

FOREWORD

Drawing Class Lines Through Critical Education: A Proletarian Program for the Current Crisis

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There is a common belief out there that capitalism is so totalizing, so all-subsuming, that even the most radical scholarship can be accommodated within its circuits of production and consumption. Curry Malott, in this book, seems to be out to disprove that belief. He succeeds, and in his success, he demonstrates that this belief reveals nothing about contemporary capitalism, and everything about what passes as radical scholarship today.

At the base of this book, then, is a critique of—and corrective to—the deep-seated anticommunism that permeates much of the Western and academic Left, especially within the U.S. Thus, it isn't just the global bourgeoisie and its representatives who will despise the contents of this book; it's likely to upset quite a few self-proclaimed and celebrated "critical scholars" inside and outside of education. One thing is for sure: after reading this book it's hard to look at the field of critical education—especially critical pedagogy—the same way. With biting critique and careful historical and theoretical analysis, Malott lays bare what he, following Sam Marcy, calls the "crossing of class lines" that characterizes so much critical scholarship. The crossing of class lines is, simply, when one finds oneself shoulder to shoulder with imperialism, shouting the same slogans ("Down with authoritarianism!") and attacking the same enemy (communism).

Bringing communist theoreticians and revolutionaries into the educational conversation, Malott begins to develop a “communist pedagogy” in this book, and this pedagogy offers the field needed clarifications, historical contexts, conceptual frameworks, organizational imperatives, and future possibilities. Malott begins by tackling a question that is, for any organizer, presently absent in academia writ large today: the state. He clarifies for us what the state is and what role it plays in the revolutionary process, reminding us along the way that revolutions are, by definition “one of the most authoritarian human actions possible.” Revolutions take place when one segment of society imposes its will absolutely on another segment; there is no revolution without repression. As Marx (1867/1967) puts it in *Capital*, “Force is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one” (p. 703). It is only through utilizing the state and its repressive and productive powers that a new society can arise, for the bourgeoisie, as history has shown, doesn’t go without a fight.

Once deposed they count their losses, regroup, find new allies, and launch campaigns of terror. The history of the communist movement has proved this without exception. Thus, to forfeit or bypass the state “is to surrender before the final battle has even begun.” Just months after the exploited masses of Russia took power in 1917 they were under attack from fourteen imperialist armies, each of which was in coordination with the White Army that served Russia’s former capitalists and landlords. When Cuban guerrillas overthrew the U.S.-backed Batista dictatorship in their country, it wasn’t long before the U.S. invaded the island. The CIA’s forces were repelled by the armed Cuban masses, but the campaign against Cuba continued with assassinations and terrorist attacks. There were plans for another U.S. military intervention, and these plans were changed only when the Soviet Union sent medium-range ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads to the country. There is a reason that imperialist politicians constantly denounce any attempt by an independent government to acquire a nuclear weapon—and it isn’t because they hate bombs. They don’t care that Israel has a nuclear weapons arsenal and that it has never allowed international inspection of its nuclear capabilities, and they aren’t dismantling their own nuclear weapons. Instead, they are attacking the DPRK for its nuclear capability, and they are denouncing Iran’s alleged attempts at a nuclear weapons program (which isn’t documented). They bully countries into dismantling nuclear weapons programs, imposing deadly sanctions and threatening more war. It is interesting to note that the two governments who have complied with U.S. dictates to abandon nuclear weapons

development were Iraq and Libya. Both governments were overthrown after they complied. What is the lesson here?

The establishment of the Soviet Union in 1917 and the Communist International in 1919 provided a new hope for the world's oppressed. This hope wasn't merely ideological, but was also *material*. As Malott shows, the Soviet Union was the center of gravity in the proletarian struggle for much of the twentieth century. It was the armory from which the world's oppressed drew their weapons to overthrow their oppressors, and it fertilized a counter-hegemonic bloc to imperialism, allowing the class war against the bourgeoisie to take on a truly global character for the first time in history. On the one side of the war stood the imperialist states and their puppet governments, and on the other side stood the socialist states and the anticolonial states.

This was a beautiful period of struggle for humanity, although it wasn't without its setbacks and its errors. Yet Malott argues that there is a crucial difference between critiquing the leadership or policy of a socialist state and critiquing that state's social system. And here is where his criticism of critical pedagogy is most severe: critical pedagogy turned its weapons of critique against the social systems of the proletarian class camp, thereby crossing class lines. Malott provides several historical and contemporary examples of pedagogues such as Henry Giroux who not only denounce the proletarian camp, but even go so far as to equate the Soviet Union with Nazi Germany—its literal opposite. Democracy is opposed to totalitarianism in critical pedagogy, which is exactly how Winston Churchill framed the world struggle in his famous "Iron Curtain" speech in Missouri on March 5, 1946. Talk about crossing class lines!

There is a material basis for such class collaboration, and a history of it that stretches back more than one hundred years with the betrayal of the Socialist International, which was the grouping of mass socialist parties. In 1912, the Socialist International met in Basel, Switzerland, for an emergency meeting. The outbreak of an inter-imperialist war was imminent, and the socialist movement needed an orientation. The outcome of the meeting was clear: in the outbreak of inter-imperialist war, all socialists should oppose the war and refuse to fire on workers of other countries. For those parties with representatives in parliament this meant that they had to vote against any war credits. When push came to shove, however, the overwhelming majority of the socialist parties capitulated to imperialism and united with their national ruling classes. The Socialist International collapsed.

Why did this happen? How was it that the parties of working-class revolution united with their class enemies? Lenin answered these questions in his

work on imperialism (1920/1965). Monopoly profits extracted by imperialist powers, those profits “obtained over and above the profits which capitalists squeeze out of the workers of their ‘own’ country” made it “*possible to bribe the labour leaders and the upper stratum of the labour aristocracy*” (p. 9). These monopoly profits provided the material basis for national chauvinism and reformism, the latter of which can be defined as sacrificing the gains of the entire working class for the short-term gains of a particular section of the working class. The socialist parties that betrayed the working class, like the German Social Democratic Party, were able to keep their offices, their newspapers, their positions in parliament, and so on. The Bolsheviks, who stayed loyal to the proletarian revolution, were driven underground and their parliamentary representatives were arrested.

It’s not too hard to see, then, why what Malott calls “antisocialist socialism” is so prevalent in the academy. We are back at the limits of what counts as radical today. There are limits. You can be a socialist in the academy, but only after you denounce every socialist country and the history of the communist movement. All you need to do is add a few quick lines dismissing the Soviet Union as “totalitarian” and you will be all set, no need to worry about your tenure and promotion. It will help, too, if you stick to teaching and writing about this critical stuff and refrain from organizing and agitating.

We should hope that these critical scholars will engage with Malott’s ideas and arguments, and do the only logical thing: repudiate their previous writings and actions. This is what Malott has done in and with this book, which is an honest political self-critique. He writes of his “long journey of self-reflection and de-indoctrination.” Malott’s work has been heavily influenced by the revolutionary critical pedagogy of Peter McLaren. More than anyone else, McLaren has been instrumental in bringing Marx into the field of education, and this book is certainly situated within the opening that McLaren’s work has created. McLaren turned to Marx at the height of the post-al era, and it was an uphill battle all the way. But, as Malott notes, the “fog and bigotry of anticommunism in the U.S. is slowly dissipating.” Indeed, the crises of capitalism and imperialism have aroused new mass movements in the U.S., from Occupy in 2011 to today’s Black Lives Matter. The campaign of Bernie Sanders has both capitalized on and furthered the acceptance of the word “socialism.” It’s now safe(r) for communists to come out of the shadows and boldly organize, and that is precisely what this manuscript represents.

Malott doesn’t just formulate his program through critique, however, for he also points to several examples of organizations in the U.S. that have

refused to cross class lines. Chief among these is the Black Panther Party, which clearly located itself within the context of the global class war. The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was explicitly a Marxist-Leninist Party that saw itself as part of an international communist movement. Panthers distributed Mao's little red book at rallies, traveled to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and aligned themselves with all foreign anti-imperialist governments. They developed their own application of Marxism-Leninism particular to the contours of U.S. capitalism, and they did not follow orders from any foreign Communist Party, but they militantly defended all socialist formations and all people's governments. A modern day example that he gives is the Party for Socialism and Liberation, which has unflinchingly stood against imperialism.

While it is common to hear dismissals of the Soviet Union as "authoritarian" or "totalitarian," there are also the quite puzzling designations, "state socialist," or "state capitalist," or "deformed workers' state" that pop up. They are labels that intellectuals in capitalist countries put on socialist governments because they know better. The way that one arrives at these designations is by drawing up what an ideal socialist society would look like and then comparing that to actually-existing socialism. As Malott carefully shows us, however, this is idealism pure and simple. A materialist analysis acknowledges that "the tension within the co-existence of the past, present, and future represents an unavoidable, dialectical reality that carries with it the contested curriculum of struggle." The Soviet Union, for example, erected socialism not out of advanced capitalism but out of feudalism. But socialism was constructed. It wasn't perfect, there were ebbs and flows, but capitalism was never restored. There were income differentials, sure, but there was no bourgeoisie in the Soviet Union; labor power wasn't a commodity to be bought and sold, and the relations of production were not relations of exploitation (see Szymanski, 1979, for empirical proof of this).

When the wave of counterrevolutions in 1989–1991 overthrew socialist governments throughout Europe, it was celebrated as an advance for democracy and freedom. And for the world's bourgeoisie, it was: they moved in and gobbled up the countries, making private all that was held publicly before. Isn't it odd that, whenever privatization happens in the U.S., critical intellectuals decry it as "neoliberalism," but when it happens in former socialist states it is seen as "democratization"? Malott's analysis here cuts through this mystification, helping us see that these are just two sides of the same coin, two of global capital's strategies for accumulation. We have to resolutely oppose both.

The global proletariat today is more fragmented and dispersed as a result of this freedom and democracy. With the framework of the global class war that Malott provides we can more deeply appreciate the transformations that have taken place since 1991. I propose that there are two primary phases here. The first is an all-out imperialist offensive against all socialist and independent states and peoples. Without an effective counterweight against imperialism, many independent and socialist states found themselves under the immediate threat of military and economic attack. The economic blockades on Cuba and the DPRK were immediately expanded and intensified. A new war was started against Iraq—first by military means, then by economic means, and then again by military means. Thousands of bombs were dropped on Yugoslavia, Bosnia, and Kosovo to break up the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, sending the different nations within the federation into turmoil and chaos. Panama was invaded and its president was kidnapped and taken hostage in a U.S. prison. This is the context in which the recent wars on Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, and Yemen must be seen (in fact, the war on Afghanistan was the first step in a new war against independent states in the Middle East). It is similar to U.S. policies toward states such as Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Iran, Sudan, China, Ukraine, Zimbabwe, and Russia.

But we are in a new historical moment, and it is a vulnerable and exciting one. The U.S.-led imperialist offensive has waned; the era of uni-polar imperialism seems to be over and new counterhegemonic blocs are forming. While the war on Iraq did overthrow the nationalist Ba'athist government, it wasn't as easy as the imperialists had imagined it. The Iraqi people waged a heroic insurgency against occupation forces, and the project of installing a new puppet government ultimately failed. In 2007–2008 the capitalist economic crisis shook the world. With the U.S. bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan, a socialist tide gathered in Latin America, bringing socialist and anti-imperialist governments into power, most notably with the election of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. At the same time, independent powers like China and Brazil have emerged as real economic forces. True, these states are characterized by capitalist relations of production (although that's not 100 percent true in China's case), but they are not imperialist. China, in particular, has opened up an avenue for anti-imperialist and independent governments to emerge. Chinese economic relations with the Bolivarian revolution, for example, have been critical in Venezuela's independence from U.S. imperialism.

The emergence of a counterhegemonic bloc has thrown imperialism into crisis. The strategy of installing puppet governments is no longer feasible, for

these governments can easily abandon the U.S., as happened in Iraq. In the face of this reality, Dan Glazebrook (2013) argues that the strategy of imperialism today is to generate failed and weakened states. This is a compelling way in which to understand imperialist strategy in Syria since 2011. When protests against the Syrian government began that year, imperialism seized the opportunity to initiate a regime change. The West had been funding opposition groups in Syria for some time, and these groups as well as radical Islamists quickly emerged as the opposition leadership (all progressive opposition groups quickly sided with the government, as they were satisfied with the reforms instituted—including a new constitution—and aware of the threat of imperialist intervention). But Russia and China vetoed a UN Security Council resolution to wage war on the country. So for five years now the West has been waging a proxy war against Syria, and in the process has created the material basis for the emergence of Daesh—or the Islamic State in the Levant—and has facilitated weapons and money transfers to them and the al-Nusra Front, which is affiliated with al-Qaeda. Russian military intervention in Syria, which began on September 30, 2015, has been essential in turning the tide of the war, allowing the Syrian Arab Army to liberate key cities from the terrorist forces. Of course, the U.S. doesn't want Daesh to get too powerful, and it can't have Daesh threatening U.S. geopolitical interests. The U.S. is flailing around trying to stay balanced on a tightrope it strung across the Middle East. If the U.S. were really interested in ending terrorism, it would immediately fall back and join in an alliance with Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah, the three groups that have actually been fighting Daesh and the terrorist groups for five years.

This is the state in which we find ourselves: imperialism is in crisis, a new counterhegemonic bloc has formed, and social movements in the United States are gaining ground and becoming more and more militant. The veil of anticommunism is lifting. What are we to do? The question, as Malott puts it, is: "Will education support the basic structures of capitalist hegemony and its domination over the Earth, or will it strive to uproot them?" This book provides us with an essential framework for understanding our history, our present, and, thus, for formulating the tasks ahead for critical educators. By drawing a clear class line through critical pedagogy he has offered up a new space in which to theorize and enact the possibilities of critical education.

Until victory,
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References

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