

## **The rule of capital, imperialism, and its opposition: Radical education for equality and justice**

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**The paper traces the developments taking place in the sphere of education as a direct fall out of larger socio-economic and political developments. It bases its arguments in the tradition of Western educationists who, in different ways, have tried to analyse education in relation to the social relations characterising a society and who see education as an instrument of reproducing the existing ‘realities’. Deriving from the experiences of education in USA primarily it argues that trends towards standardisation and high-stakes testing cannot stand outside the social context. They are primarily constructs of capital and one of the challenges today is to see how rational knowledge is constructed. And in order to understand this construction, one needs to see how knowledge moves from what appears to be, to what is, or from appearance to essence, sometimes unmasking deception, sometimes simply deepening understanding. It is in this context that he sees schools as the central organising places of North American life. The paper defines notions of ‘courage’ and ‘change’ in context of schooling and education and concludes that changing minds is the daily life of every school worker.**

### **INTRODUCTION**

*“...In proportion as capital accumulates, the lot of the labourer, be his pay high or low, must grow worse.”* (Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1)<sup>1</sup>

How do we get from where we are, to where we must go? What is it that people need to know? How do they need to come to know it, in order to lead reasonably free, connected, creative, communal lives? How might

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1 Marx, Karl: *Capital*, Moore, Aveling edition, Vol.I, p.655. And online at [www.marxist.org](http://www.marxist.org)

we reignite the historical project of rescuing knowledge and action from the goals of domination?

These are epic times when qualitative and irreversible changes are taking place. People are defining themselves and, in a world which can offer its children only perpetual war, it is a period when despair and confusion can seize the outlook of masses of people. These epic times call for a new form of epic heroism, rooted in notions of the common good, community and equality, which remembers the wisdom that says where there is oppression, there is resistance, sometimes muted, sometimes not taking forms that we approve of. But there is always resistance, and it is in this interaction that change is made, change which will happen – for the better – if we can outfox the destruction of wisdom.

Part of that is remembering how rational knowledge is constructed. My former neighbour was a shrink, a psychiatrist. I once interrupted his work with his roses to ask him, “Just exactly what is it, Roger, that you do?” Roger raised his left hand high over his head, out to the side, and wiggled his fingers. “I get them to watch this,” he said, “While I do this,” and he lowered his right hand to below his waist and wiggled those right fingers, and he chuckled.

Part of the construction of reason is understanding how knowledge moves from what appears to be, to what is, or from appearance to essence, sometimes unmasking deception, sometimes simply deepening understanding.

My project is about transcending emergent fascism, overcoming capitalism and imperialist war; epic heroism, ideas rising not out of the mists, but from a careful analysis of what is. My thesis is that schools are central to this struggle in North America, and in much of the world. The interacting struggles of school workers, students, and community people could reverberate into the working class worldwide, as the recent May Day 2006 mass demonstrations in the US indicate.

### **THE PRESENT CONTEXT**

What is it that we face today? This is as good as it gets with capitalism. This is all capitalism has to offer: endless war, irrationalism, racism, massive unemployment, the ruin of our natural resources, the assault on reason – all in the name of profits. Today, every local tin-pot warlord has learned he needs a nuke, as the US may come, and every big state feels empowered to strike first, just in case.

In 1999, I wrote in the social studies journal, *TRSE*, “if you are teaching middle school now, you are looking at the soldiers in the next oil war.” It was easy to see this war coming, but not these particular wars. Nobody could predict the vile terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. And I make no crystal ball claims now. Only Cassandra, the Greek goddess blessed with the gift of prophecy, but cursed with knowing no one would believe her, had perfect prescience.

Even so, there are tendencies that are rooted in history, and present-day circumstances, that we can use to peek into what is to come. In January, 2002, four months after the billionaire Bin Laden terrorist attack, in the midst of the initial stages of the massive assault on civil liberties in the US, the Rouge Forum News editorialised, “There will be resistance in the US, and that resistance will likely rise initially from poor and working class black people, people who have historically taken the lead in the US. It may break out in Detroit, or in smaller ghettoised areas, but it will break out, as people cannot take much more--they will fight back because they must.”

In June 2002, impoverished black rebels in the small town, Benton Harbour, Michigan, rose up, set their town ablaze, in response to the steady stream of police repression that has accelerated under the current regime.

Since then, people in Latin America moved to reject the neoliberal, imperialist, drive towards privatisation and currency devaluation. Most strikingly, Bolivia’s populist leadership nationalised the oil supply, while, in Venezuela, the Chavez regime, still in power following a bungled US-backed coup, offered poor US citizens in New Orleans, ruined by government neglect during the Katrina hurricane, cheap oil for the winter. Back in the US, millions of people marched in the May Day 2006. “Immigration Rights Are Workers’ Rights,” demonstrations which provided hints as to how future actions might look, in form and substance.

In a period when many educators and activists felt we were at a low ebb of education and activism, the people marching on May Day showed that the class struggle and class consciousness are always on, no matter how submerged it may seem. Indeed, many of us may need to rethink our viewpoints, as what has been submerged to us has been daily work life to others. The rise of resistance also may show school workers how we might keep our ideals, and still teach. The May Day marches involved millions of people. We marched because imperialism and the processes of capital made it necessary to retaliate. Imperialism made life impossible in

people’s homelands, and capitalism made life nearly impossible in the US. Treated worse than commodities, the mass of people marching face more problems at international borders than auto parts. Despite the infinite problems of the marches, like the concession to US flags, most people in the marches knew that capitalism cannot solve the problems we face. Just as the US cannot win in Iraq because Iraqis know the US troops are really there to rob them, yet the US cannot leave Iraq because it must have the oil and social control that Iraq represents. So the incessant imperialist drive for cheap labour, and to rule through divide and conquer manoeuvres, will not be stopped by any of the immigration bills in the US Congress. US bosses cannot live without cheap labour, and cannot live with the struggles cheap labour produces. Imperialism impoverishes people outside the US. Pushed out of their birthplaces by starvation, they come to the US desperate for better lives – if only for their children. The US rewards them with subsistence jobs, arrests them when the fruits and vegetables are picked, shifts them back and forth across the artificial borders merely to meet the immediate needs of capital. When they protest, the government prepares to send the troops. Only the long struggle against capital itself, involving direct actions like on May Day – and what might be projected well beyond that – can address our common crises. May Day is recognised in Mexico as an international workers’ holiday initiated by anarchists and communists in the US. Most people on the marches knew of the political significance of the May Day action. People marched as in a wildcat strike, against the directions of their sellout union and church leaders. Many risked their jobs. Students fought their way out of schools under “lockdown.” And hundreds of thousands of marchers were, in fact, involved in what amounted to a massive general strike. Moreover, the structure of the marches, including people of all ages, all job classifications, all nations, all races, all sexes, offer clues of how organising for the future could be done—beyond the narrow confines of unionism.

With that as immediate background, I list these as interrelated international and national social and economic tendencies, all existing before September 11, 2001:

- Booming inequality within the US, and between the US and the world (Johnson, 1999).
- Segregation deepening within communities and schools (Orfield, G., Yun, J. 1999).
- Irrationalism and rising power of religious fundamentalism in school and out (Jenkins, 2002; Ohio Plan, 2002).

- Regimentation of society via spectacles, surveillance, and the suspension of common civil liberties (Foner, 2002).
- Rising authoritarianism on the job and off, as the vertical discipline of society sharpened. This was especially easy to see in schools (Bayot, 2002).
- An equally transparent intensified split of mental and manual labour, again easy to spot in schools, where elites tried to replace the minds of teachers with the minds of “for-profit” curricula regulators and testing agencies.
- Militarisation of the schools and society (Goodman, 2002).
- Technology leading not to better lives for all but to massive worldwide unemployment and overproduction, meaningless and repetitive jobs dominating the future for most kids (Feaster, 2002).
- A mystical economy built on Ponzi schemes like Enron, an economy that was unravelling with the NASDAQ collapse, with the interwoven collaboration of auditing firms and banks so steeped in greed that they lost sight of concern about investment for production, their leaders so fearful of the future that they just stole the money and ran.
- A deepening divide of town and country, with masses of people being driven off the land and arriving in cities, homeless and hopeless.
- A cultural attack in North America, designed to terrorise the military and to eradicate memories of Vietnam (Franklin, 2000).
- The privatisation of the military, increasing leadership and dependence on mercenaries, secret companies, while special operations forces work under the guidance of corporate leaders (Wayne, 2002).
- The incarceration of two million people in the US, inordinately black people. (*New York Times* April 11, 2003).
- Government less and less as a neutral arbiter of disputes, more and more a weapon in the hands of the powerful (Lipsitz, 1994:59).

While my focus in this summation above is on the US, these same tendencies pertain in every nation, from China to Russia to India and Japan – and nations in the super – exploited periphery as well.

September 11, the despicable terrorist attacks and what followed, fashioned both a qualitative shift in our social context, and a bright light illuminating what was already going on that often went unnoticed.

September 11 and the events that followed confirmed at least two related contradictions:

1. The contradiction between global capital and the national base of capital’s personifications, the people who seek to ride the process. Capital, a system that rules people, is always on the prowl for the highest forms of exploitation, of raw materials and resources, of markets, and of labour, people. Capital, as an international system which has now invaded the entire planet, knows no boundaries, but its history is bound to a national base, countries. The capital system requires the protection (and projection) of national armies which are at odds with one another in an almost infinite variety of ways. Within countries, capital is represented, personified, by people who, from time to time, possess capital and ride it, until someone else does a better job at exploitation. At every level, all are at odds with all and, in some areas, this chronic war results in either kakistocracy, meaning rule of the worst conceivable leaders, or Talibanisation, the rule of the most irrational and depraved – terms that could be easily applied to most “First World,” leaders too.

Oil is now central to understanding current events and this contradiction. Oil wars play out with the battles between Unocal, Chevron, of the US; Bidas from Argentina, Russia, the countries of the Middle East oil fields, the new Central Asian nations, Nigeria, Indonesia, Colombia, Bolivia, Venezuela, Japan, and China, among many others. International capital, as a system, is in discord both with pure individual selfishness and the need for a national army (Klare, 2001: 90; Yergin, 1991: 722, 753; Rashid, 2001:45; Lindquist, 1991:77).

It appears that US government leaders (who have close ties with oil interests, big business, corrupt labour leaders, and government are now so entangled that it is reasonable to say they are about to complete the merger attempted in Italy’s corporate state) now seek to resolve that contradiction by invading the world, everywhere from the Philippines to Central Asia, Iraq, and Columbia and unannounced more to come—perhaps Iran. So, the US seeks to resolve the national/global contradiction by extending its global rule, by invading the world, with permanent bases everywhere, under its national base. Positioning against China, and domesticating India, has to be seen as a significant part of this effort to construct uninterrupted hegemony (Meszaros, 2002:29).

As an aside, we may have seen the last of the counterfeit wars of national liberation, which have so captivated the left for nearly a century. One

such war after the next, while challenging forms of imperialism, never led to either a communist ethic, nor a communist practice. Now, perhaps nationalism will no longer sell, maybe the people will only fight for something much more than a new boss – or maybe not. Surely the Columbian FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) is running a successful guerilla campaign beneath the National Liberation rubric, but should they succeed, perhaps their rank and file will quickly demand more than a dominated job.

Clearly, the question to all now is: How to truly abolish the wage system-root it out hook, line, and sinker? Or, in converse, how do we win freedom, what Marx suggested in *Capital*, “begins only when labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production”? (Marx, Volume 3: 329).

2. Secondly, the invasion of the world will create another contradiction, the deepening inequality that the wars’ costs will lead to intensified suffering among the poorest section of US society and the poorest people in the world. As the economy and efforts to reify a master /slave relationship grind on the daily lives of poor and working people, they will fight back, developing wisdom as they go, as they always have and must. However, to underline, millions of people have died in revolutionary and resistance national liberation movements, only to find their children living in the midst of corrupt, if slightly more advanced, forms of capitalist exploitation as Vietnamese combat General Giap noted recently, criticising the dishonesty of leading party members in his nation – whose citizens changed the world in defeating, and forever unmasking the superpower, the US. (Giap, *New York Times*, May 7, 2006)<sup>2</sup>.

Nevertheless, despite the relentless impoverishment of the working class in the US and around the world there was an outpouring of witless nationalism following the terrorist billionaire’s attacks, and another outpouring of jingoism engineered by the government around the illegal immigration issue, that has to be troublesome, even if it was in fact superficial. There was, for example, no rush to enlist in the military, even though hundreds of thousands of people waived flags at baseball games. There was no patriotic purchase of stocks, and there has been no patriotic outpouring of enlistments for Iraq, even though that was urged by the

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2 Keener, W. *New York Times*, May 7, 2006, Giap Criticises Vietnamese Leadership.

White House corps. Only a tiny handful of aging white men follow the vigilante border guard US Minuteman movement. But appearances are important, superficial as they may be, as they can be transformed into something else – as the Minutemen appear about to be superseded by the National Guard<sup>3</sup>.

Capital invaded the world, leaving nothing untouched. Lenin was mistaken to suggest that imperialism is the highest, or last, stage of capitalism, because capital’s internal contradictions, especially the contradiction of accumulation and consumption, would bring it down. He made a historical error and fell into the same pit he often warned against: a mechanical approach in envisaging social change. Later, Fredy Perlman sought to re-think Lenin, in *The Continuing Appeal of Nationalism*.

Perlman argues that imperialism was the initial stage of capitalism, making capitalist accumulation possible. Capital thrives on destruction, on its second-tier mediation: chaos. Capital’s personifications may suffer, as do those people who feed it surplus labour. Fickle capital will abandon one personification for the next, bedding only the most exploitative, the most vile. But only a massive change of mind, revolutionary class consciousness, finally brings capital to its end, and initiates a new era (Lenin, Perlman).

The most recent century was the first time in history when there was nowhere to run, as the residents of the Falklands/Malvinas discovered when British jump-jets began to bomb their sheep farms. Now, it may be that capital, if we can take it as a personification of itself, could not tolerate areas and people which it created, debased, and de-civilised, that is, barbarised, to a point where they were briefly out of its reach, as in Afghanistan, Iraq, etc., and capital felt compelled to recapture them to rationalise them into systems of its accepted behaviour: wage slavery. Capital’s relations to international neighbours are always hostile (Barran, 1955:4).

This is, then, an international and national society, steeped in inequality, segregation, irrationalism, heading for a sharp financial crisis, with the most powerful of the nations promising the citizens of the world perpetual

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3 The term Minuteman in the US has historical meaning. The Minutemen were radicals in the US revolution against the British in the 1770s, a people’s militia claiming the ability to mobilise in a minute, armed and ready to fight. They initiated the guerrilla methods of warfare that the US citizenry used against Britain. However, since the 1960s various racist, nationalist, anti-immigrant armed, vigilante groups have appeared in the US, most recently offering themselves as border patrol personnel on the Mexican border.

preemptive war – the highest, but not necessarily last, stage of what is fairly called capitalist development.

In sum, what is afoot now can best be understood in the context of an intensified international war of the rich on the poor. There is a term for the direct rule of the rich, coupled with the promise of war, the suspension of civil liberties, racism as public policy, irrationalism assaulting reason, the merger of the corporate world with government and labour leaders in the national (corporate) interest: a culture writhing in violence: emerging fascism. This tendency, taking place in somewhat different ways throughout the world, sets the stage for the wars to come.

### **THE CENTRIPETAL ROLE OF SCHOOLS AND EDUCATION**

Such a world, such a nation, is going to make peculiar demands on its schools where the common historical project of rescuing knowledge and education from the demands of the ruling classes has been largely eradicated and subjected to the regimentation of curricula standards and high-stakes testing. No external standard, and no high-stakes test, can stand outside the social context described above.

One tangential tendency is worth examining a little deeper in regard to the role of school: deindustrialisation. Basic industrial production is indeed taking place, and in connection with agricultural labour and the struggle for knowledge, social and scientific, industrial labour makes our lives possible. But industrial production has been nearly obliterated in North America. It has been shipped overseas, outsourced.

Since 1970, more than one million US auto workers lost their jobs, probably forever. Another million steel workers, and miners, and in rubber and feeder plants were permanently laid off. Labour analyst Doug Henwood estimates that there are only 700,000 industrial jobs left in the US. I think he is wrong by about one-third, but let us take that figure as it is (Henwood, 2002).

I watched one of these developments take place. Born in Detroit, I was raised inside the auto industry where a working man or woman could expect to raise a family on a job guaranteed for life, with only one family member working. This custom shifted radically during the latter years of the war in Vietnam, in the mid and early 70s, as the refusal of US auto-makers to reinvest in their own aging plants met a manufactured gasoline shortage, and the US auto companies began to unravel. Tens of thousands of people lost jobs and the auto makers began campaigns to “Buy

American!” as they invested in overseas auto supply plants. Lacking any vision beyond the quickest way to turn a buck, the new auto moguls offended the early gentry who had, in their minds, foresight, had contributed to the common good, as the millionairess, Lady Astor, an American millionairess who symbolises a bygone viewpoint of old money, objecting to a lack of social concern and a willingness to invest not only in industry, but benevolence, commented on her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, “Everyone became obsessed with money in the 1990s and went higgledy-piggledy scampering after their fortunes,” she said. “People with money used to often care about the people who had no money. Not always, but often. Now, it is rare to find people with money who care at all about people with no money” (*New York Times*, March 30, 2002).

Over time, nearly 200,000 auto jobs shifted to Tijuana, Mexico’s maquiladora plants, just across the border from San Diego where I now live. Those jobs in Mexico, which paid about 10 per cent of the same job in the US, are mostly gone now. The new (often less than ten years old) maquiladora plants in Tijuana sit empty – the jobs shifted to China where it is, now, cheaper to ship goods back and forth across the Pacific, and pay a Chinese worker nearly nothing, than it is to pay a worker in Mexico nearly nothing, and just drive the finished goods across the international US/Mexico border.

From my thesis on the critical role of de-industrialisation, I offer four postulates which I think are firmly grounded:

1. Factories, once central to civil life in the US are closed, for the most part.
2. The numbers of industrial workers in the US have been slashed to strip the industrial working class of their potential, for the time being, of being serious agents for social justice-even though some industrial workers, dock-workers for example, occupy vital crossroads of capital and can shut them off if they choose.
3. Since the industrial workers, especially those in the Congress of Industrial Organisations were the people who won in the 1930s what we take for granted as civilised life, things like Social Security, the 40-hour week, rights to organise, exercise free speech and assembly, and child labour laws; the absence of their jobs is important.
4. The remaining industrial workers, on one hand, belong to unions so corrupt, undemocratic, racist, and captivated with nationalism that

there is no reason to believe that they will soon be leaders for social justice. This has been true for decades (Adamic, Brecher, Serrin, Scott). On the other hand, the remaining industrial workers in North America are remarkably privileged, in a relative sense (not to discount their dangerous jobs), and they know it--indeed many of them have been steeped in the AFL-CIO culture which suggests that American workers do better because other workers do worse. Finally, this workforce is aging, and has done nearly nothing at all while hundreds of thousands of their comrades lost their jobs. The only real experience of the key industrial sectors of the AFL-CIO is retreat and loss, a habit which will be hard for them to break, even though they will be more and more cornered as war costs and production demands crunch on their lives.

From that I submit this:

Schools are now the central organising places of North American life and, in many cases, the centripetal organising places in nations that are now rapidly industrialising: China and India.

More people organise their lives around school than any other force in North American society. While schools do not garner even 1/10th of the federal military budget, schools are in every community, everywhere, offering food, knowledge, free space, medical care, and hope – real or false. The military is isolated, deliberately, and does none of that. The tax system is widely distrusted, and social security still directly influences only a small portion of the population. Teachers are also able to exert the most creative control over their jobs, more than any other group of workers with medical benefits in the US.

Reflecting the social shift, teachers are now the most unionised people in the United States. With 3.9 million members the school workers unions are nearly three times the size of the next largest unions, SEIU and the Teamsters. Educators in the NEA have some union democracy available to them, unlike most unionised people, as indicated by their 1999 rejection of NEA's leaders' plans to merge them into the AFT-AFL-CIO (DiegmueLLer, 2002; Gibson, R. 1999).

This means that what teachers and related school workers do now counts more than ever before. This is true not solely because their jobs are located in the central organising point of North American life, jobs which cannot be outsourced, but because most of those teachers are working with those

sectors of society which are most exploited, most oppressed; communities of colour and immigrant communities. It should not be lost on us that these communities are likely to be both explosive, and, especially in the case of recent immigrants, experienced in the powerful social struggles in their earlier homes.

This is not to say that industrial workers are forever hopeless, or that school workers are solely in position to be revolutionary forces in North America. Industry in the US could be rebuilt, if the processes of capital show that will be profitable again. The Ford Rouge Plant, where I once worked, was at one time the largest industrial work place in the world, with more than 100,000 workers. It was the site of militant Marxist-inspired unionism. Today, less than 9,000 people work at the Rouge, and the UAW local there is one of the most corrupt in the nation.<sup>4</sup>

It was, in part, in recognition of that shift that we named our group the Rouge Forum. Even so, the Ford family now says they will rebuild the Rouge, with a \$2 billion investment (*Detroit News*, June 21 2003). We shall see, and we shall see if the re-industrialisation somehow revitalises the UAW. Frankly, I think re-industrialisation will happen, but the rebirth of the UAW cannot. And, whatever comes of the Rouge, 200,000 jobs in Mexico's maquiladora plants have been lost to China in the last three years. The main tendency is imperialist outsourcing, in search of ever cheaper surplus labour. In any case, the working class, in the plants, in the military, on the docks, remains as a key lever for change. But the question we face is this: where can we best send our limited resources for the greatest impact, now? I think that place is school where the youths of the working class are, and where the class struggle is raging. Schooling can be regimented and, to a degree, placed online, but the need for warehousing kids, for babysitting, cannot be outsourced.

Nevertheless, while the world appears to be more divided than ever by the wars of all on all, it remains that the revolutionary processes of capitalism have united us in unprecedented ways through systems of exchange, production, technology, transportation, and communication. How can we make that unity dominate the disunity that now prevails?

The last fifty years witnessed the first time in history when every man, woman, and child could live fairly well, if we shared, if we could build a

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<sup>4</sup> See Gibson, R. (July 2006) The Torment and Demise of the United Auto Workers Union, *Substance Magazine*, Chicago. Online at <http://www.rohan.sdsu.edu/%7Ergibson/UAWJune2006.htm>

society based on inclusion and community. Yet that possibility today is strangled by an interaction of a fascist few, and the voluntary servitude of those who cannot see a way out.

School reform is underway everywhere. But doing school reform without doing simultaneous economic and social reform is like washing the air on one side of a screen door. It will not work. But doing social and economic reform also requires a context, a goal, and for us that goal must be to overcome, go beyond, transform, metamorphosise, capitalism. This is as good as capitalism gets, and it is unacceptable.

The main things taking place in school, besides the intensified invasion of market forces (a frontal assault on space and thought), segregation and the destruction of curiosity, are standardisation and testing. There is a direct line from standards to tests to deepened segregation to mindless nationalism and the willingness to die for Exxon. Resisting those tests is resisting fascism – if test resistance is taken as anti-capitalist resistance – and often it is not.

Even so, real school reform, which will allow reason to transcend irrationalism built into the social structure, and also allow equality to overcome inequality, democracy to go past authoritarianism, necessitates deep social transformation – the interaction of struggles in school, communities, in the military, and on other jobs. There is nothing new about this, from Soweto to Mississippi to the 2006 uprisings in Paris, it is commonplace for students and youth to point the way.

Perhaps the Paris uprisings of 1968 serve as the best illustration. There, French youth feeling shut out of society, fully alienated from not only daily life in school, but the prospects of life after school for meaningful jobs, struck the Sorbonne. They were extraordinarily creative, using wall posters that called out the conjugation, for example : “I Participate. You Participate. He and She Participate. We Participate. They Profit.”

Their strikes, marches, street corner speeches, and a massive outreach campaign into working class communities and factories sparked what could have been a revolution, if it were not betrayed by the leadership of the French Communist Party, tied closely to the electoral process and the French bourgeoisie.

So, French students’ consciousness was set up, first by their prospects, limited by crises of French capitalism, then by their own pedagogical action as students became educators, and then by their own actions, in

conjunction with workers. They were defeated, though, because workers cannot finalise social change, cannot alone press through to equality and justice. But they surely can initiate it<sup>5</sup>.

Beyond resistance, schools at least claim to struggle for what is true, and the key question facing humanity now is the question I began with: What is it that people need to know, and how do they need to come to know it, in order to be free, creative, connected, communal, inclusive, and unafraid?

The substantive side, and the pedagogical side, surely cannot be split apart, as 90 years of sham socialism should teach us – whatever it was that masses of people should have known was clearly not learned as they hardly resisted socialism, and they hardly burst out of its capitalist veneer (socialism was never much beyond the nationalisation of the working class) when it fell apart. No one learns to ride a horse in one sitting, and falling in learning is a process of practice and reflection. Still, at issue here is a massive international change of mind, coupled of course with huge upheavals, but a change of mind that will outlast the uprisings and transcend into something worth the fight. And such is the task of schools: massive changes of minds. Still, every aspect of every failure of socialism played out in socialist schools where, as quickly as inequality became policy, the methods and substance of teaching were stripped of freedom, replaced by surveillance and restrictions. Schools serve as canaries in the mind of national societies; freedom ebbs and flows with social and economic conditions of resistance and change.

## **WHAT MIGHT BE DONE IN SCHOOLS?**

To conduct change through schools requires four things that cannot be built into external educational regulations or their mates, the Big Tests:

1. The Critique of Tyranny and its transformation is ages old, but the metaphor of the Master and the Slaves is a lighthouse for understanding what it is people need to know, and how they need to come to know it, in order for all to be free. This is not only a study of contention, opposition (though it most assuredly is that, exploding notions that “we are all in this together, partners in production”), but a study of overcoming, transcending, transforming, that is, how we can start with what is and

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<sup>5</sup> See Singer, D. (1990). *Prelude to Revolution*, Monthly Review Press, NYC, for a full discussion of the betrayal of the French uprisings on 1968. For the connection of consciousness and hope, see p. 53.

get to what ought to be. At base, the Master-Slave metaphor can show, graphically, this simple thing that people must know, at the outset, of how we can become free: Things change. We can see that the mass of people have not, and will not, be ruled forever by a relatively tiny minority – especially since we now have all at hand that we need to be reasonably free and comfortable. This goes to the question of how we keep our ideals and still teach within a society that suggests that may be impossible (Strauss, 2000; Gibson, 2002 ). The fact that things change can sustain good teaching, even under fascism, when we must ask ourselves fifth columnist questions, like, “What would Kim Philby do?”

2. Wisdom, the grasp of the whole, totality, and the potentially profound understanding of the relations of people to each other and their universe – the vast possibilities when people’s interactions are mainly friendly, cooperative. Wisdom is understanding the whole, its relations to the composite parts, and humbling action – since knowledge is partial, but not so partial it is paralysing. Anatol Lunacharsky, leader of the revolutionary Soviet education system in a brief period before Stalin, suggested that a good Soviet citizen would be one who could “play one instrument very well, but who could hear and understand the whole orchestra too.” The task of intellectuals has, for too long, been to only construct reason. Now we must consciously connect reason to power. But in daily life, making friends and keeping them over time is a radical notion as well. (Lunacharsky, 1971:23).

3. Courageous action. Fear, married to opportunism, is commonplace in schools now. It is reasonable to be afraid of job loss, the impact of tests, mindless nationalism, etc. How can we get beyond this fear? Courage is not standing in the school house door, berating the tests and the regulations – and getting fired. Courage is not merely making an ethical point, but getting enough power, and then using it, to make change. Part of the answer to the question that faces so many educators now, “How do I keep my ideals and still teach?” is found in gathering the power found in competent teaching, close ties with colleagues, parents, and students, and the courage of returning to work another day.

Ideas should be a key product of school. New ideas, which we sorely need, require some freedom to have them. Offering freedom to students takes courage.

Courage is developing the critique of tyranny and wisdom to the point of understanding what it takes to win, and then acting – in conjunction with the people who are losing most from the system of capital, and thus are

likely to understand it best. Courage is recognising that what people need to know and how they need to know it, in order to be free, is a process, not a dogma. We all have a lot to learn and we need to try to learn with good humour.

Courage could mean taking a radical action like making several lifelong friends, or leaving a subversive flyer in a lunchroom, or teaching well , or concluding that one is always too busy to resist and resisting anyway, or visiting a kid’s home to see a parent, or grandparent. Courage can indeed be refusing to give the test – en masse, or denouncing a tyrannical law, or ridiculing an enforcement bureaucrat who deserves to be mocked, or simply being patient with a colleague who has run out of patience. Courage can indeed be leading a wildcat strike, or May Day march, matched with freedom schooling to discover what forms of education can thrive in the midst of civil strife.

4. A practical ethic, drawn from the historical experience of the Master-Slave metaphor, rooted in the reasonable supposition about human nature that people are imaginative, curious, and creative, architects of their circumstances when they adopt a practical-critical stance, and that, given some freedom and criticism, they can learn, comprehend, and transform their world. Again, the beginning point of this is simple: Things change. They change in part because of technological advance, in part because of deepening cleavages between harmony (a united world) and disharmony (class struggle, imperialism, etc), but also because people embody struggle in their everyday lives, in all the key sectors of life and history:

1. At work they struggle not only for pay, benefits, and working conditions, but for freedom and creativity in the processes of the work, and control over what is done with the product.

2. In the centrepiece of reproduction, sexual relations, they continue to press for greater freedom, crossing boundaries firmly established, everywhere but in bed.

3. People struggle for what is true. Everywhere in the world, people are recognising that their governments are lying to them, about nearly everything – and the struggle for what is true, the difficult battle to defeat prejudice and habit, is as necessary and relentless as the fight for food, indeed in many instances it is the same thing.

And it points back to the key point of the Master-Slave metaphor which Marx addressed in his Theses on Feuerbach, “...Circumstances are



changed by people and it is essential to educate the educators. This doctrine must therefore divide society in two parts, one of which is superior to society. The coincidence of the changing circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice.” (Marx, Fourth Thesis on Feuerbach. See also David Harvey: 2000: 200-203).

We must, however, learn from what went wrong in the past. Socialism failed. While a key part of that failure surely stems from the incessant attacks launched against socialist states from the imperialist world, the failure of socialism was nevertheless mainly internal. I have eight interrelated thoughts about why socialism failed, and a few ideas about what we can learn from that.

1. Socialism began with a one-sided view of Marxism (now best represented in G. A. Cohen’s, Karl Marx’s Theory of History but deeply rooted in past misinterpretations): The Theory of Productive Forces. This view suggested that equality could only be won from abundance. To gain abundance, the productive forces of machinery, technology, and industrial organisation must be maximised. To achieve that, technicians, experts, administrators must come to the fore. To entice them, there had to be rewards, privileges – to the party leadership as well – which, through benevolence, would share out the treasure – later, and then later still, and then never.

The theory of productive forces, summed up by Lenin in a description of the New Economic Policy (which openly declared a return to capitalist productive relations in the USSR) was this: electrification plus the party.

Decades later, this theory made it possible for a top leader of the African National Congress to say to me, in an interview on May 20, 2003: “Our economy is simply the NEP updated. We have learned that we must have capitalist, neoliberal relations of production. Now we know that sometimes you must stand over the people with guns to gain that production, to build socialism.”<sup>6</sup>

This idea, adopted both by honest revolutionaries and corrupt opportunists, ignores Marx’s vital emphasis, “The greatest productive force is the understanding, wisdom, of the revolutionary class itself.” (Marx, *Poverty of Philosophy*:196).

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6 Interview with a top African National Congress leader who must remain anonymous.

Related to the theory of productive forces is a theory of learning, what I believe is a misreading of Vygotsky, Dewey, and others. This pedagogical approach suggests, rightly, that knowledge is socially and emotionally constructed, and that knowledge is typically built on past knowledge, scaffolded, and linked dialectically with the unknown, through a teacher or a text. Vygotsky’s nearly infamous “zone of proximal development,” is the area, the space, between the known and the unknown, an area of struggle. Frequently, though, Vygotsky and Dewey are taken out of their own zones of political, social, and economic development, i.e. the Marxist Vygotsky, and the sometimes radical, sometimes bourgeois Dewey, are taken up as if their goal was only reason, and not reason connected to power, social change.

From that, Dewey and Vygotsky are stripped from whatever radicalism there may really have been in them, and two things happen: (1) the Marxist, dialectical, view that things change not only by quantity turning into quality (daily reading lessons, for example) but by leaps (in school, “aha” moments) is eradicated, leading to a simplistic form of scaffolding of, “this, then this, then this,” with the educator never really arching out of the reach of students, into the realm of imagination and (2) the possible application of this dialectical sense of pedagogy is erased from its implications in theories of social change, i.e. people cannot be told that the goal of radical social change is an egalitarian, democratic, creative, communal, free world, that is, communist world; they have to be led to that through a series of stages, small steps, when they are either tossed “into motion,” and then taught later, or they are taught piece work, without a view of the whole.

But the idea of the whole is absolutely central to social change, and learning. And, in the absence of the whole, totality, people tend to take up, piecemeal, social problems, as if one can be split from the other, leaving themselves defenceless in the face of totalising capitalist manoeuvres. This, in brief, was one failure, of many, of postmodernism, which not only sought to split the past, present, and future, but which sank each identity into its own form of isolated capital, as if there was no whole to address (Breisach, 2005)

The stage theory of productive forces (and learning) blinded many people, distracted them from their initial projects of community, democracy, and equality: communism. Production became the sole ethic, and the sole aesthetic as well. But the heralded goal of the drive for national economic development, the theory of productive forces, abundance, will not be the basis of the next revolutionary, or post-revolutionary, human society. More

likely, for some time, we will have to learn to share misery – nothing new to millions now. From each according to their commitment, to each according to their need.

2. Nationalism: often a response to imperialist intervention, or to racism, nationalism swept over the internationalism of the world's workers – who do all occupy space that is going to always be unevenly developed, and who must, because they are propertyless, compete for jobs and life. Internationalism of the world's workers is first, an idea, leaping beyond experience, that must become a material force – a signal of the creativity of the architect who can foresee the structure of a building, or the social architect who can envision a better world. Nationalism, as Fredy Perlman pointed out long ago, has enjoyed a continuing appeal, even among socialists. It at once then aligned socialist workers with local despots, and shattered pretenses of internationalism, setting up endless wars and economic battles, turning workers into instruments of their own oppression (Perlman, 1979, Gibson, 2006).

3. Male chauvinism/sexism: the fear of non-exploitative sexual relations on the one hand, and the outright domination of women, coupled with a complex variety of sex/gender biases on the other hand. Sexual oppression, the oldest division of labor and the oldest form of oppression, may be our biggest mystery.....so hidden deep in our history that we cannot see its complexities. Even so, in my experience, in the two revolutions, or upheavals that I have the most experience with, in Grenada and South Africa, the exploitation of women as sexual objects, and as the workforce of the revolution, quickly became big reasons why the revolutionary effort was shipwrecked.

4. Related to the theory of productive forces are several multi-stage theories of social change. China and the USSR set the pattern (despite Lenin's insistence, at the watershed moment of the Russian Revolution, that social change could leap stages). First there had to be an advanced form of capitalism, under the party, then socialism under the party, then the end of the class struggle (again under the party, in contradiction to all previous claims – this a pure fiction).

Hence, mass movements rooted in solidarity, equality, communist democracy, that is, revolutionary movements promising the freedom and creativity of a new world, movements that were, while the revolution was in progress, more democratic and egalitarian than any societies in history, when victorious, the leadership turned back on the people in the name of

the theory of productive forces and declared that freedom was showing up at work on time in a Taylorised factory, or, in some cases like South Africa, the freedom to become an individual entrepreneur-with no start-up capital. Today, the African National Congress (ANC) is using armed force against miners and community organisers who seek to interfere with their NEP-like project, and it is reasonable to suggest that the levels of the ANC betrayal will result in ruthlessness at least as vile as that of the apartheid regime. Throughout socialism's history, there has been nothing unusual about leaders declaring that the people were betraying the revolution – an upside-down analysis of who was betraying whom.

5. Iconisation and demonisation: These are two folds in the same cloth, creating new false gods – Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Maurice Bishop, Mandela, Che, Cabral, etc. – which places their work beyond criticism, and thus ritually kills any life that was ever in them, and demonisation, set up by vicious polemics, uncomradely debate among people who should, or could, have been friends. S.P. Bunting of South Africa, Lewis Corey (a.k.a. Louis Farina), of the US, and many, many others suffered this fate, and their contributions to the movements lost. Paulo Freire (who, ironically, allowed himself to become an icon, and promoted a small publishing cabal around his own work) addresses the issue of iconisation in his early work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, nicely demonstrating how leaders can be transformed into doing what they set out to oppose.

6. The reification of violence: Anyone who seeks to overcome the Master-Slave relationship must address the problem of violence, unleashing the anger of centuries and every petty dispute that might gain vent. Yet those who do not want to merely replicate the past in new ways must teach abhorrence of violence, attach both sorrow and respect to it, and if necessary only to employ violence with the greatest care. I have seen how violence (a relatively popular literacy campaign sank into an authoritarian movement where literate teenagers with guns stood over seniors ordering them to learn to read) can contaminate an entire society, and a movement for social justice, in Grenada, and now in South Africa, and I do not want to see the horror rise again.

7. Front Groups: Commonly manipulated and controlled by the party (though sometimes the tail does wag the dog) turning all concerned into alienated objects, as distinguished from the slow process of building an organisation, a mass class-conscious organisation, where each can see that collectively, with solidarity, equality, and reasoned democracy, we can understand and change the world.

8. The use of democratic centralism to wrongly locate truth within the central committee when truth is in fact a social relationship of testing for evidence and reflection, a spiralling form of praxis, an interaction between leaders and the mass of people – which closed the ears of the leadership and set them apart. This reification of what may be an organisational necessity, democratic centralism, led to wild shifts in party policies, but exhibited the simultaneous actions of (a) sectarianism, ordering things to happen and people to change, and (b) opportunism, tailing behind social and economic processes which are declared to be natural laws, or, importantly, failing to attack the whole of oppressive relations, choosing instead to address them piecemeal. (See Lukacs, 2000: 70-72).

### WHAT IS TO BE KNOWN?

*“Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is, necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.” (Marx, The German Ideology)*

One expects more from communists (or, seen from the right, much less). While there has been no clearly enunciated communist ethic, it is not hard to see that past socialist efforts and egalitarianism, democracy, solidarity, internationalism, anti-racism, anti-sexism, the unleashing of creativity and mutual care, the complete transformation of work and communal life including family life and aesthetics, only stood together in the most temporary of opportune alliances. At the very least, one would expect opposition to capitalism, an earnest desire to end, not ameliorate, the processes of exploitation, to halt racist, nationalist, and sexist alienation, to demonstrate the reification as the rule of things (like autos) as distinct from promoting auto sales, an analysis of the government, the state, as a weapon of the rich, not a potential ally, and the mention of revolution, if not a forthright plan. None of that was forthcoming from socialism.

What the Communist Parties of the world (trailing Stalin) did, in practice, was pursue the path Lenin cursed, “official optimism...which serves to conceal opportunism,” coming from two directions: (1) the belief that the continuing development of productive forces coupled with purely economic

struggles of the working class (in the US craft union leader George Meany’s words, “More”) would lead to, not just socialism, but a profound, class conscious, understanding of capitalism, and (2) that alliances with the bourgeoisie and its allies, like top labour leaders, would equally lead to close ties with the working class, socialism, and socialist understanding.<sup>7</sup>

At the core, the issue must be: what is it that masses of people need to know, and how do we need to come to know it, in order to lead reasonably connected, free, equitable, democratic lives within communities dedicated to opposition to selfishness, exploitation of others, irrationalism; caring communities of self-actualising people? And, moreover, how do we get from what is, our current conditions, to what ought to be, when one must be drawn from the other? Every leaflet, every demonstration, every strike, should address the roots of this question which is, after all, one of the issues that shipwrecked socialism – the willingness of masses of people to accept a new boss, after making huge sacrifices to get rid of the old one. Each action of the left should be tested against its impact on class consciousness.

There is nothing magical in daily life or even the resistance that workers or educators must mount to survive that reveals the role of class rule in society, or what to do about it. The deepest failure of socialism, the failure to forge a mass of class conscious people who could defend what they had won, demonstrates this point rather clearly.

Lenin (who the socialism and Stalin cited all the time – indeed Stalin had him stuffed) thought of class consciousness in this way:

“Working class consciousness cannot be genuine political consciousness unless the workers are trained to respond to *all* cases of tyranny, oppression, violence, and abuse, no matter *what class* is affected – unless they are trained, moreover, to respond from a Social Democratic [i.e. revolutionary communist] point of view and no other. The consciousness of the working class cannot

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<sup>7</sup> V.I. Lenin, *Imperialism the Highest Stage of Capitalism, Collected Works, Volume 22*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, p. 302. Lenin argues the working class is split into two international camps, one on the side of communism, the other, because of the super-profits won from imperialism, on the side of its national bourgeoisie—as evidenced by the entire history of the leadership of the AFL-CIO. Imperialism, however, was not just an advanced stage of capitalism; it was a source of the original capital, as Fredy Perlman has demonstrated in *The Continuing Appeal of Nationalism*, available online. Perlman’s analysis, on better historical ground, leads to more profound thinking about the splits in the working classes, though Perlman came to gloomy conclusions.

be genuine class consciousness unless the workers learn, from concrete, and above all from topical political facts and events to observe *every* other social class in *all* the manifestations of its intellectual, ethical and political life; unless they learn to apply in practice the materialist estimate of *all* aspects of the life and activity of *all* classes, strata, and groups of the population. Those who concentrate the attention, observation, and consciousness of the working class exclusively, or even mainly, upon itself alone are not Social Democrats; for the self-knowledge of the working class is indissolubly bound up, not solely with a fully clear theoretical understanding - it would be even truer to say, not so much with the theoretical, as with the practical understanding - of the relationships between *all* the various classes of modern society, acquired through the experience of political life. For this reason the conception of economic struggle as the most widely applicable means of drawing the masses into the political movement, which our economists preach, is so extremely harmful and reactionary in its practical significance.”<sup>8</sup>

Class consciousness is the awareness that one is, “part of a social group that, through common work activity at the same time reproduces a social system and others in it who do not have the same interests regarding that system, and who do not participate in it in the same manner...it is an orientation towards political action...an awareness of others, of those who are similar and those who are different with regard to their long-term interests, and an awareness of the social structure that makes their differences real<sup>9</sup>.”

Class consciousness implies anti-racism, anti-capitalism, as well as a vision of a better future against which today’s actions can be examined. This is not to simply reduce every question of race, sex, religion, or ethnicity immediately to greed, profits, but it is to say that the war for surplus value has, at the end of the day, decisive influence in setting up all the social relations of capital.

Capital’s schools, racism, nationalism, sexism, and religion all disguise social problems, problems of class, as problems of individual people, competing races/crafts/industries/nations, or fate. That is, capital’s schools

8 V.I. Lenin, *What is to Be Done?*, *Collected Works*, Volume 5, p.412.

9 Eyerman R. (1981), *False Consciousness and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International.

and UAW forms of unionism are designed, above all, to create a veneer of limited knowledge, but to wipe out class consciousness. To date, this is succeeding.

Class consciousness has been seen as:

- (1) A logical and necessary result of the advance of productive forces, that is, when the world is industrialised, people will become class conscious (Kautsky, 1918; Stalin, 1938).
- (2) An awareness of the whole picture of capital, through the daily bitter experiences that capital must offer the working class-- and the intervention of an advanced party (Lukacs, 1988).
- (3) An offering to working people from organised intellectuals and dedicated activists, especially as crises arise (Lenin).
- (4) As workers’ spontaneous response to their collective, persistent, problems, as work is always alienating (Glberman, 1999).

And (5) class consciousness has been seen as the natural product of intellectuals produced by the working class itself, organic intellectuals, whose ideas can be more easily accepted, grasped (Gramsci, 1977; Freire, 1973 and Freire, 2000).

None of these formulas have worked well. Class consciousness, then, is a pedagogical and practical problem that has not been resolved, that plagues the working classes of the world as crises of capital – inequality, imperialist war, rising irrationalism, international bankruptcies, militarism, etc. – make the current situation especially menacing, urgent.

The crux of the pedagogical issue goes beyond transcending racist alienation and defeating exploitation. At the heart of the question is the view that people can overcome the Master/Slave relationship, consciously, yet not recreate it at a new level; to forge a new society, a caring community, from the wreckage of the old, to forge reason from unreason.

This was not the project the CPUSA (Communist Party of USA) and the UAW (United Auto Workers) took up. What did they in fact do?

Justice does demand organisation. Organisation requires discipline. Class consciousness must be dialectically pressed on organisers, and from organisers back and forth to masses of people. Organisation must be moral, ethical, to win the trust of the masses, and to set a standard against which opportunism can be judged. But the crux of education, of organisation,

and of pedagogy itself, is the fact that we can understand and transform the world. We make our own histories, are subjects who can create change, or continuity (Lukacs, 1968:3, 42).

The path to a loving society, a community where people can live creatively, consciously, collectively, and not merely democratically, is probably only possible through great suffering. We should not despair in that, because that is the home of hope. People who have suffered and struggled, in that process, they define themselves and achieve a standing that is unavailable to others. People who have suffered can transcend fear, the host of hate, because they will have had to truly move in understanding from what appears to be, to what is, to what can be--because the processes of their suffering gives them a better understanding of what is essentially a Master-Slave relationship than the Masters can ever attain, and because their daily lives serve as proof to the Masters lies--- and in doing that they may be able to fashion a society that lives by the idea, which will require a massive international change of mind (and a calling off of the massive scientific industrialised slaughter), an idea whose time has come: From each according to their commitment, to each according to their need. This stands in clear opposition to what the zenith of capitalism today, summed up by Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* as the ultimate declaration of imperialism: Exterminate all the brutes.

Capital has nothing left to offer anyone. Even before the NASDAQ collapse, people with three SUVs began to notice that such good luck was just not fulfilling. Capital has inverted science, consider the huge scientific advances in weaponry and gas-masking, while 25 per cent of the children in parts of New York City are cursed with environmental asthma. Capital is attacking all that is beautiful, from rationality to aesthetics – the drooling fundamentalist snake-handling top office-holders who cloak the breasts on statues. But overcoming the processes of capital is going to require a massive change of mind – an urgent change if we are going to go beyond industrialised slaughter.

Changing minds is the daily life of every school worker. What we do counts, more than ever. We will win. That will not happen by simple reasoning. The Masters will not adopt the ethics of the slaves. We will win by resisting, with a plan to overcome, and by learning from our resistance-outfoxing the destruction of reason and wisdom. □

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