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Review of Che Guevara, Paulo Freire and the Pedagogy of Revolution

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Che Guevara, Paulo Freire and the pedagogy of revolution, by Peter McLaren, Rowman & Littlefield, Oxford, UK, 2000, 220pp, ISBN 0847695328

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Peter McLaren, professor at the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at the University Of California, Los Angeles, has published widely on the topics of critical pedagogy, cultural studies, and Marxist theory. In this work he compares the revolutionary pedagogy of Guevara and Freire. The book is divided into three sections: 'The Man in the Black Beard' deals with Guevara; 'The Man with the Gray Beard' with Freire; and the final section considers why a critical pedagogy is needed today. The introduction is by Freire's second wife, Ana Maria Araujo Freire.

The book is written from an avowedly Marxist perspective and will not sit comfortably with those who agree with the 'Pax Americana' view of world affairs. McLaren swiftly positions this book with the anti-globalisation perspective: globalisation and the threat of corporate control of education are main themes throughout the work. The content of the book is based solidly within the Americas, and contrasts the disparities between the countries of north and south America. It asserts that the wealth of the north is based on the exploitation of the south, and that the job of the revolutionary pedagogue is to lead the exploited to a realisation of their position through education. Any loss to or control of that system by capital will result in a lessening of potential liberation of the poor.

If you are looking for a biographical account of the life of 'El Che' in the first section, then this is not the book for you. McLaren pulls the threads of Guevara's revolutionary life and places his actions in the context of the need for education to develop the revolution. He contends that Che's pedagogy is 'grounded in the lived experiences of the oppressed becoming transformed into the new man through acquiring a revolutionary consciousness while at the same time living the life of the revolutionary'. McLaren contends that Che's contribution to critical pedagogy has 'seldom, if ever... been discussed', and he examines Che's literacy and school-building programmes in the Sierra Maestra during his time as a guerrilla leader. McLaren considers that 'the struggle over education is fundamentally linked to struggles in the larger theatre of social and political life'.

The second part of the book looks at Paulo Freire, an internationally recognised educational thinker. Freire developed his own critical pedagogy with educational programmes for the poor in Brazil. McLaren states that 'by linking the categories of history, politics, economics and class to the concepts of culture and power, Freire managed to develop both a language of hope that work conjointly and dialectically and that have proven successful in helping generations of disenfranchised peoples to liberate themselves'. One of the key concerns of Freire was the need for a progressive educational programme that was linked to the need for political and social change. Freire worked for the Brazilian Workers Party until his death in 1997 and held many posts for them in regional authorities, where he developed literacy programmes for the poor and underprivileged. In the book, Freire is shown sitting beside Luis Di Silva, head of the Workers party who, in 2002, was elected president of Brazil by general franchise. Press reports suggest that he is the first Brazilian president who does not hold a university degree. Freire would indeed be happy.

The final part of the book seeks to combine the central arguments of the previous sections. McLaren believes that a critical pedagogy is more vital today than ever before, and shows that Che and Freire 'have given us a pedagogical course of action... to redress locally and globally current asymmetrical relations of power and privilege'. McLaren establishes that the approach of both Che and Freire have relevance today.

This is a difficult book to get into. The language requires certain knowledge of Marxist theory and the language of epistemology. For all that, some of the themes will reverberate here in Ireland, as the reforms in the education system take hold and the requirement for public-private partnerships leads the drive to a corporate education.