentina. In Bolivia, the victory of Evo Morales, the first indigenous president in the country's history, is a sure sign of hope for the millions of indigenous people who make up 75 percent of Bolivian population. In recent years, the enforcement of neoliberal social and economic policies in Bolivia, spearheaded by such international bodies and organizations as the IMF and World Bank, have only contributed to the acceleration of social and economic polarization. In the case of Bolivia, for instance, free trade policies have downsized the standard of living of more than 66 percent of Bolivians, who have been forced to survive on two dollars a day. Recently, in a symbolic gesture of solidarity with the Bolivian people, President Morales announced he would cut his salary by half in order to hire more teachers. Of course, Venezuela under the leadership of Hugo Chavez leads the field (after Cuba) in its attempt at resisting U.S. economic and military imperialism and creating a socialism for the twenty-first century.

The No Child Left Behind Reform Movement

Teachers and educational activists have increasingly played an important role in the fight against neoliberal capitalism. This has become most clearly evident in their opposition to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law, which is grounded in the half-century conservative fight to impose strict national standards in U.S. public schools. The origins of the current standards-based reform movement in public education can be traced back to the early twentieth century when curriculum theorists like Ellwood Cubberley and others attempted to align school curricula to the needs and demands of the U.S. economy by developing a scientific approach to designing and planning them.⁶ From the 1950s to the 1970s, with the Cold War in full swing, the "back to basics" movement gained momentum in teacher education programs and graduate schools of education. Supporters of the movement were determined to ensure that school curricula reflected not only the ideologies and political views of the dominant social classes in the United States, but that they also prepared students for employment in the growing military industrial complex to defend the country against the "communist threat."

A report published in 1983, *A Nation at Risk*, was another significant milestone in the history of the education reform movement.⁷ The report vilified schools for the relatively weak economic performance of the United States compared to its Asian and European rivals.

The driving forces behind the recent educational policies of the NCLB Act, passed in 2001, are neoliberal social and economic policies that favor flexibility, efficiency, outsourcing, and downsizing methods of production. Under the neoliberal economic model, schools must perform similar to corporate entities. Just as the Dow Jones stock indices measure the performance of companies and represent the pulse of Wall Street, so too the Adequate Yearly Progress Report (A.Y.P.) measures and ranks the performance of public schools. One of the most pernicious results of the No Child Left Behind law is that the state can now indefinitely close or restructure "underperforming schools," those that fail to meet the requirements established by the A.Y.P. Greg Palast's description of the effects of the provisions within the NCLB reform movement is informative:

Under No Child Left Behind, if enough kids flunk the tests, their school is marked a failure and its students win the right, under the law, to transfer to any successful school in their district. You can't provide more opportunity than that. But Bush does not provide it, he *promises* it, without putting up a single penny to make it happen. In New York, in 2004, a third of a million students earned the right to transfer to better schools—in which there were only 8,000 places open. New York is typical. Nationwide, only one out of two hundred students eligible to transfer manage to do it. Well, there's always the army.⁸

Take the case of Arizona, which spends \$7,000 per pupil in their current schools, and runs a program that provides vouchers for \$1,000. Where can you find a school to teach your child for \$1,000 a year? In reality, a voucher is what Greg Palast calls a "coupon" that "lets you get something for no cost." Palast asks:

So who benefits from this "free" private school program? According to No Child Left Behind expert Scott Young, 76% of the money handed out for Arizona's voucher program has gone to children already in private schools. In other words, the \$1,000 check from the state turned into a \$1,000 subsidy for wealthy parents, a \$1,000 discount on private schools for the privileged. How astonishing: a program touted as a benefit for working-class kids that turns into a subsidy for rich ones.⁹

As a stipulation of NCLB, supplemental Educational Services assists schools in hiring tutors from for-profit companies for students who fail tests. Schools are required by the federal government to pay out 20 percent of their tiny "Title I" subsidy to hire tutors from private companies. This often means cutting back their own teaching staff to pay for contracts with private tutoring companies. Many of these tutors, however, are not credentialed because federal law does not require them to be. Perhaps schools will hire the youngest of the Bush clan—Neil—to help educate their students. Neil Bush's education company, Ignite!, promotes automated teaching via television screen. An advisor to Ignite! is exiled Russian tycoon Boris Berezovsky, whose presence in Latvia has been banned by the Latvian government.¹⁰

At the same time, an emphasis on testing (resulting in a teaching-to-the-test mania), strict accountability schemes, prepackaged and scripted teaching for students of color, and a frenetic push toward more standardized testing (what Jonathan Kozol refers to as "desperation strategies that have come out of the acceptance of inequality") has been abundantly present since the mid-1990s. But what has this trend produced?¹¹ As Kozol points out, since the early 1990s, the achievement gap between black and white children has substantially widened, and at about the same time we began to witness the growing resegregation of the schools (when the courts began to disregard the mandates of the *Brown* decision).¹² This has led to what Kozol calls "apartheid schooling." Kozol reports that in 48 percent of high schools in the country's largest districts (those that have the highest concentrations of black and Latino students), less than half of the entering ninth graders graduate in four years. Between 1993 and 2002, there has been a 75 percent increase in the number of high schools graduating less than half of their

ninth-grade high school class in four years. In 94 percent of districts in New York State where the majority of the students are white, nearly 80 percent of students graduate from high school in four years. In the 6 percent of districts where black and Latino students make up the majority, the percentage is considerably less—approximately 40 percent. There are 120 high schools in New York (enrolling nearly 200,000 minority students) where, Kozol notes, less than 60 percent of entering ninth graders make it to the twelfth grade. Such a statistical record has prompted Kozol to exclaim: "There is something deeply hypocritical about a society that holds an eight-year-old inner-city child 'accountable' for her performance on a high-stakes standardized exam but does not hold the high officials of our government accountable for robbing her of what they gave their own kids six or seven years earlier."¹³

Moreover, many of these multiple-choice, norm-referenced tests are unreliable and are unable to provide valid score interpretations. Tests are only worthwhile when they further instructional design, that is, when they can help teachers teach more effectively. The other key question is: What, exactly, do we want our teachers to teach effectively? In other words, effective teaching for what? And in whose interests? Who benefits from such effective teaching, the capitalist class or future wage earners totally dependent on selling their labor power in order to survive? Teachers and students are often excluded from participating in their own learning when the one-size-fits-all approach to standards focuses on uniformly covering material that is selected on the basis of its testability or ability to be quantified as measurable outcomes rather than focuses on discovering ideas. Noninstructional factors (such as the number of parents living at home, parents' educational background, type of community, and poverty rate) account for most of the variance among test scores when schools or districts are compared.¹⁴ It is likely that standardized tests almost always hurt the education of working-class students and unlikely that they can help, especially given the fact that norm-referenced tests are designed to even out the averages. The questions for the tests (reflecting the biases of the test makers) are related to the world outside of school, a world that requires a set of skills and knowledge more likely possessed by students from affluent families. Affluent families, schools, and districts are better able to afford test preparation materials and services. When poorer schools scrape into their budgets to acquire such materials and services it is often at the expense of basic educational resources such as books. And teachers who are required to "teach to the test" are using low-level, drill-and-skill teaching methods. Alfie Kohn calls the disproportionate pressure on teachers of minority and low-income students to raise tests scores, coupled with the fact that minority students are most likely to be denied diplomas as a result of failing a high-stakes exit exam, a form of "educational ethnic cleansing."¹⁵

What's Behind the No Child Left Behind Act

The NCLB Act championed by President George W. Bush is an egregiously flawed act that doesn't—as it claims to do—support school improvement. In the context of the Bush administration's storied hostility to public education and its neoliberal ideology of privatization, it does just the opposite. It uses flawed standardized tests and reactionary approaches to the notions of assessment and accountability to punish schools that it labels as "failures" with sanctions that make the situation worse rather than improving it. Instead of rewarding schools for their success, NCLB is saturated in an ideology of "weed out the worst" in a war against the poor.

The mandates of NCLB call for the elimination of the academic "achievement gap" that exists between different groups of students, particularly at-risk students, but it is woefully unable to fulfill its promises. The teeth of its measures has democracy in a death clamp. NCLB imposes standardized annual testing—from third to eighth grade—in language arts, and math. Science was added in 2006. Based on annual test scores, NCLB prescribes an accountability schema ("adequate yearly progress") that focuses on sanctions for failing schools. Schools that fail to

improve their test scores must use federal funds to pay for extracurricular tutoring and for transferring students to a so-called high-achieving school. Sanctions encompass a wide variety of activities, but there is little doubt that they open the doors to corporate and faith-based sponsorship of instructional services—a move that at the federal level is unprecedented. NCLB imposes numerous other regulations on teaching practices in the area of literacy. It also includes a phonics-based initiative that is heavily influenced by SRA/McGraw-Hill's business plan known as Open Court. Some proponents of this enfeebling initiative include members of the Christian Right movement that refer to phonics as "Judeo-Christian." These same champions of phonics would refer to constructivist approaches to reading or Freirean approaches to literacy as pernicious forms of secular humanism.

And finally, NCLB mandates that local authorities not only provide access to military recruiters on their campuses but that they also provide them with student names and contact information. Schools that receive federal financial support risk having their funds withheld if they do not provide access to military recruiters. Prior to the legislation, one-third of the nation's high schools refused the military access to student information. San Francisco and Portland, for example, had board policies against military recruitment because of its discriminatory policies against gays and lesbians. The only true option provided to students who do not wish to be contacted by the military is to have their parents initiate restricted access to their children. But many students and parents don't have adequate information on how to do this—before it is too late. We know that the military is now using more relaxed defense department rules to sign up more high school dropouts and students who score lower on mental-qualification tests.

Legislative provisions of the NCLB Act clearly make the process of privatizing education a lot easier through a testing and accountability scheme that will increase the likelihood of failure of students in economically disadvantaged schools. NCLB is directed toward transferring funds and students to profit-making private school corporations through vouchers. This is essentially a neoliberal model of education. It promotes the full marketization and "businessification" of public education, a move that will destroy much of its quality. A cardinal constituent of reform in NCLB is relying on the so-called self-regulating market to "fix" educational services. The neoliberal ideology that permeates the NCLB does not share the interest of the majority of its citizens, does not relate to the lived experiences of the poor, and does not provide adequate opportunities for youth to develop into critical agents and active participants in the development of a society freed from the alienation wrought by capitalism.

The bell curve rationality of the tests that antiseptically cuts off scores irrespective of a student's linguistic background, class background, or national origin, and that sorts students into categories on the basis of single test scores, does little to motivate students to do anything other than to leave school. This punitive test-driven "reform" puts inordinate pressure on teachers to teach to the test—to narrow their focus on what subjects should be taught and what themes and topics should be addressed. Doing well on multiple-choice questions becomes the cardinal focus of the curriculum and thus pedagogical approaches to teaching subjects critically, through a dialectical approach to social life, are diminished if not lost altogether. Conspicuously absent in this exercise in futility are critical pedagogical approaches that include examining the contradictions between what is happening to students in their everyday lives and how the wider social order is constructed economically, how its legal institutions operate, and how the public and private spheres organize their priorities, and for whom. Little time in the school day is left to examine the politics of social life and how the world is driven by the capitalist law of value. In other words, there is virtually no time for public pedagogy—for learning to think and act in a manner that speaks to creating a socially and economically just society.

High-stakes testing should flatly be prohibited for graduation or grade promotion, and schools should be encouraged to focus on the use of multiple forms of assessment. Participatory democracy—local parents, educators, students, and other residents working together to make policy, curriculum, and pedagogical decisions about the school—should be at

the heart of public school accountability systems. Schools need quality teachers, adequate support staff, an engaging antiracist curriculum, critical approaches to teach against sexism and homophobia, an anti-imperialist approach to understanding national and world events and the relationship between them, useful assessments, adequate planning time and staff development, significant parent involvement, small class sizes, a de-colonizing pedagogical approach that validates indigenous ways of knowing, and leadership that reflects the courage to brush against the grain of the prevailing neoliberal agenda in education and the society at large.

In the present rush toward accountability schemes, corporate management pedagogies, and state-mandated curricula, an ominous silence exists regarding the ways in which new attempts to streamline teaching represent an attack on both the democratic possibilities of schooling and the very conditions that make critical teaching possible.

Framed in the language of hypernationalism and neoliberal economics, the current conservative attack on schools represents, in large part, a truncation of the democratic vision. Underlying the new reform proposals set forth by the recent coalition of conservatives and liberals is an attack on schools for producing a wide-ranging series of national crises, from the growing trade deficit to the breakdown of family morality. Not only does such an attack misconstrue the responsibility schools have for wider economic and social problems, but it is characteristic of a dangerous ideological shift regarding the role that schools should play in relation to the wider society.

At the heart of the ideological shift is an attempt to define academic success almost exclusively in terms of capital accumulation and the logic of the marketplace. The authors of the "blue ribbon" committee reports have cast their recommendations in a language that reflects the resurgence of chauvinistic patriotism and have reformulated their goals along elitist lines. In doing so, they have attempted to eliminate a social concern for nurturing a critical and committed citizenry. They have passively surrendered educational reform to a fetishism of procedure rather than demonstrating a concern with emancipatory social goals. Furthermore, the increasing adoption of management-type pedagogies has resulted in policy proposals that promote the de-skilling of teachers and the creation of a technocratic rationality in which planning and conception are removed from implementation, and the dominant model of the teacher becomes that of the technician or white-collar clerk. (Consider the narrowly scripted Open Court reading program published by the Science Research Associates in which teachers are told what to do at every moment of instruction. Here, dialogue and student interaction is undervalued as a vehicle for learning how to read.) At the same time, the model of the school has been transformed, in Giroux's terms, into that of the "company ' store." In general, the new efficiency-smart and conservative-minded discourse encourages schools to define themselves essentially as service institutions charged with the task of providing students with the requisite labor-power capacities to enable them to find a place within the social division of labor.

This New Right ideology of school reform—exemplified by the NCLB Act—provides only a sterile and truncated range of discourses and conceptions that undermines what it means to be a critical citizen. Under the logic of the reforms, students are taught to link citizenship to the profit imperative and the norms of market relations and brokerage politics wherein the vested interests of the individual, the corporation, or one's country are always valued over the collective interests of humanity. Rarely is the concept of profit maximization considered immoral, even when it is at the expense of the poor or minority groups, or, further afield, at the expense of the social and educational development of Central American and third-world populations. Absent from this discourse is any recognition of the importance of viewing schools as sites for social transformation and emancipation, as places where students are educated not only to be critical thinkers but to view the world as a place where their actions might make a difference. Absent are any discussions of socialism as an alternative to capitalist society, of direct, participatory democracy as an improvement over representative democracy, of ecosocialism or revolutionary

ecology as ways of challenging the endlessly proliferating commodity economy with its ecological destruction.

With the neoliberal agenda in full swing, the NCLB Act has shifted the discourse of progressive educational policy from "equality" to "adequacy."¹⁶ The language of "higher standards" and "higher expectations" has replaced the low-intensity social justice agenda of the center-left educators. Kozol debunks the conceptual frameworks used to explain the causes of underachievement among students of color. As part of the daily rituals and practices designed to raise student morale, schools now employ what Kozol refers to as "auto-hypnotic slogans." In schools that are identified as "underperforming," students of color are encouraged to memorize phrases such as "I can," "I am smart," and "I am confident" to boost their self-confidence and to improve their academic performance.

Today's Urban School Factories

Today urban schools are adroitly organized around the same principles as factory production lines. According to Kozol, "raising test scores," "social promotion," "outcome-based objectives," "time management," "success for all," "authentic writing," "accountable talk," "active listening," and "zero noise" constitute part of the dominant discourse in public schools.¹⁷ Most urban public schools have adopted business and market "work-related themes" and managerial concepts that have become part of the vocabulary used in classroom lessons and instruction. In the "market-driven classrooms," students "negotiate," "sign contracts," and take "ownership" of their own learning. In many classrooms, students can volunteer as the "pencil manager," "soap manager," "door manager," "line manager," "time managers," and "coatroom manager." In some fourth-grade classrooms, teachers record student assignments and homework using "earning charts." In these schools, teachers are referred to as "classroom managers," principals are identified as "building managers," and students are viewed as "learning managers." It is commonplace to view schoolchildren as "assets," "investment," "productive units," or "team players." Schools identify skills and knowledge students learn and acquire as "commodities" and "products" to be consumed in the "educational marketplace." Under the current climate of the NCLB school reform movement, teachers are regarded as "efficiency technicians" and encouraged to use "strict Skinnerian control" methods and techniques to manage and teach students in their classrooms. Kozol writes that in the market-driven model of public education, teachers are viewed as "floor managers" in public schools, "whose job it is to pump some 'added value' into undervalued children."¹⁸

To the disdain of progressive educators, the "test craze" is now a growing trend in most large metropolitan public school districts. In some districts, standardized testing begins in kindergarten. Some public schools have been forced to cut back or entirely remove art and music classes from their school curriculum. Other schools have reduced or altogether eliminated recess and/or nap time. Most public schools now have a testing coordinator. During homeroom, for example, school administrators encourage teachers to teach students test-taking skills and strategies. The Los Angeles Unified School District has developed its own quarterly assessment tests in math, science, social studies, and English. The district tests students every two months. We are told that the purpose of these district assessment tests is to prepare students for the statewide standardized tests in late spring. At teacher and staff development meetings, most of the time is spent on sharing and discussing effective strategies and methods to prepare students for quarterly assessment tests and to review state and districts standards. Teachers are also encouraged to attend workshops and conferences to learn more on how to align their teaching practices to the state standards.

As the standardized curriculum and standardized testing widen the achievement gap between poor and wealthy school districts, working-class students and students of color continue to be tracked into vocational programs and classes that teach life skills or offer basic

training that prepares them for jobs in the retail and service industry.¹⁹ Perhaps even more disturbing is the placement of high school female students in sewing and cosmetology classes. As we know by now, these classes do little for students who must compete with advanced placement and college-tracked students. It is painfully ironic that just as we are witnessing the factory model of schooling returning with a vengeance, the factories of yesteryear in which working-class students traditionally sought employment are moving out of the country, escaping unions and depriving workers of medical benefits.

The NCLB and the Militarization of Public Schools

Provisions within the NCLB legislation have removed obstacles to the recruitment efforts of the military to target high school students, in particular vulnerable students of color in urban public schools. The military has engaged in dirty recruitment campaigns and tactics to lure high school students to enlist in the army, including visiting classrooms and making weekly home phone calls to potential high school students to pressure them to join the army. Other strategies include driving Humvees to schools blasting hip-hop music and distributing free T-shirts and "Yo Soy El Army" stickers. What is unsettling is that the army spends \$13,000 in advertisements for each potential recruit, which is about the same amount of money to educate one child for one year in the New York public school system. In response, many students, teachers, and principals have organized local and national coalitions such as the Coalition Against Militarism in our Schools (CAMS) to resist military recruitment efforts in their community schools. Recently, the School Leadership Council at Roosevelt High School, located in the working-class Latino community of East Los Angeles—recognized as the number one "marine-recruited school in the nation"—passed a resolution to restrict military recruitment efforts at their high school.²⁰

And if all this isn't bad enough, the military defense budget continues to swell at the expense of funding public education. In the 2002-2003 annual budget, state tax revenues fell sharply by \$22 billion compared to the previous year. The Bush administration's decision to abolish the estate tax will cause an additional \$10 billion loss in revenues. The impact of the Bush administration's social and economic policies has been devastating. As David Goodman notes:

Schools around the country are reeling from the cuts. In California, where 3,800 teachers and 9,000 other school employees received pink slips last year, districts have cut textbook purchases, summer school, bus routes, maintenance, athletics, student newspapers, and electives. Half of the school districts in Kansas have cut staff; several districts have gone to a four-day week; and 50 schools in Kansas now charge students to participate in some extracurricular activities. In Michigan, funding for gifted and talented students is down 95 percent; Buffalo, New York, has been forced to close eight schools and eliminate 600 teaching jobs over the past years.²¹

Faced with the shortage of revenues to support their existing educational programs, many school districts have been forced to develop partnerships with corporations eager to step into the lucrative education market. Consider McDonald's recent adoption of a new strategy to promote its products in the highly profitable market dominated by children. This comes after the highly publicized libel suit, now famously referred to as the McLibel Case, and the recent film *Super Size Me*, which raised ethical and moral questions regarding McDonald's food processing and preparing practices that many believe have significantly contributed to obesity and other health risks among children. Nancy Hellmich reports that in an effort to restore its much-tarnished public image as the family-friendly fast-food chain, and to further protect its market shares, McDonald's has decided to capitalize on physical education programs in public schools.²² Over 7 million students in 31,000 public schools have agreed to participate in McDonald's "Passport to Play" program. The program consists of a number of multicultural

physical education activities including boomerang golf from Australia, Mr. Daruma Fell Down from Japan, and Holland's Korfbal. Students who complete each of these activities receive a stamp in a passport issued by McDonald's. According to Bill Lama, McDonald's chief marketing officer, the objective of the Passport to Play program is to educate students on the "importance of eating right" and "staying active." Such a strategically calculated move allows McDonald's not only to recover from much of the negative publicity it has received in the past few years but helps the food chain to secure a greater presence and visibility in public schools.

Beyond the NCLB: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Hope

As the drums of war drown out dissent and as accountability and testing regimes are imposed upon public schools, critical educators advocate for a curriculum that enables students to conceptualize, analyze, theorize, and critically reflect upon their experiences in the world. Despite their seeming singularity, experiences are not fashioned in isolation. Because experiences, though idiosyncratic, are part of a larger ensemble of social relations, it is important for students to interrogate their own experiences in the context of understanding how oppression and exploitation function within the larger totality of capitalist society. The long-term goal of education is the transformation of the existing social order. And that means teachers and students should have a number of theoretical approaches to work from—with a Marxist analysis of class as the centerpiece.

This approach is not new, having been developed over the years by exponents of the work of the late Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Fortunately, the work of Freire has managed to avoid the halting attention to which many other radical educators seem depressingly prone. For decades his work has been at the helm of critical pedagogy and popular education and his legacy seems assured. That is good news for the educational Left.

Although insufficiently heralded in the United States, Freire's masterwork, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, can claim a one-of-a-kind status in the annals of the educational Left. More than any other single book, Freire's signature opus continues to shape the ways in which many leftist teachers and educators frame political and ideological questions related to teaching and learning in their classrooms.²³ Freirean pedagogy has inspired and motivated a new generation of educators and activists to defend democratic principles, values, and practices in their classrooms and schools against the neoliberal onslaught in an age of terror, fear, and permanent war.

Viewing human beings as a "presence in the world" (this holds true even in a consumer-driven, mass-produced culture run by taste merchants and reality-television producers), Freire maintains that taking risks is an essential characteristic of our "existing being."²⁴ He reminds us that education, both as a political and ideological activity, involves taking risks. Our presence in the world is not a neutral presence. As political and ideological agents, we are compelled to take a stance within it. As Freire notes: "Nobody can be in the world, with the world, and with others in a neutral manner."²⁵ Thus "being" is a *being in the world*. Freire sees history impregnated with possibility and hope. However, to make that possibility tangible in the lives of the oppressed, he believes that we must actively engage and intervene in the world.

What does "being in the world" entail? Freire explains that our presence in the world is not to adapt to it but to work toward transforming it. Freire emphasizes that adapting to the world is only a process—a temporary phase—toward intervening and transforming the world. Thus adaptation is a "moment in the process of *intervention*"⁶ Furthermore, Freire argues that we live in an ethical world. Our ideological and political orientation compels us to make moral and ethical decisions. Freire reminds us that our actions have a universal dimension, and that "being in the world" entails recognizing our responsibilities and commitments toward other human beings.

Freire views human beings as both subjects and objects of history. In other words, though the forces of history shape our past and present, we can change the course of history, and in the process make history. As Freire puts it, "The future does not make us, we make ourselves in the struggle to make it."²⁷ We can break away from the chains of history passed down to us from previous generations and make our own history. In short, Freire acknowledges that human beings are conditioned by history, but he refuses to accept that they are determined by it, because for Freire history is possibility.

Freire maintains that a critical reading of the world involves *denouncing* the existing oppression and injustices in the world. At the same time, it involves *announcing* the possibility of a more humane and just world. For Freire, reading the world is both a pedagogical-political and a political-pedagogical undertaking. Denouncing the world is an act that involves criticizing, protesting, and struggling against domination and domestication. The act of announcing a new world entails hope and possibility, and this stipulates envisioning a new democratic society outside of capitalism's law of value.

Elsewhere, Freire makes an important distinction between the role of education in helping students develop critical thinking skills and as training and preparation for entering the workforce.²⁸ He cautions us against reducing education to a set of techniques and skills. Freire incessantly asserts that education can effectively be employed to "make and remake" ourselves. Education, as Freire conceives it, involves knowing that you know, and knowing that you don't know. It entails developing a "critical curiosity" and a radical reorientation toward the world.

For Freire, critical pedagogy involves learning to question the world by cultivating an "epistemological curiosity." He encourages teachers and educators to imagine, dream, and struggle toward building the foundations of a new democratic society. They must also be willing to be a "presence" in the world by engaging in a dialectical process of what he calls "reading the word and the world."

Donaldo Macedo and Ana Maria Araujo Freire underscore what is meant by "reading the word and the world" when they assail those literacy specialists who teach reading as a method disarticulated from the world of exploitation and oppression, antiseptically detached from the totality of capitalist social relations. Specialists who equate the process of becoming literate to acquiring a discrete set of cognitive skills "domesticate the consciousness via a constant disarticulation between the reductionistic and narrow reading of one's field of specialization and reading of the universe within which one's specialization is situated."²⁹ Such "pseudocritical educators" are thus "semiliterate"—they can read the word but are woefully unable to read the world, that is, they are able to read the texts of their specialty but remain "ignorant of all other bodies of knowledge that constitute the world of knowledge."³⁰ Jose Ortega y Gasset calls such a specialist a "learned ignoramus" who—as Macedo and Freire explain—is "mainly concerned with his or her own tiny portion of the world, disconnected from other bodies of knowledge . . . [and] never able to relate the flux of information to gain a critical reading of the world."³¹ Paulo Freire emphasized that a critical reading of the world implies "a dynamic comprehension between the least coherent sensibility of the world and a more coherent understanding of the world."³²

Learned ignoramuses are all around us. For instance, how can education specialists in science and math and computer technology ignore how teaching advances in these areas have aided the military industrial complex that enables the United States to exercise its domination of less developed countries of the world, that allows industry to subject the poor to the ravages of capital, that facilitates the devastation of our ecosystems, and that makes possible breakthroughs in medicine that benefit only those who can afford to pay for treatment?

In our own classrooms we are careful not to approach the struggle for socialism from the Olympian standpoint of eternity—as a primrose path that leads the faithful to that luminous workers' council on the hill. We eschew Utopian blueprints in favor of serious discussions that

deal with questions of power, the state, and various forms for organizing for socialist democracy. For instance, we explore the current debate between the Zapatistas (who do not wish to take state power) and the supporters of Hugo Chavez (Chavistas who believe that the state can be transformed from the bottom up by taking state power). In some cases we have traveled with our students to Venezuela and Mexico and have participated in such debates firsthand.

The critical revolutionary pedagogy that we support advances these and other issues from the perspective of a problem-posing rather than a solution-giving pedagogy. It eschews magic bullet solutions and instead favors the practice of historical materialist critique. It mandates approaching the process of teaching and learning within the larger context of certain fundamental questions. In the wake of the dictatorship of the financial markets, where, in the words of Robert Went, the "invisible hand" of the market is mercilessly arid ruthlessly strangling millions of working-class men, women, and children, how do we liberate creative human powers and capacities from their inhumane form, namely, capital?³³ What does it mean to be human? How can we live humanely? What ethical and moral actions must we take to live humanely? How can teachers recognize the important role they play in the battle between labor and capital?

These questions along with others can only be answered in the course of revolutionizing educational practices, which will largely depend on the willingness of teachers to join anti-imperialist struggles. Teachers need to support de-colonizing pedagogies and make efforts to work with new social movements, including indigenous groups, in their fight against capital's deadly assault on the poor and the planet that sustains all of us. Teachers must recognize that, as workers, their interests and those of their fellow educators worldwide are tied to the defeat of neoliberal capitalism and the creation of a post-capitalist, socialist society.

Notes

1. Henry Giroux, *The Terror of Neoliberalism* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2004).
2. Public Citizen, "Public Citizen and United for a Fair Economy Expose Stealth Campaign of Super-Wealthy to Repeal Federal Estate Tax," April 26, 2006, <http://www.citizen.org/press-room/release.cfm?ID'2182>.
3. Manning Marable, "Empire, Racism and Resistance: Global Apartheid and Prospects for a Democratic Future," *The Black Commentator* (2007), http://www.blackcommentator.com/211/211_cover_manley_speech_marable_ed_bd.html.
4. Ibid.
5. Akosua Amoo Adare, "A Short E-Mail Interview with the Dirty Thirty's Peter McLaren," *Chopbox Magazine* (Toronto, Canada: Kofi Asare).
6. Christine Sleeter, *Un-Standardizing Curriculum: Multicultural Teaching in the Standards-Based Classroom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2005).
7. National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Washington, DC: The Commission, 1983).
8. Greg Palast, *Armed Madhouse* (New York: Dutton, 2006), 313.
9. Ibid., 317-18.
10. Ibid.
11. Jonathan Kozol, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2005), 51.
12. Kozol, *Shame of the Nation*, 51.
13. Ibid., 46.
14. Alfie Kohn, *The Case Against Standardized Testing: Raising the Scores, Ruining the Schools* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000).
15. Ibid.
16. Kozol, *Shame of the Nation*, 46.
17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., 285.
19. Ibid.
20. Arlebe Inouye, "Standing Up to the Military Recruiters," *Rethinking Schools Online* 20, no. 3 (Spring 2005), http://rethinkingschools.org/archive/20_03/mili203.shtml.
21. David Goodman, "Class Dismissed," *Mother Jones* 29, no. 3 (2004): 43.
22. Nancy Hellmich, "McDonald's Kicks Off School PE Program," *USA Today*, September 12.2005.
23. Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum Books, 1970).
24. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Indignation* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2004).
25. Ibid., 60.
26. Ibid., 34, emphasis in the original.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Donaldo Macedo and Ana Maria Araujo Freire, "Foreword," in Paulo Freire, *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), xxii.
30. Ibid., xvii.
31. Ibid., xvii.
32. As quoted in Macedo and Freire, "Forward," xvii.
33. Robert Went, *Globalization: Neoliberal Challenge, Radical Responses* (London and Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2000).