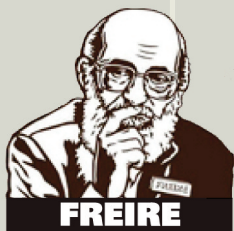
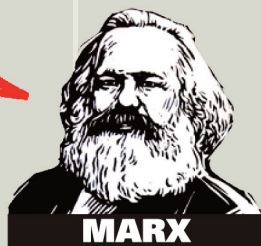


EDUCATING THE EDUCATOR



A Meeting of Minds



PETER CURTIS

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PETER CURTIS

For Humphrey
For a lifetime seeking the luminous summits

Peter Curtis has been a union militant and active socialist for more than 40 years. He has taught in government schools since 2000.

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Introduction

The genesis of this project was as a chapter for a book to celebrate 150 years of *Das Kapital* by Karl Marx. The purpose was to explore aspects of Marx's *Capital* and the continuing contribution his works make to the labour movement and society at large. In the intervening years, my considerations about its purpose have evolved.

As activist thinkers, we are in no doubt that organised labour and its forms of organising and educating can no longer provide us with the means for our most urgent task; the rebuilding of our movement with the capacity to energetically resist the dictatorship of the ruling classes and the consequences of their destructive activity.

There appears to be common agreement that the past four decades have seen the boss class gain the upper hand one way or another. Political, legal, and paramilitary forces have been combined to develop their surveillance state. Our class enemy uses every means to disorganise labour. This booklet is a contribution to exploring and developing ways of educating ourselves to become educators educating each other.

Peter Curtis

Preface

Peter Curtis is an educator and activist who in this booklet explores ideas about the connection between learning and activism.

The paper takes the form of an imagined dialogue situated in the present day between Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Paulo Freire (1921-1997) and discusses the relevance of their ideas to contemporary society. Curtis argues education should be collaborative in form, be lifelong, include lived experience, and that it ought to develop critical thinking skills which empower individuals to become agents of social change in their communities.

An example might be the NSW Builders Labourers Federation (BLF) in the 1970s which not only campaigned for higher wages and safer working conditions for the Union's members - fundamental union business – but also for environmental and heritage protection and for gay rights. All of these campaigns not only evolved from community requests followed by public meetings but, also necessarily, general meetings of the Union members which through dialogue about proposed actions served democratic requirements and educational or pedagogical purposes.

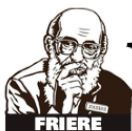
The industrial workers who took action around these non-industrial issues may not have initially been interested in the environment or conservation or heritage or gay rights but their involvement, reinforced by positive outcomes, led to an expanded knowledge and consciousness of the power of political activism

A further example arises from the consciousness raising groups of the early 1970s Women's Liberation movement where discussion was focussed on the lived experience of women's lives. This educative process led to political activism that brought important social changes in many areas of women's lives.

These far from isolated examples are testament to the importance of the issues raised in this booklet.

Judy Munday, July 2024

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Who, and what, educates the educator?

... as capital personified ... the capitalist's own transitory existence is implied in the transitory necessity of the capitalist mode of production. But in so far as he is capital personified, his motivating force is not the acquisition and enjoyment of use-values, but the acquisition and augmentation of exchange-values. ... he ruthlessly forces the human race to produce for production's sake. In this way he spurs on the development of societies productive forces, and the creation of those material conditions of production which alone can form the real basis of a higher form of society, a society in which the full and free development of every individual forms the ruling principle.¹

A meeting of minds

Mohammed V. International Airport, Casablanca. Two men, in transit again, in exile again. They are excitedly introducing themselves. Incredulous is the expression on the NSA agents face reflected back from her monitor but changing quickly to curious puzzlement, “Of all the minds! Meeting here?” She adjusts herself, and her earplugs, casts habituated eyes over the bank of screens, and settles in. Yelping excitedly to her own audience, “Marx and Freire! What a coup!”

As she tunes in she brings up their files, to reassure herself that indeed these are those of, “Whom we are forbidden to speak”; *‘Marx, Karl (1818– 1883): Class enemy– First to claim that he exposed capitalist social relations — Author, agitator and organiser of the first International Working Men’s Association (1864-1876) — Enduring legacy is criticism of capitalist commodity production, first comprehensively documented in ‘Das Kapital’ — His work continues to be controversial despite every effort to erase his legacy from history.* And, *‘Freire, Paulo (1921 – 1997): Class enemy – A communist who hides his propaganda by claiming to be an educator and Catholic – Self-appointed representative of ‘the oppressed’ people – He argues that speaking, reading, and writing are political acts — A partisan, and member of the Brazil’s Workers’ Party, and one time Secretary of Education for Sao Paulo, 1989-1992.*

A MEETING OF MINDS



Karl Marx: Since it's more than a century and half since I wrote *Das Kapital*, I am surprised to find that, after all these years, you find my work crucial in developing your pedagogical practice.

Paul Freire: Well, as you often remark, yours is a legacy which is always evolving. That variety in itself is a testament to the power of your thought and practice, both of which provide me with the means to read the world in different and necessary ways. Throughout my life I have met some of the most marginalised workers, which is the trigger for my question, Why do the capitalists believe they can continue to justify themselves as spurs to development? Surely, they are now more like the 'thorns in our sides and their gods a snare unto us'? But perhaps you're being too polite to say that which truly surprises you, even shocks you. How can it be that your ideas inform those of us from the Catholic faith?



No! Not shocked, not particularly! My maxim has always been that nothing human is alien to me. Furthermore, one should doubt everything, and most of all, oneself. I think, as you say, we can all be easily snared, seduced even, to seek illusory self-enrichment. If I am surprised it's because I've battled long and hard against all manner of hypocritical moralising and superstition.

A MEETING OF MINDS

Ah, that most misquoted of your aphorisms: *'Religion is the opium of the people'* But I know the rest, *'Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature ... the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions.'*² Perhaps one consequence of the seductive illusions we are sold; religious suffering, is the expression of real suffering, and a protest too against such suffering?



Hashish is the choice here, and there is supply and demand. Indeed, opium softens the blows and deadens the pain so we can go on. But you are right to ask, what can we do, what do we do, to replace the capitalists' class power so that we may be able to develop our capacities fully and freely? I argue that emancipation involved the elimination of false gods, be they the church or the state. I do wonder how a man like yourself, enlightened by the understandings you have, can manage to maintain the faith.

For me, the figure of the suffering Christ expresses our need for some answer other than any opiate our oppressors care to offer. People have always been concerned about suffering in the world. The elites not only deny us our next loaf of bread but our humanity too. In my homeland Brazil, the reactionary champions of capital were recently represented by Bolsonaro's government. They have gone for now, but they will be plotting ways to reassert capital's overt dictatorship. A few social and legal obstacles won't stop them amassing more wealth. The people opposed their attempts to impose and reinforce further austerity measures, and the attacks on the Indigenous movements who are defending their lands from logging and mining.



I heard too, that they were determined to erase your legacy from the consciousness of Brazil's people and history. While the workers' movement has been through a qualitative change since the '64 coup; the capitalists recognise that your activism, and ideas for education for liberation remain a threat. As you say, so does the majority of the population one way or another.

A MEETING OF MINDS

The violent behaviour of those who hold the purse strings of power is necessary to organise fear, to enable their dominance so that their power appears as a force of nature, so that peasants and workers appear stupid. It is the poor themselves who believe they must be held responsible for their self-torment, their deplorable living conditions and delinquency. If we are told such things often enough we believe them to hold some truth, even when it is self-deprecating, so we stop seeking the truth even when it explains our oppression. Generally speaking, the powerless, in the early moments of their historical experience, accept the sketch the powerful draw of them. They have no other picture of themselves other than the one the privileged impose on them.³



Just as when the factory owner extols the virtues of machinery and thereby reduces the refractory hand of labour to docility, we can see the thoughtless contradictions of the capitalist brain as the spirit of the factory.⁴ The owners must deny the transformations within each variation of the master-slave relationships. Our human condition is not pre-determined, or metaphysical if you will, because it too has a history. Social systems are not states of nature: “Liberation” is an historical fact and not a mental act, and it is brought about through historical conditions.⁵ We have the evidence that our living relationships change along with the needs of those who own the bulk of the wealth. Today, that means monopolising capitals. In a system of commodity production we are forced to sell the only thing we have left to sell, our labour-power. We remain enslaved – albeit a new kind of slave, a wage-slave. Herein lies the irreconcilable difference between capital and labour.

You describe vividly how our oppressors determine our conditions. From your example I take the need for analysis, for creating and organising our knowledge, so that we can explore the lives and subjectivities of the oppressors and the oppressed. The processes for literacy conducted through our Culture Circles⁶ are intended to democratise culture. In this day and age where



A MEETING OF MINDS

ad hominem arguments, or worse, monologues comprising vulgar moralising attacks which block opportunities to think in new ways. Nothing socially useful can be created this way apart from claiming dubious moral superiority. Your ideas were a revelation to me, but I had to think my way out of the prejudices of the ruling class, and as well, the left-wing propaganda that distorts so many of the assumptions about your ideas. Initially, I was surprised to discover much of it had little to do with what you had actually said and written. Our dialogue is possible only because I have had to learn to cultivate a thoughtful mind and a willingness to listen, to try and understand what others are trying to tell me. If culture is defined as the systematic acquisition of knowledge, it has to start from what we do, not from where someone else thinks and wants for us ⁷. Learning to read the world and the word in many different ways reveals all manner of oppression.



Engels is a fine example, always giving careful attention to peoples' ideas and working with them. So, I was right in suspecting that my influence on your pedagogy is how I show that what we do in practice, in responding to actual situations, conditions our consciousness much more than our ideas determine what we do?

That's why, I assume, you are critical of substituting the word 'capitalism' with that of 'neo-liberalism,' as if we were oppressed by a bad idea rather than by capitalists' pursuing what they must do in order to stay competitive. Indeed, your emphasis on the formation of consciousness through activity, and how both can be changed, is a further point of engagement. 'Reading the world and the word', as I put it, must be resolved in actions if we are to achieve relative clarity.



We should take a stand against philosophers who contend that ideas rule the world. Interpreting our world and changing it form a unity, which is generally misunderstood these days. While the arguments of Hegel and Feuerbach, Smith and

A MEETING OF MINDS

Ricardo to name the significant ones, were, in part, Idealist, in the sense they had not grasped the significance of “revolutionary,” “practical-critical” activity. However, only by grappling with those mighty thinkers could I arrive at the labour theory of value. All mysteries find their rational solution in human practice and in the struggle to comprehend our practice ⁸.

Absorbing what you write has been a life-long activity and there are any number of fruitful ways to read and interpret you. The unfortunate myth, even amongst comrades, is that your analysis is irrelevant because it belongs to an age long past. My catholic traditions are very much older but they too are renewed along with my faith.



Hegel was treated like a dead dog when I published *Capital*. Supersession comes quickly for some! While I grew to oppose his Philosophical Idealism, I have always acknowledged him as a mighty thinker, one whose philosophy calls for transformation: “all that exists deserves to perish.”⁹

My pedagogy is described as transformative but my emphasis is on appreciating our conditions if we are to change our consciousness. It is our collective efforts which transform each of us, and so too, our world. In 1964, when the USA encouraged the generals to take power, my crime, they said, was to politicise education by enabling the illiterate.¹⁰ Of this, I was more than guilty. I refused to accept that literacy education would be another instrument of domination. The imposition of a cosmopolitan syllabus pressed upon rural workers is oppressive. Becoming literate is much more than a mechanical problem of learning to read as such. For us it is about becoming critically conscious; ‘conscientizacao’ is the word in Portuguese, this is one way to redress the sources of oppression.¹¹ Becoming aware of something new is one thing, but more than that, making ourselves conscious of the familiar, the routine, and the expectations that we take for granted, without question. They



A MEETING OF MINDS

too are oppressive aspects of our daily lives. It is our exposure of the everyday which makes pedagogy of the oppressed a dangerous practice.¹²



What kind of teacher accepts without question what they are told? Are we to perform like a dancing bear, and follow the Judas goat like sheep, and limit young minds to the demands of profit making? The purpose of education becomes a critical question for all of us, but most particularly for communists and socialists because we have a vision for humanity which takes us beyond the immediate toil of the factory and routine household chores. Wage-slaves like workhorses need only enough sustenance to continue on. Under the rule of capital, many are reduced to their physical needs alone. Are we considered as human beings with our own hopes and desires? If we are to become alive, and live in the fullest sense of the word, we must seize the revolutionising openings that capitalism provides us.

I'm always critical of any dogmatic, mechanical application of ideas and this is why I rail against sectarianism.¹³ Some on the left try to dismiss me as an Hegelian Idealist with a 'subjectivist bias'.¹⁴ But I say to them, let us put aside our metaphysical differences and build unity around what we agree on. Finding philosophical agreement is too often the obstacle. Any educator should be concerned with both the subject and object of education. I do not see myself as an expert in literacy. I am more concerned with a critical understanding of education. Teachers and students are learners both, as the subjects and objects of any education process.



We soon learn that the bureaucracy is the keeper of the treadmill from which no one escapes. They're paid to organise power through their hierarchies of knowledge. They stopped me, and many others, from holding positions in universities.

Transforming our lives and minds is what I would call revolutionary activity, or 'praxis', the dialectical dance of theory

A MEETING OF MINDS

and practice, the word and the world, the head and the hand.¹⁵ I believe that you too also found fault with subjectivism as a denial of subjectivity¹⁶.



For the very reasons that I expose individualism as an impediment to enriching individuality as one outcome of social engagement.

Transforming the reality of our oppression means acknowledging our inheritance of unfolding histories. The significant problem always is how do we transform this reality into a better one? The oppressors are interested only in changing our consciousness, not the conditions that oppress us.¹⁷ Authentic thinking is concerned about reality. Teachers cannot think for their students or impose thoughts upon them.¹⁸ For me, as I know it is for you, our history and the making of our humanness are one and the same. Objectively, social reality is a product of our actions; despite appearances, actualities do not exist by fate or chance. While our actions condition and change us, so too do we recreate our reality — for better or worse.



Consciousness is conditioned by our relationships with nature and through our social, economic, and political inter-relationships in the world, between people, and the work we do together. The classroom instruction to which so many of us are subjected mirrors the capitalist production process. Individual craftsmen were once capable of carrying out all the aspects of production. In as much as the head and hand belong together, the mental and physical used to be united in the labour process.¹⁹ Over time, the needs of capital separated hands from heads; solitary humans still operate upon nature but without calling their own muscles into play under the control of their own brains.²⁰

When our hands are no longer directed by our own heads, the surviving connections become antagonistic.



As I know only too well. To write about machinery in *Capital* I

A MEETING OF MINDS



enrolled in a practical course put on for workers. There I sat, with my doctorate in the history of Greek science, understanding the mechanics and the mathematical laws but visualising the simplest technical issue was almost beyond me. I have problems with commercial arithmetic and our household accounts are a muddle. Yet I revel in the calculus.²¹

That hostility between the thinking head and the doing hands is the obstacle we radicals have to overcome. As you say in *Capital*, a school could be a factory for producing sausages or instruction.²² How can reformers believe that schools can provide the means to overcome our existential and economic alienation while not redressing the problems beyond the school gate, across the whole of society? We've seen the assault from the corporatised for-profit sector discrediting and colonising the public-school space. Regardless, the pedagogy for capital I describe as the 'banking system'²³ or in progressive liberal parlance, GERM (Global Education Reform Movement). Currently organised around a computer model of the mind, of brains 'hard-wired' for 'information and data processing', denying their plasticity! In this regard, we can see that capitalists foster an elitist attitude which always tries to naturalise, domesticate, or make passive the receivers of transmitted knowledge. However, people, students, and teachers, will always push back, seeking ways to work around and outside the system in attempts to humanise schooling, but too often our efforts result in frustration and disillusionment rather than generating hope for emancipation and freedom.



GERM! (guffawing) Another reiteration of Dickens's Mr Gradgrind? It's true that the ruling ideas are those of the ruling class.²⁴ One such insidious myth which buries the exploitative character of capitalism, is that we get a 'fair day's pay for a fair day's work'.²⁵ That so many wage-slaves believe this half-truth highlights why we need to educate and organise. Even in a capitalist democracy, the role of the state, as the agent of capital, is to cast a veil over the existence of the oppressed and the

A MEETING OF MINDS

sources of our oppression and exploitation. As you put it, ruling classes labour to keep us silent and out of sight. However, while you are right to bring the concrete circumstances of oppression and exploitation to our attention, to our consciousness as such, are you suggesting that our subjective experiences alone are enough to liberate us from oppression?

No, not at all! Far from it! I will say this. My early years of schooling in the 1920s and 30s were difficult. My father had died, and we too, like so many, went hungry. I achieved very little, especially in the primary years. That changed when I got regular meals. My point is that so many of us, peasants and workers, have terrible experiences in life, and in our schools. Too often we are left feeling stupid, or failures, because what we know is considered useless, not knowledge. We are certainly not permitted to question or challenge the nature of our circumstances. As I keep saying, we are alienated from our lived experiences because the economic system and its keepers demand that from us. Writing *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was my initial story about why educators have to be educated.²⁶



They were hard lessons for you;²⁷ I was particularly taken with your insights in the account of the fishing village. What I would give for a regular feed of fish!

The fisher-folk I worked with have a long deeply-felt relationship with the sea that defines their self-understanding as people. Unfortunately, the keenness of these self-perceptions obscures their exploitative economic and political relationships.²⁸ In our culture circles, we engage in a dialogue, both as individuals and as a collective. Once again, the dialectic: Learning and teaching is revealed to be a social process of finding out more about what we do, or did not know, about our worlds. If we listen, to hear the meaning of our words, our narratives, constructing meaning by connecting our words to worlds, we become self-conscious in a process of self-realisation: Being, and Becoming, Belonging to communities, societies, nations. Appearing from this meta-



A MEETING OF MINDS

cognitive process of 'becoming conscious' to self, and to the other, I and Thou²⁹, were their stories of personal and collective indebtedness to the middleman, and his control over their market price. They lived the knowledge but they had not 'heard' it before. Personally, politically, and economically, we uncovered their social relationships in the economic mode of exchange: their labour is sold as a commodity; the fish they caught are a commodity, which in the middleman's hands changes form into money. Out of that, we generated the words to describe these relationships and organised to change the world in ways that benefited them. Once they had revealed these relationships, new questions were spawned by our initial inquiry. We could penetrate appearances. Could nature generate these kinds of social relationships and modes of exchange? What activity conditions our determinations; how is our culture ordered; and who, what, how, and why is that order manifested. This process and method of critical dialogue allows both educator and educand to grasp lived experiences, often for first time. Although, while unveiling socioeconomic structures, this critical knowledge does not effect a change in reality in itself.³⁰



Your illiterates started from the spot where the most sophisticated apologists for capitalism end up. They take the surface for the reality and sail over the deeper currents. The dazzle of monetised exchanges blinds them to the exploitative core in the production of those commodities. Their material interests prevent them from ever 'reading the world' as you and I understand it to be.

It is true that I have not applied myself to a systematic understanding of how capitalism functions. For me, the attraction of *Capital* is your 'worldliness', writing the score for my humanism. I should dedicate more of my time to reading *Capital*. In the time prior to writing *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* I discovered you. That said, my philosophical and theoretical influences remain rather eclectic, although they're generally defined as Marxist, and socialist. Phenomenology and



A MEETING OF MINDS

existentialism are also important elements of my emancipatory theology and pedagogy. My own experiences, and the multitude of questions that arise from seeking solutions while working to overcome Brazil's deep-rooted poverty and illiteracy mean that I seek ideas which speak to me, inform the particular experiences I have with those I engage. I remember a young activist who had been imprisoned, he asked for a bible to read. Surprised, I asked why? 'So, I have an understanding of the people in my circle, their ways of being and thinking.' Just as you found at the workingmen's college, teaching and learning are activities dynamically intertwined. My activities as an educator arouse my curiosity. New problems and questions are always emerging. Politically I did what I could, assisting in the Workers' Party, and as Education Secretary in Sao Paulo from 1989 to 1992.



But where did you initiate your program? They were modest demands; for a national democratic struggle, for a more inclusive and democratic national capitalism?

It was Recife, the state capital of Pernambuco on the north west coast, on the Atlantic. The ruling elites, as it turned out, were fearful of the mere suggestion of an outbreak of democracy — 'What would those *menos gente* (less-than-people) know about anything? They can't even read and write.'



They always present any democratic demands that go beyond their limits as communism. Remember what the USA did to Vietnam? Just as Cuba's superior health care and education infuriates them.

Meanwhile, here in Brazil, the United States of America led international capital in preventing further competition from our industrial development while gaining greater access to Brazil to plunder their resources.



Which is why we must always try to keep up with the national and global dynamics of their system.

A MEETING OF MINDS

My crime is to seek practical solutions to apparently intractable problems. For that I was jailed and then finally forced into exile by the junta.³¹



I know a little about exile. I fled Germany for Paris, then had to escape to Brussels and was driven out to London. Exile is not the worst thing that can happen to a revolutionary.

Indeed not. Archbishop Romero was gunned down at his altar in 1980 because he spoke up for the poor.³²

Servility is the most detestable of vices. We don't need the threat of the military to remind us that the master-and-slave relationship, the oppressor and the oppressed, is marked by inequalities at every level.

The Vatican took thirty-five years to recognise that Romero might be a martyr. The nature of the state and its ways of organising power must always be included within our understanding of the exchange relationships developed between workers and the owners of capital.



I'll think about adding Romero to Spartacus, Prometheus and Kepler into my Pantheon of heroes.

As educators, we should be concerned about the kinds of social relationships engendered by these economic relationships. I shall never forget the violence that imbued the families and communities of the rural workers. Beatings of children were justified as necessary preparation for a life that was brutal. My reaction left me shame-faced when they described what they imagined was a typical day for me as compared with theirs.³³ However, despite the brutality, the contrast with the fisher-folk could not have been greater, they let their children run free, which meant no compulsion to attend school.³⁴ Playfulness encourages our disposition for struggle and freedom because they approximate our desires. Everything I have said describes the process of self-realisation.³⁵ Absorbing the implications of all these experiences taught me what I call critical-consciousness



A MEETING OF MINDS

which is only possible in a process of self-realisation which is defined by collectively reading the word and reading the world. If popular education is to provide the means to realising our potential, our capacities as human-beings, then we stand in opposition to any practice which makes schooling little more than an instrument to adapt and reproduce our capacities to that which best serves the ever-evolving needs of capital.



Certainly, Fred Engels has been critical to developing my consciousness.³⁶ Regularly, we engage in debates and in my head. Fortunately, I have the pleasure of his company, but not often enough.

Engaging in a dialogue such as we are now, and as you suggest with your comrade, assists us to become conscious of our circumstances historically and, as a consequence, of our possibilities. Its essence is establishing that reciprocal and dialogical relationship between the educator and the educand.³⁷ Dialogue is a critical tool because it is a reciprocal act, of non-monetised exchange. But, so too, is the act of reading the written word. Although it is a 'dialogue' of a different kind, reading leads us along avenues outside our own immediate experiences for thinking about the world and thence to thinking and acting consciously to change it, and thereby each other. Here is the primary question for me, how can the oppressed, as divided, unauthentic beings, participate in developing the pedagogy for their own liberation?³⁸



Language is practical consciousness.³⁹ Whether or not it is quite as old as consciousness, language exists only with others, and for that reason alone it exists for me personally. Language, like consciousness, arises only from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other people. To suggest that language could have emerged, or be acquired, without a community of people who live and talk together is preposterous. My three daughters showed me how consciousness begins as social product, and remains so as long as we exist, to become aware of the

A MEETING OF MINDS



sensuous environment enriching their connections with us and with things.⁴⁰ Each daughter became an individual growing in self-conscious, indeed, making herself ‘individual’, yet part of our household.⁴¹

Which is why, as an educator and cultural worker, I am preoccupied by how to become critically conscious of our circumstances, by questioning each other about how oppression permeates each of our lives.



My being educated by the workingmen in the International Working Men’s Association is not unlike yours with the fisher-folk and rural workers.

The difference was that your comrades were already the most advanced elements in their class.



Class struggle is always one of self-emancipation. That said, it is critical to understand who and what contribute to our social relationships and how they are shaped by the needs of capital. You rightly argue for a pedagogy of liberation, for freedom from exploitation. What remains for us is the question of how can we liberate ourselves from the miseries of lives chained to screens?⁴² Today, workers are controlled, not only by being attached to their devices at work, but they are also under surveillance, via the screens and algorithms of the giant corporations in conjunction with their state organisations. Like, I imagine, we are now! Modern industry, however, could never treat an inherited form of production as the definitive one. The technical basis of capitalism is permanently revolutionary, whereas all earlier modes of production were essentially conservative.⁴³ Manufacture is swept away by large-scale industry. The workshop’s division of labour is reproduced in a still more monstrous form by converting the worker into a living appendage of a robot.⁴⁴

Many of the communities and people I meet are situated outside the industrial workforce, but there is no doubt they

A MEETING OF MINDS

suffer the effects that you mention. All the struggles of the First Peoples, many now landless workers, the expropriation of their soil, the despoliation of forests, provides an obvious parallel. My worries are with those who must tolerate Third World conditions — the so-named ‘Damned of the Earth’⁴⁵ — those who are denied the ability to participate even in our limited democracy, primarily because they cannot read and write. I don’t mean just informally deprived. In Brazil, the law denied the vote to the illiterate. Even without that barrier, illiteracy cuts to the heart of economic political and social rights to equality.



We intellectuals have greater opportunities to uncover the mechanics of exploitation, and a duty to present those hidden dynamics to the oppressed. But it is only after they make these truths a living part of their struggle that our scientific explanations acquire a power comparable to a force of nature.

Pernambuco, the state I grew up in, and where I went on to develop the literacy project, and as you previously mentioned, was engaged in a struggle for democratic reforms. I should add that I revived the project inside the Workers’ Party in 1989. The U.S.A back then treated Pernambuco as another Cuba by equating our struggle with communism. At that time, I was merely protesting about the church’s passivity towards the poor. My protest was also voiced by the archbishop in this part of Brazil: “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a Communist.”⁴⁶



Does ‘seeing’ the poor make one a Communist or a Christian? (Chuckling) Must I choose?

Alleviating suffering doesn’t generally grapple with causes. My involvement with Liberation theology could be described as equal parts of your good self and Jesus Christ.



I’m far from sure what your ‘spirituality of human action’ might mean, and even less clear how you can turn it against oppressors.

A MEETING OF MINDS

In part, it involves hope, love, and solidarity with the oppressed. Try to see it this way. Ontologically, we seek to go beyond ourselves. To stretch these limits, to transcend them, we need a hopeful vision ... something more than the here and the now. To break the culture of silence, to speak critically about the world of the oppressor, and about our world of the oppressed, is part of remaking this world. It is through confronting our reality that we come to perceive that a lovelier world can be announced, somehow anticipated, in our imagination. Such aspirations are far from Idealism. Imagination and conjecture about a world different from this one of oppression are necessary if we are to transform reality. You and Engels developed socialism from the wishful thinking of the utopians into a scientific analysis of what must be done and how it might be possible. I'm seeking to redeem utopianism from the ether by recognising hope as part of praxis, and by giving our imaginings an historical materialist underpinning.



My version of your vision is of building workers who construct a house in their minds before picking up a trowel. Their floor plan can only ever be a first sketch. The labouring processes will reveal difficulties and propose fresh solutions. How true that is for science, I know too well from discarding several prototypes on my way to constructing Capital.

Indeed. While hope is an ontological need, we must anchor it in practice in order for it to become actual, concrete.⁴⁷ Hope alone cannot transform the world. That kind of 'naiveté' is a highway to hopelessness, pessimism, and fatalism. Neither can our struggle to improve the world be reduced to calculated acts or to a scientific method. The confidence we gain through acting hopefully is based on the need for truth, necessary to overcome the fear of freedom as an ethical quality of the struggle.⁴⁸ Hope without rage and love is dead, to misquote the epistle of James.⁴⁹



Luther dismissed such sentiments as 'an epistle of straw'.

A MEETING OF MINDS

Our shared dismissal of his disdain for the efficacy of 'works' or 'deeds' establishes our common starting point on education as a shared practice. This, then, I hope will enable us to refine its purposes and from there to grasp what we need to do to overcome more than the current babble.



This 'us' isn't just we two?

No, but we're not excluded just because we're dead. Don't forget that Capital was approaching 100 when it informed Liberation theologians.



Luther would be surprised to find the church trading indulgences for social research?

The mainstream emphasis is on individualising our problems, making them appear as personal failures, or flaws in a teacher's techniques. The Cubans are a persistent threat to this view. They've demonstrated why revolution is a prior condition to overcoming mass illiteracy. Humility is the virtue of our learning to serve the oppressed in their overcoming of their own oppression.

To repeat: the educator learns to be educated.

(laughing): I couldn't have put that better myself.



There is a difficulty connected with a pedagogy for revolution. On the one hand, a change of power is required to establish a system of education which serves working people. On the other, such a system is a prerequisite to bring about that overturning of power. We have no choice but to commence from where we are.⁵⁰

We can set out only from where we are. We can't staff schools with 'future teachers' working with students bussed in from the day after tomorrow. All my pedagogy grows from how both educator and educand learn to teach each other through engaging with words about the world beyond every school gate.



A MEETING OF MINDS



That's why in our Manifesto we advocate combining schooling with work.⁵¹ The question of education is always a favourite bourgeois topic, especially the many-sides to technical instruction.⁵² Modern industry constantly replaces complicated skills with simpler knacks which require less training.⁵³ Cultural education, if a worker gains some, has no direct effect on wages. By moral education, the bourgeoisie understands the drumming-in of its 'principles', its needs and interests, into the heads of those they exploit. Adam Smith supported education for the children of the oppressed if it taught them not to challenge their oppressors.⁵⁴

As you observe, we must learn by doing. Unless we resist what is being done to us, the problems of education under the limits set by capitalism can never be resolved. The elites look after themselves by making the world work for them but always at our expense. For these reasons, I always support 'revolutionary ferments' as you put it.



The ruling class has neither the know-how or means, or the desire, to offer everyone a broad education such as you and I have enjoyed. Indeed, what I said in 1849 resounds even more today, 168 years later with all the prevailing rhetoric about 'life-long learning' and certification: 'Every worker should learn as many branches of labour as possible, so that if, either through the application of new machinery or through the changed division of labour, he is thrown out of one branch, he can easily become accommodated in another.' Education for the working class has always been defined by what capital needs to extract from them.⁵⁵ The spirit of capitalist production emerges clearly from the ludicrous way in which the British parliament drew up the so-called education clauses of the Factory Acts. They made elementary education compulsory, but made no provision for how that end could be achieved. Nevertheless, the Act did indicate what could be done when concessions are 'wrung from capital'.⁵⁶

A MEETING OF MINDS

For the very poor, that's never a choice. At very best they might scrape together enough money for primary school.



Once again, in the *Manifesto* we call for 'free' education. Our demands, as Robert Owen recognised, are that the mental should be combined with bodily labour, with gymnastics and technological education — not mere training — as one more means to overcome the division of labour and the distorted development of apprentices. The printing machine, for example, created a new division of labour. No longer was it a requirement of their 'craft', to read and write. They required no intellectual training, little room for skill, and less for judgement. Once too old for children's work, they became recruits for crime ... due to ignorance and brutality, their mental and bodily degradation.⁵⁷

The brutality of so many of our relationships, the desperation of our living places, and the squalid favelas infect our subjectivity and sense of solidarity. It is for this reason that Erich Fromm describes my educational practice as a kind of historico-cultural, political psychoanalysis.⁵⁸ As I have said, we find it difficult to see what is in front of us. We somehow obscure reality. We need to create spaces for reflective dialogue to explore and find common meaning and understanding, to see them up close, from personal observation and personal intercourse.



The moral degradation is all too real. Engels spent nearly two years becoming acquainted with Manchester's proletarians, observing their strivings, their sorrows and joys. He wrote it up into a book, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*.⁵⁹

In our 'culture circles' we meet people we may have known in different ways, but here we may discover each other's previously hidden strengths.⁶⁰ As well, individuals discover new things about themselves. I think it demonstrates the power of the collective, reciprocal practice and mutual respect. The 'photo-dialogue' method is one way to provoke discoveries. I recall working with group of teenagers; I showed them some



A MEETING OF MINDS

photographs of their very own street, and asked them to identify the location. It did surprise me, but they named a number of locations, slums elsewhere in other countries for example, before the realisation dawned on them as they put the puzzle together. Naturally, their self-discovery raises all kinds of questions for all of us.⁶¹



My image is of the two little girls in the Moxley brickfield. From their tenderest years, they were exposed to low language, filthy, shameless habits, so that unknowing and half-wild, they grew up lawless, abandoned and dissolute.⁶²

Any and each positive change has to be rung-out through a struggle with the ruling elites, and these changes are a direct consequence of our political power. I cannot believe in the magnanimity of the dominant class, as a class. I will admit that magnanimous individuals are possible.⁶³ *Capital* relies on the evidence of those who can see, and make some sense of these horrors. Mysticism, abuse, corruption, drugs, disease, war, all limit the possibility of a world in which it is easier to love.⁶⁴



Another example is how the transformation of work by large-scale industry changes social relations. Inventions in the service of capital misshape bodies and minds. Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but we, human beings, developing material production and our mental intercourse, can still alter our physical existence, our thinking and the products of our thinking.⁶⁵

That is what I mean by critical consciousness. What has to be done cannot be set down with general phrases about "labour" and "society". We must prove concretely how, in this capitalist society, the material conditions have at last been created which enable, or more, compel workers, to lift this social curse.



But reality demands that the capitalists, as capital personified, be fanatically intent on the valorisation of value, and must keep

A MEETING OF MINDS



on forcing the rest of humankind to produce for the sake of surplus-value. I observed young children working with a strained attention and a rapidity which was astonishing, hardly ever giving their fingers a rest or slowing their motion. Not to mention the mistress armed with her stimulant, the long cane. No opiates there! Tell me such methods are not wage-slavery!⁶⁶

While the ruling class persists in proving me hopelessly over-optimistic, are there not historical moments in which the survival of the social whole will be in the interests of all social classes? Is there not an imperative imposed upon all classes to try to understand each other? By the way, I am not suggesting that we can have a 'New Age capitalism' devoid of social classes and conflict.⁶⁷



What then are you suggesting? Sounds to me like a proposition for joining forces with the oppressors. Cast your mind back to '64! We need to keep repeating this to ourselves, as to why the interests of the classes are irreconcilable. A revolutionary reconstitution of society at large is necessary lest we face the common ruin of all the contending classes.⁶⁸ In that respect, I do appreciate what you're saying, but as you always point out, we must face the 'Truth'. And their truth explains why they must maintain their monopoly on violence.

Sometimes my hopefulness takes a battering too. We're the ones who had to deal with a remilitarised Brazil under Bolsonaro. A number in his cabinet were connected to the military. I know, we both know, that, ontologically the oppressed are doubly oppressed. On the one hand, by the master-servant relationship but also because we internalise our reduction to thing-hood since we are forced to sell our capacities. Our embodied labour-power becomes who we are, the commodity we sell. As educators we need to ask how the system perpetuates tolerance for the illusion of freedom? I believe that to be the critical question for pedagogy and politics.⁶⁹



As you say, the pernicious illusion of the capitalist system is that we are free, free to work, albeit according to the conditions

A MEETING OF MINDS



determined by the owners of capital. But their reality relies on their fundamental principle, of narrow self-seeking, the dissolution of humankind into the world of atoms: a world where people regard each other only as useful objects, each exploiting the other. All the while, the powerful few, the capitalists, must seize all they can for their class. Social warfare puts every house in a state of siege, with hard egotism on one hand, and nameless misery on the other. Capital's weapon is the control of the means of subsistence and production. The worst of such a state must fall upon the poor with whom you work. One can only wonder that the whole crazy fabric still hangs together.

You make it sound hopeless. I ask, what kind of education can we make? We must conceive of activity subjectively, as sensuous practical activity. Any society has to produce use-values, be they aesthetic, or productive equipment, or for daily sustenance. To abstract thought and theory, that is, intellectual activity, and questions of 'truth' and 'reality' from objective practical-critical activity, can lead only to idealism and scholasticism. That too, I've taken from you.



For all these reasons, I argue that the working class does not have a choice. It must take responsibility to act as a class-for-itself. While both the ruling elites and the working class are vulgar and boorish, and especially so while 'virtue' remains the equivalent of 'value' and 'value' equates with 'price', the capitalists too are under the sway of the system, cogs in their own machine. They too are formed and changed by their material conditions; competition subordinates individuals to the immanent laws of their system – external and coercive.⁷⁰ So the question keeps coming back at us: what do we have to do that will enable our class to act for-itself? Education is fundamental for making a civilised world, and this is why we must persist in our demands that governments and churches should be equally excluded from any influence on schools.⁷¹

Becoming self-conscious subjects is a necessary step toward liberating ourselves from intellectual and social paralysis. Pre-



A MEETING OF MINDS

schools to universities can be seen as testing grounds for skills to meet the needs demanded by capital. The variations in the modes of transmission, of 'schooling' rather than educating, induces unwillingness to the point of deliberate avoidance to take up the questions and the analysis necessary to redress and overcome inequities of gender, ethnicity and class.



Their system is animated by its drive to reduce resistance offered by humankind, an obstinate yet elastic barrier.⁷² The contradictions of its historical form of production open the way to its dissolution so that we can re-establish life on a new basis.

Militant workers search for the means to elaborate democracy as an emancipatory movement in every area of life, most notably at work. Schooling no longer even pretends to educate citizens for democracy and social equality. Rather, it has become a scramble to get a foot on the bottom rung of their ladder of opportunity. Capitalists neither seek nor need democracy because their politics are essentially plutocratic. Cuba, as I said before, remains exceptional, a story which always merits more attention.



Schools never educate workers so that they can direct their workplaces and their society. Rather, the object is to start preparing them early so they can be plugged in at work and to perform efficiently wherever they are needed.⁷³

You advise us to start *Capital* from the chapters that take up our everyday experiences; the length of the working day, co-operation in workplaces, and the division of our labours. In those pages workers can read their world in your words albeit one hundred and fifty years later.⁷⁴



Those words will live on to interrogate the worlds we shall remake together. (Waving at the cameras) Must be time to go?

I wonder, my flight's been cancelled! They've all been cancelled! The entire airport is like a ghost town!

The bars are closed. Let our spectres seek out a coffee house.

A MEETING OF MINDS

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A MEETING OF MINDS

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A MEETING OF MINDS

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Film recommendations

The following film is a documentary that highlights material that every union organiser and community activist would enjoy while providing food for further thought and discussion.

Tous au Larzac / Leadersheep, 2011, French. Directed by Christian Rouaud

Working sheep farmers run the campaign, urban anarchists admit that they need a Jesuit engineer's knowledge to build a stone sheep fold; work provides a communality that enables people to unite despite their differences and traditions. In 1971 the French government expropriated 107 farms to expand the military training grounds on the Larzac Plateau in the south of France. This enrages the conservative Catholic farmers who pledge to the death to defend their land. The first lesson for the outsiders is that the farms need workers; they learn this requires understanding and respecting the direction of the locals, and each other's too. Patience, long meetings and problem solving all help to combine the forces of farmers, nationalists, socialists, communists, and trade union militants. The ten-year struggle defeats the French Government and gives rise to the anti-globalisation movement in France.

The following films demonstrate the power of dialogue. Overcoming the strictures of schooling on education these challenges to the status quo appreciate the joy de vivre of people engaging with each other in a common purpose.

***Just a Beginning*, 2010, French. Directed by Pierre Barouquier and Jean-Pierre Pozzi**

Just a Beginning follows a preschool class over two years engaging in philosophical dialogue. Seated in a circle the children – aged three to five – approach the universal subjects of love, power, difference, growing up, even death. Refusing to direct the discussion the teacher allows the children to follow their own logic and end inconclusively. The thinking and the talking are what is important, and not any artificial consensus or agreement.

***The Circle*, 2023, Italian. Directed by Sophie Chiarello**

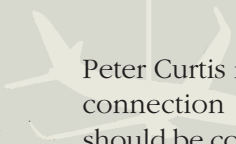
The pupils of an Italian primary school are followed by the camera for five years, capturing their unique perspective on the world. In circle time, students sit regularly with the teacher, and the director, to share their thoughts and feelings without judgement. No matter what they're going through, they are very supportive of each other. This is not a documentary about children, but a reflection on the formation of our society in a space where children listen and grow.

***Radical*, 2023, Mexican. Directed by Christopher Zalla.**

Run-down school facilities and a lack of computers, the majority of teachers focus on passing government-mandated standardized tests. Newly arrived teacher, Sergio surprises his sixth graders by taking an unorthodox approach to teaching. Encouraging them to solve problems creatively, he inspires his sixth graders to be confident and achieve beyond their impoverished circumstances. Student-led learning engages the students like they have never been before. See my review published in ARENA at <https://arena.org.au/radical-a-film-to-provoke-thinking/>

***The Teacher Who Promised the Sea*, 2023, Spanish. Directed by Patricia Font**

Ariadna discovers that her grandfather has been searching for his father's grave. He had disappeared in the Spanish civil war. Ariadna helps to exhume a mass grave in which he may be buried. She then discovers the story of Antoni Benaiges, a young teacher from Tarragona who before the war was her grandfather's teacher. Antoni, following the methods of the Democratic School inspired by the French pedagogue Freinet, he antagonises the priest and oppressive village leaders by introducing an innovative learner centered pedagogy. He celebrates his students while he makes a promise to take them to the sea.



Peter Curtis is an educator and activist who explores ideas about the connection between learning and activism. He argues education should be collaborative in form, be lifelong, include lived experience, and that it ought to develop critical thinking skills which empower individuals to become agents of social change in their communities.

Judy Munday

Right from the start – in the location of their chance encounter — we have Peter's rich imagining of what Karl Marx from the nineteenth century and Paulo Freire from the twentieth might say to each other about the learnings of the movements they adorn and their relevance for now. Thus, in their comradely, mutually critical yarn, we in labour, environment, feminist and other activism of this century, can see our role as learners-educators restoring the emancipatory, eco-humanist drive that overcomes its alienation, exploitation, oppressions and defeatism for a new socialist society in all respects better than the mess we are now in.

Don Sutherland, socialist, union and political educator: Retired from 20 years as Education Coordinator, Organiser and Industrial Officer with the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union in their national office.

What an amazing contribution! If only I had had teachers of Peter Curtis's calibre who shared Freire's outlook! Freire was an important influence at my university, and I was always inspired to see the reaction of my students from the Global South to a perspective in education so opposed to the modernization logic that pervades so much of educational studies. Freire's writings might still be widely influential in Brazil, but many of my Latin American colleagues had to wait until they got to graduate school in the US to have the chance to engage with his work. Thanks to Peter for this important contribution, which I will happily share with my own students.

Professor Stephen Carney, Department of Psychology & Educational Studies, Roskilde University, Denmark

