

'Our Teachers and The Limits of Cognition': Dietzgen and the challenge of McLaren's epistemology

Abstract

"We need a philosophically grounded alternative to capitalism" (McLaren, 2015, p. 56), but what does such a philosophical grounding look like? Need it be shared? The philosophical basis for practice was not shared by Lenin and Bogdanov, for example, and yet both retained the ability to work together in the Bolshevik party. There's a profound difference between **god-building**, and **god-seeking**. Socialists have strong traditions of both. Peter McLaren's recent work fits into the latter category. I will engage with this project, because I think Peter's position, whilst honourable, lacks the visionary power of the former. And to these I would like to add a third position, one which seeks to extend to all of the material universe and to all living things a sacred character, but without any requirement for categories such as god. There are of course many mystic traditions which espouse something similar, but relatively few socialists have developed politically this position, as espoused by the tanner-philosopher Josef Dietzgen (though there are certainly close links between Dietzgenism and god-building). My argument for raising such seemingly arcane concerns, is rather similar to that of Lenin whose immersion in philosophy in writing *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* in 1908 primarily met the political requirements of the day. Amidst ubiquitous talk of the Anthropocene, and a sudden rise in interest in Bogdanov on the Marxist left, now is the moment to look to the prospect of taking up a Bogdanovite project, not to build a new god, but to re-sacralize nature. In this paper, I begin to mobilise an unlikely alliance around this vision: not only Dietzgen, but deep ecologists and even Jiddu Krishnamurti assist in exploring the limitations of McLaren's position.

Introduction

It's odd: I expend so much energy campaigning against forced academisation, baseline testing (we won!) and such like, yet present here an analysis of McLaren's recent work as far removed from the day to day struggles as Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* was from organising activity within the Bolsheviks. But, of course therein lies the point. There is nothing more practical in terms of the day to day operation of a campaign than its philosophical orientation. Systems of belief shape the ways in which we abstract categories of phenomena from the world, delineate, and label them; and in so doing the patterns of prehension, exclusion and inclusion that direct our movements.

The hardest thing one can do is to trace the emergence of one's own systems and pattern of belief. The genesis of faith, in a god, in family, 'race', humanity, in ideology occurred under material conditions with which one is uniquely familiar, and yet also uniquely ill-equipped to analyse. The extent to which we are all conditioned by and bound up in established patterns of belief make it extraordinary difficult to take the first step towards that movement which Marx identifies as "self-changing" (Marx, 1992, p. 422) and as the defining activity of "*revolutionary practice*" (original emphasis) (ibid.), to observe and account for the daily repetition and enactment of those beliefs. In considering Peter McLaren's recent work, this paper explores the reproduction of established patterns of faith, and argues that if faith is necessary in human thought - as well it may be - then

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socialists should set their sights high, questioning the material reproduction of established patterns of religious faith to plant the seeds of a new collectivism of the imagination.

At the limits of thought, the turn to faith

The title of this article derives from one shared by two very different and rather unexpected sources who inform the analysis that follows. The first is from Joseph Dietzgen, earliest philosopher of Marxism, autodidactic hero of forgotten generations of proletarian educators and a man with a keen interest in relationship between socialism and religious thinking. In 1877-8, he wrote a couple of essays called *The Limits of Cognition* and *Our Professors and the Limits of Cognition* (Dietzgen, 1906). The second, a book entitled *The Limits of Thought* (Krishnamurti & Bohm, 1999), is a record of dialogues a century later between physicist David Bohm and anti-guru Jiddu Krishnamurti, the spirit of which takes us to the question of the roles of faith and orthodoxy in informing and shaping approaches to the better world for which we hope and build and organise.

For many of us, the flame of hope lit by critical pedagogy and the vision of the communist future glimpsed in Marx's least 'scientific' prophecies offer reasons to hold out against the brutalising effects of neoliberal capitalist education. For so many of our teachers, when drawing out the achievements of the individual child in the face of standardised testing terrorism is no longer enough reason in itself to stay in the fight, belief in a better educational future is usually the straw at which they clutch. If no such vision is imaginable, the battlefield is more often than not abandoned to the next cohort of cannon fodder. For those who find faith in a vision of another school, another world, there is sufficient reason for the fight to go on.

For Peter McLaren, critical educators have a "new era to proclaim" (McLaren, 2015, p. 124) one reflecting the eschatological zeal of the true believer. Whilst I might agree with Peter (and Krishnamurti¹) that "the revolution is now" (ibid.), there remain huge questions about circumscribing revolutionary social change within the terms of established belief systems, or requiring, like the British comedian and actor Russell Brand (Guardian, 2016), heroes of the revolution – Guevaras, Chavezes – against whose monumental achievements we may measure our own contributions to the revolution; figures best exemplified for Peter McLaren by Christ, whose 'outbidding of God' for moral superiority marks him as the 'ideal of man' upon which we may project our image of a 'future man', central to the utopian meaning of Marxism (McLaren, 2015, p. 115). The question for me is rather one of the usefulness of the myths of the past, and among these I include not only the messianic mythologies of Christianity that so many find inspiring, but also the old myths of Promethean scientific Marxism, myths of red plenty and production without limits. Whilst I'm not sure I accept Krishnamurti's pithy dictum that "[i]f I perceive the nature of belief, it's finished." (Krishnamurti in Krishnamurti & Bohm, 1999, p. 79), I hold it to be the case that if I perceive the conditions for and nature of belief, my relationship to belief is changed. This is, surely, a helpful tonic in a 'post-truth' era of unqualified positional assertion; not to deny the supersession

¹ Krishnamurti's use of the same phrase employed by McLaren appears in a very different context, but is central to his approach: "Transformation can only take place immediately; the revolution is now, not to-morrow." (Krishnamurti, 1954, p. 27)

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of shared political Truth, but, if belief trumps Truth, to recognize our ontogenetic culpability in realizing provisional (classed, raced) truths²

McLaren's epistemology

There is much to agree with in McLaren's (2015) epistemological review. He discusses the constitutional embodiment of new ways of thinking - which are also very ancient - in the cultural political developments in *Las Américas*, proclamations of a "plurinational, communitarian, collective, egalitarian, multilingual, intercultural and bio-socialist vision of sustainable development" (McLaren, 2015, p.94) which are said to reflect a "new epistemology of living that has so far not been a casualty of the epistemicide of the conquistadores"(ibid). It is proposed that this stands in contrast with the ways of thinking birthed by the material conditions of advanced Western capitalism, systems of thought which are full of "illusion and error"(ibid)³. We are all very familiar with the arguments that conscientization is the inverse of such 'false consciousness' and represents the means by which we might be "rescued"(ibid) from the epistemological dead end of commodified thinking. However, we should also recall that at the heart of Marx's argument for a fetishism of commodities lies an analogy with the ways in which the human mind has manufactured gods and spirits, inventions which become shibboleths in the repetitive reenactments of their mythopoetic power to misdirect our epistemic assumptions.

So, what follows from this are a series of questions. *Is faith necessary to the vision of a better world? If so, is faith in any one of the world's religions better than another? Is measurement against any ideal better for us than any other?*

In his latest book, a faith in Christ's teaching offers McLaren an underlying philosophical reason to maintain the struggle for a better world. McLaren's Christ, like Keir Hardie's (2015)⁴ is a communist archetype, and so he feels justified in asking, "if you accept Christ as your personal saviour and support a system that creates inequality and injustice, what does this say?" (McLaren, 2015, p.105) Well, at the risk of sounding glib, it says you're a member of the bourgeois Christian mainstream who, like most other Christians the world over do not share McLaren's picture of Christ Communist, and would no more actively withdraw support for capitalism than they would actively withdraw support for eating. To compound this with the claim "we cannot shirk from this obligation [to the poor] without imputation of culpability and still remain Christian" (ibid.) also raises the question of whose entitlement it is to appoint some true (true Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, et cetera) and some apostate - and the same of course applies in the Marxist milieu.

² There is nothing new here that Dietzgen and later Bogdanov and indeed Lenin did not recognise in the assertion of 'proletarian logic' (Emmett, 1928) over "bourgeois "truth""(Lenin, 1975, p.102).

³ As an aside, McLaren is not quite correct in his claim that in identifying as the end goal of its quest a noncommodified, participatory *buen vivir* whose essence is equilibrium, conscientization eludes Eurocentrism. There is nothing necessary about decentring to models of equilibrium, since such models lie at the heart of universalist systems theories of epistemology devised in the west, and Bogdanov's Soviet precursor (Bogdanov, 1996).

⁴ Hardie famously wrote, "When the old civilizations were putrefying, the still small voice of Jesus the Communist stole over the earth like a soft refreshing breeze carrying healing wherever it went" (2015, p. x)

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It is a perfectly legitimate move on McLaren's part to co-opt selected passages from the Gospel of James to the cause of revolutionary socialism, and the case that communism was an early Christian principle is both well established and compelling. Peter's use of J.P. Miranda's Marxist exegesis demonstrates this convincingly. Indeed, among the Bolsheviks, Lunacharsky offered a similar case for a revolutionary communist core to early Christianity (Boer, 2013).

There are a number of central questions begged by this approach. Why employ Biblical readings rather than Koranic, Vedic, Gurbani, et cetera? For sure there is a value - indeed it is pedagogically essential - to take people *from where they are* on a journey towards a fairer, wiser, a properly more communist world. And of course it is true that across great swathes of the earth, people find hope, forbearance, resistance to the depredations of capitalism in their Christian faith. But should socialists be in the business of extolling established religious faiths? I argue that a more logical and consistent path is to draw upon the wellspring of faith to promote a wider, more inclusive worldview. This is the 'God-building' approach.

Both before and after the October Revolution of a hundred years ago, the Bolsheviks were faced with the question of how to make conscious working class partisans of populations who also found hope, comfort and relief in their deep faith in Christ or in Mohammed. Lenin's position, which became predominant as he secured his leadership of the party had not always held sway. Rather there had, as one would expect, been a multiplicity of approaches towards the important question of religious faith among the Marxists factions in immediately pre-revolutionary Russia. This article is not intended to excavate these debates, but will draw attention to the particular response of the vperedists by way of contrast with McLaren's current argument.

But, first, let me first offer a few comments on Lenin. Most readings of Lenin are that he followed Marx in thinking of Christianity as a psychological reflection of the material reality of the masses of workers in slave and feudal economies, of their subservience and exploitation, which "comes to its sharpest expression in the belief in a better life after death, which inevitably arises from the hopeless situation of those exploited." (Boer, 2013, p.11) Prior to the revolution, Lenin argued that the party should not proclaim atheism as part of its platform, nor should it divide the working class by foregrounding anti-religious or anticlerical propaganda, for "[u]nity in this really revolutionary struggle of the oppressed class for the creation of a paradise on earth is more important to us than unity of proletarian opinion on paradise in heaven." (Lenin in Boer, 2013, p. 19)⁵ Indeed, Roland Boer argues that on occasion, Lenin came close to recognising a revolutionary potential in established religion as representing not only an inward reflection of exploitative economic relations, but also a reaction which might point towards redemptive justice. If this is the case in the years before the October Revolution - and I'm not sure it is - then Lenin's position sometimes approximates to that of McLaren.

For Lenin, there was a deep ideological imperative, following the October Revolution, to educate the masses out of the "religious fog" in which they were enshrouded, to reveal the historical and economic origins of Christian confusion and superstition, and thereby to evaporate this fog such

⁵ Boer probably credits Lenin with a more sophisticated approach than is warranted here in that he overlooks the changed strategic priorities at different stages in the revolutionary process.

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that the sunlight of socialist materialism might shine through. An impatient Lenin seemed to believe that this end could be achieved swiftly and efficiently (Lenin, 1972).

By contrast, the strategy of the vperedist current among the Bolsheviks was to take the long view. This was a pedagogical solution of enormous ambition. To educate for a different kind of faith, "God-builders sought to promote the affinities between Marxism and religion, fostering the "warm stream" of Marxism in terms of enthusiasm, feeling, the new human being, the radical dimensions of religion, all of which were to be embodied in revolution." (Boer, 2013, p.59) The God-builders evinced no belief in divinity. Rather, "they sought to provide a dimension to Marxism that went beyond cold theory, preferring to emphasise enthusiastic, emotional and ethical elements" (Boer, 2013, p.73) By religion, Lunacharsky "meant not the belief in divine figures or a supernatural world that determines this one, but rather the emotive, collective, utopian" (Boer, 2013, p.76). Roland Boer (2013, p.77-8) seeks to clarify a confusion regarding God-building: drawing on Lunacharsky's texts, he dispels the perception that the God-builders' project sought to substitute a worship of humans for the worship of gods. Rather the active element - the 'building' - of an alternative vision requires also the active construction of the new "man like a god, in relation to whom we are all in raw material only" (Lunacharsky in Boer, 2013, p. 78). There are certainly similarities here with the ways in which, for example, Che Guevara is represented pedagogically by supporters of the Revolution in Cuba and internationally by its exponents such as McLaren, following Fidel's identification of Che as the archetype of the new man⁶. However, a key difference between the God builders and McLaren is that whilst the former recognised the revolutionary communist path of early Christianity, they sought only to draw attention to this as an example of a 'socialist faith', before moving beyond this and towards a *faith in socialism* per se, without the need for gods or saviours.

For the purposes of this paper, I am taking the central figure lying behind the philosophical orientation of the vperedists to be Joseph Dietzgen, widely read at the time and well known to both Lunacharsky and Bogdanov, each of whom drew on aspects of his approach.

Dietzgen

Joseph Dietzgen was explicit in his view that socialist epistemology had every potential to succeed and indeed supersede other systems of belief, fulfilling the spiritual and emotional needs to humanity as well as appealing to the rational and practical. In this he anticipated and informed the various vperedists, from Bogdanov's empiriomonism to Lunacharsky's god-building. "From all other earthly knowledge socialism is distinguished by its religious form, by its fervid appeal to the heart and soul of man" (Dietzgen, 1906, p.90) he claimed. The sense in which socialism in itself fulfils the criteria of a religion is explained by Dietzgen by reference to its redemptive capacity, its vision of hope, above all the utopian eschaton represented by its relentless appeal to the perfectible

⁶ "If we want to say how we would like our children to be educated, we should unhesitatingly say: we want them to be educated in Che's spirit. If we want to have a model man, the model of a man who does not belong to these times, the model of a man who belongs to the future, I say from deep in my heart: Che is that model man." (Castro, in Martí, 2014, p. 86)

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immanent within the everyday. Socialism's chosen people are not the few but the masses, and its profoundly collectivist promise is to make of all, men-like-gods. Religion, he says, was

"until now a matter for the dispossessed. Now, however, the matter of the dispossessed is becoming religion, that is something which takes hold of the whole heart and soul of those who believe. The new faith, the faith of the proletariat, revolutionizes everything, and transforms after the manner of science, the old faiths." (Dietzgen, 1906, p.91)

In Feuerbachian mode, he goes on

"In order to emancipate humanity from religion not only vaguely but distinctly and really, it is necessary to overcome religion by analyzing and fully comprehending it. The new gospel asks for a thorough revision of the whole system of our thought. According to the old revelation the law was primary, the supreme and eternal, and man the secondary element. According to the new revelation man is the primary, the supreme and eternal, and the law is the secondary, temporary and transitory element." (ibid.)

Socialism (or social democracy as he more often called it) represented, for Dietzgen and his later followers, not only a system of social organisation, but possibly even more importantly an epistemology, the only true monist-materialist system of thought, arising from the lived experience of the working class. Echoing Dietzgen, Bogdanov noted the potential for epistemic seismic change, the "development of monistic, scientific organisational thought has been impeded by the specialisation and anarchical fragmentation of the labour system" (Bogdanov, 1996, p. 56) under capitalism. However, even as the revolution in productive relations unfolded, Bogdanov felt, it would take time for the new epistemology to reflect the lived conditions of socialised work. Monist and materialist, the new organisational form of thought which would supersede superstition and traditional religion would not "be recognised easily, and rapidly take its final shape. The industrial proletariat itself is only gradually becoming the new social type, re-educated by the power of life relations formed only recently." (Bogdanov, 1996, p, 58). The point is that, unlike McLaren, the enormous pedagogical ambition here does not see the adoption of the Gods of the established religions into a socialist vision of the future, but rather their gradual replacement by a complex monistic materialist faith. "[A]ll religions have this in common, that they strive for the salvation of suffering humanity," claimed Dietzgen, and "social democracy is all the more the true religion as it strives for the very same end, not in a fantastic way, not by praying and fasting, wishing and sighing, but in a manner positive and active, real and true, by the social organisation of manual and mental work" (Dietzgen, 1906, p. 94) giving rise to the conditions for new forms of faith.

Dietzgen of course remains little regarded by either scholars or socialist activists today, yet something of his thinking certainly lies behind the impulse of both god-builders and system-builders among the vperedists. Bogdanov in the recently translated *Philosophy of Living Experience*, is fulsome in his praise for Dietzgen, arguing that because of the intimate connection Bogdanov took to exist between labour and epistemic orientation, only the worker-philosopher was in an

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ideological position to grasp the organisational content of the dialectic. In this respect, he says, Dietzgen is superior not only to Schelling and Hegel, but even to Marx and Engels⁷.

"First, he energetically advocated the need for a *monistic* worldview, for which he employed Spinoza's idea of a single, universal being, and he connected this idea with realist dialectics. Second, he put forward the idea of the dependence of forms of cognition on social being even more decisively than Marx and Engels. To be precise, he recognised that thought *originates* in the labour process, and that the new working class - the proletariat - must develop a new *logic* - i.e. a new basis for thought - for itself." (Bogdanov, 2016, p. 199)

Elsewhere (Bogdanov, 2016, p. 193), Bogdanov had claimed that Dietzgen was as close to Schelling as to Spinoza for his denial of dual attributes to nature, and a pure form of dialectical monism that found "the real and the ideal" existing "simultaneously in all phenomena". This notices the important feature in Dietzgen that the dialectic is not a temporal movement but an inherent imbalance in the universe of nature against itself. This takes us to the sense in which although Dietzgen precedes the Bolshevik god-building project, he also exceeds it in his insistence on the materiality of thought, the monist consequences of which take us beyond the rather promethean sounding proclamations of man's pre-eminence to a more nuanced understanding of the world and all of nature as sacred, a vision which chimes with McLaren's Ecuadorian and Bolivian bio-socialist claims (McLaren, 2015, pp.93-4), but does so without an appeal to gods or heroes, 'sacralising' nature in a distinctive way that chimes with much later, ecosophical theory.

Dietzgen rigorously asserts the primacy of the empirical, the lived experience of the individual in their work, to the establishment of forms of knowledge. Religion and philosophy 'overshoot themselves' when they miss the final causes of understanding in the material conditions of experience, and the materiality of thought itself. He wishes to destroy the distinction between the objects of natural science and those of religion, making of each and all, equal objects of enquiry. God, the inconceivable, differs not significantly from any feature of nature as yet in-conceived, insofar as each is approached "without ever bringing it within full vision." (Dietzgen, 1906, p. 234) It is worth mentioning that in the essays in view in this paper, *The Limits of Cognition*, Dietzgen appears to get in the same muddle we see later with Lenin - and it is possible that Dietzgen may have influenced Lenin in this respect. In contrast with other parts of his writing, in this essay, Dietzgen seems to fall into the trap of 'externalizing the object', as Žižek (1996, p. 179) puts it, rather than, as in his more thoroughgoing monist texts, insisting that consciousness itself is, again in Žižek 's words, "always-already part of it, in the midst of [nature]" (Žižek, 1996, p. 180), consequently leading to the asymptotic epistemology which appears in Lenin's reflection theory.

Nevertheless, Dietzgen remains resolutely materialist in a way that Lenin's theory of mind - if we may call it that - was not. For Dietzgen, put simply "chemical attraction and repulsion are of the same nature as love and hate" (Dietzgen, 1906b, p. 252). Here I co-opt unlikely allies for Dietzgen in Bohm and Krishnamurti whose coincidentally titled *Limits of Thought* argues for the phenomenal experience of the materiality of thought. In dogmatically asserting the universality of matter,

⁷ That said, Bogdanov also charges Dietzgen with an epistemology which is (like that of Heraclitus) 'contemplative', by which he means it implies a 'passive' reception of qualia, as contrasted with the 'active' epistemology which he attributes to Marx. I think this is probably a misreading of Dietzgen, but one which we do not have space to explore here.

Dietzgen evades the question of philosophical verification, expecting science to supersede and subsume philosophy in its production of proofs regarding the basic building blocks of the material universe. In the meantime, though, the faith of a population in materialism remains a question of pedagogical strategy to accompany the change in material conditions which give rise to the possibility of a gradual renunciation of the old religions. This is where those forms of education come in which encourage individuals to consciously and seriously reflect upon the materiality of their own thought. "[A]ll this disorder... Which prevents human beings from properly working together, has its root in the fact that we are ignorant of the general processes of thought" (Bohm, in Krishnamurti and Bohm, 1999, p.viii) claims Bohm (himself, once, a Marxist). "Through close observation of this activity of thought, Krishnamurti feels that he directly perceives that thought is a material process which is going on inside the human being in the brain and nervous system as a whole." (ibid.) Whether one accepts or not that a pedagogy of enquiry into one's own thought processes alongside a questioning of all external authority can lead to an actual awareness of the materiality of thought, the seriousness of intent with which this project was pursued by Krishnamurti and Bohm is worth considering for the way in which it highlights the shortcomings in those Marxist approaches to education - including perhaps, McLaren's - which, at the limits of thought, comfortably adopt the panegyrics of established faiths.

In truth, the education of populations towards a faith in the materiality of nature and thought has been promoted patchily by Marxists, and succeeded rarely. The task simply has not been taken seriously by many, or for a sustained period, with the exception of Lunarcharsky, and in a different manner Bogdanov, the Prolekult experiment and the god-builders. The project has been revived in the more recent efforts of the ecosophists such as Freya Mathews (Mathews, 2003)

God

Like Dietzgen, Krishnamurti often claims (eg., Krishnamurti, 1977, p. 15) that all the contents of thought possess a reality no less than any other material objects. In this limited sense Dietzgen will admit that 'God' is real, though the phenomenological approach of Krishnamurti does not lend itself to such an easy ascription of reality, since a real God-phenomenon would require a sensory perception of God. McLaren seems relatively little concerned with the philosophical arguments for or against the existence of a God, and this paper is obviously not the place to discuss them. Suffice it to say that, in *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* (Lenin, 1948), Lenin co-opts Berkley to make the case that phenomenalism entails the existence of God, because God, perceiving all, is required to maintain the existence of perception of the world when we do not perceive it. However, the empiriocritics clearly do not make this move, and indeed radical phenomenalism cannot admit of God because to do so would reduce God to a sense-perception. To attempt to overcome this difficulty would be to identify God as present in sense perception, and thus in the world, or immanent within the world. I think there is a way out of this for empiriomonism, in a materialism which is not only monist but also admits of panpsychism (as opposed to pantheism), but that is not the subject of this paper. I would only add here, that whilst an actual awareness of the material movement of thought, as a process of arising and falling away (Krishnamurti and Bohm, 2014), a perception of material consciousness, may not be admitted by many philosophers, if one were to allow it as a phenomenological proof of consciousness in the material brain, then perhaps it is not too great a step to allow consciousness to inhere in materiality in general, just as some, both physicists (Bohm, 1990) and philosophers (Mathews, 2003; Chalmers, 1995) do.

Conclusion

My own view, then, is that each in their own manner, Dietzgen, Lunarcharsky and Bogdanov point the way towards a monist, materialist Marxism which, in allowing for panpsychism, can present a philosophically and scientifically coherent ontology and epistemology which has the potential to constructively and respectfully supersede established faiths as the basis for a more integrated and holistic pedagogy of revolution than that offered by Peter McLaren’s recent work.

To claim that such a pedagogical project might be revived in the current period could seem wholly fanciful were it not for the simultaneous collapse of participation in or adherence to institutional faiths among more long-established populations in much of the West - in the 2011 census, a quarter of the U.K. a population identified as having no religion - and the upsurge in religiously inspired ideological militancy among other, mobile populations, of the disenfranchised and displaced across the Middle East, the Levant and more widely. But also, and this is crucial, the necessity now to appreciate the catastrophic implications of our addictive faith in anti-ecological models of development. My point is that, whilst there is no doubt that Peter’s recent book (McLaren, 2015) is magisterial and pyrotechnic in equal measure, in the current period, there is - at least in the West - diminishing tactical advantage in co-opting Christ or Christianity to a socialist project, and at the same time, a strategic necessity in finding an accommodation with those holistic, ecological-ecosophical, sustainable ways of thinking which will enable our long-term viability.

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