

# Postdigital Gathering

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## Introduction

THIS COLLECTION OF LETTERS responds to Peter McLaren's 2014 article, "Comrade Jesus. The Dialectic Regained: An Epistolic Manifesto." Starting from dialogues between Peter McLaren and Petar Jandrić during a decade of working together, it develops a more general concept of postdigital gathering. The chapter examines various transformations of today's critical pedagogy in our postdigital condition, with an emphasis on dialectics, the concept of the public intellectual, and epistemology. It launches a critique of the contemporary critical pedagogy movement and elaborates on the need to develop critical pedagogy toward human-technology relationships and critical posthumanism. Emphasizing the importance of myth and faith in human affairs, the chapter calls for a reinvention of traditional critical pedagogy through new forms of postdigital gathering.

### Dear Peter,

After a decade of daily correspondence, after more than thirty co-authored articles and a book, after numerous visits to your various homes (the flat above the gun shop in Orange was really something ☺), and after becoming close friends and soulmates, I was asked to publicly dialogue your text and apply it to my own context, practice, research, or philosophy. I regularly engage with works of other scholars—after all, such public dialogues are bread and butter of academic knowledge production. In your case, however, this innocent call has left me in awe—what else can I say about your work, that we have not covered, or will not cover, in our writings together?

As I read your email of today, I see you sitting in your living room, I smell something nice from your kitchen, I hear Angie quietly flipping pages of her book on the sofa. When you mention talking to Suzi or Charlotte or Kevin, I see their faces and hear their laughter. When you say that you just returned from Chapman University's campus, I see that schizophrenic mesh-up of statues representing people from Paulo Freire to Ayn Rand, and beautiful students lounging by the lush centrepiece swimming pool, in bright Californian sun. I see you, I smell you, I feel you. I usually cannot touch you, unless we're together in Greece, Croatia, California, Canada, Turkey, and various other places where we've met over the years. But you are in my pocket all the time, lurking from my phone's screen, often much closer to my heart than my next-door neighbour. I know, without asking, that you feel the same.

Our age difference spans 30 years of the quickest technological development in human history, and our spatial distance is 15+ hours on an aeroplane. Your background is in Shakespeare, and mine is in quantum mechanics. You live in advanced capitalism of the U.S., and I live in a post-communist country with free healthcare and education. But during the past ten years that we have grown together, these differences never presented a problem; they only fertilized our growth. Your context has become my context, and my context has become your context. Your practice has become my practice, and my practice has become your practice. Your research has become my research, and my research has become your research. Your philosophy has become my philosophy, and my philosophy has become your philosophy.

However, being together does not imply being the same or idolizing the other (Jandrić, 2019). It would be easy to pick one or another point of our disagreement and offer counter-arguments. Being an atheist, I could challenge human need for religious belief. Being an anarchist and living in East Europe, I could say a lot against your stubborn calls for socialism. Brought up in Christian faith, I could challenge the idea that Jesus was the first Marxist. But we discussed these and many other issues in our numerous writings together, and I don't want to repeat old discussions. So I will just follow my free associations, and comment on a selection of themes from your article in no particular order—just like we do in our daily email exchanges.

**Dear Peter**

Do you remember our first meeting at a conference in Athens, Greece, in 2011? We ate, drank, protested, ran away from the police, and were tear-

gassed (or did tear-gas happen in Ankara a bit later?). Our first interview has inspired the development of the book in which I interviewed more than 20 interlocutors from all over the world. *Learning in the Age of Digital Reason* (Jandrić, 2017) was my first attempt at creating a global online dialogue, and this line of research culminated in our latest book, *Postdigital Dialogues* (McLaren & Jandrić, 2020).

During this decade I began theorizing our postdigital condition, which is a curious blend between our online and offline existence, and which is “hard to define; messy; unpredictable; digital and analog; technological and non-technological; biological and informational” (Jandrić et al., 2018, p. 895). I started connecting people with similar interests, and created two online gathering spaces—*Postdigital Science and Education* journal<sup>1</sup> and book series<sup>2</sup>—that you are a founding member. Amongst numerous themes of interest, you, I, and many others, explored postdigital dialogue and concluded that it may generate “genuine, substantive, radical or participatory democracy, focusing on the interactive over the institutional, thus committing and contributing to political struggles in, against and beyond capitalism” (Jandrić et al., 2019, p. 180). There is no way that I can distinguish this scholarly work from my personal life—our postdigital gathering simply does not see such borders.

Having said that, your (work on) dialectics arrives from a different perspective. For you, Peter, “[t]he revolution is now, it’s the dialectic regained, it’s the people unchained, it’s the eschaton made immanent.” You are focused on developing a collective understanding that we exist in the world with others, through your interpretation of Hegel’s negation of the negation, which “establishes a relation with itself, freeing itself from the external object it is attempting to negate,” and which is required to free us from the chains of capitalism. Your dialectic, Peter, allows us to imagine radically different futures while keeping good parts of our past.

This is an important place of gathering between “my” postdigital theory and “your” dialectic. “The postdigital is both a rupture in our existing theories and their continuation” (Jandrić et al., 2018, p. 895). Indeed, Peter, I see your dialectic as a crucial rupture and continuation of theories and (perhaps more importantly) social relationships in and for our postdigital times. As we concluded together in *Postdigital Dialogues* (McLaren & Jandrić, 2020), postdigital critical praxis must be dialectical. So how do we develop this postdigital dialectic from a theoretical academic exercise into a transformative social force?

### Dear Peter

Our postdigital dialogue, or postdigital gathering—and when I say “our,” I don’t mean our little duo but the whole world of like-minded people—is generative at so many levels. Since its foundation in 2018, *Postdigital Science and Education* has published almost 200 scholarly articles and several books which display potentials of postdigital gathering in theory, policy, and practice. *Postdigital Science and Education* is just one of many scholarly examples, but the world is full of people who think, act, and live critical pedagogy without any academic underpinnings. So how do we bring all these people together and make a real change?

It has become increasingly obvious that our postdigital gathering, deeply intertwined with but not restricted to the Internet, also requires new forms of individual and social engagement. I will not succumb to the temptation of reproducing some of our writings about postdigital critical public intellectuals, which illuminate how we might develop our praxis towards the future, except for saying that “the tradition of critical pedagogy provides indispensable theoretical background for contemporary intellectuals, yet our strategies and practices are in a need for constant reconceptualization in and for postdigital times we live in” (Jandrić & McLaren, 2020).

A few years ago, in an interview for *Learning in the Age of Digital Reason*, Fred Turner spoke a line that has remained with me forever: “Network intellectuals I think are simultaneously masters of ideas and masters of social worlds. In fact, it is the mastery of the social world that leads to the ideas. Not vice versa” (in Jandrić, 2017, p. 71). Building on this thought, Derek Ford and I recently wrote:

Networks have replaced the detached academic, who if they are to join in the new pedagogy of the public intellectual will do so not as an academic but as a node in an ever-expanding network. It is with this message that we welcome the birth of the postdigital public intellectual into our world who, it should be clear by now, is always already a collective assemblage whose educational logics run along the lines of collective postdigital study, and not traditional teaching and learning. (Ford & Jandrić, 2019, p. 105)

The postdigital mesh-up between our biological and technological existence, implied but often hidden in all those apps and services which measure our heartbeats and steps developed by your neoliberal neighbours in Silicon Valley, implies the need to build new postdigital collective assemblages. So how should we go about that task?

**Dear Peter**

You very well know that Paulo Freire was a big proponent of computers and other technologies, yet our contemporaries who consider themselves as Freire's most faithful followers seem to have forgotten that message (Kahn & Kellner, 2007). I can sympathise with this resistance towards digitalization (Malott, 2020), especially when looking at the Californian ideology which dominates Silicon Valley policy and practice (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996). According to this dominant narrative, numerous human activities from transport (e.g., Uber) through accommodation (e.g., Airbnb), to education (e.g., Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs), are ripe for disruption (Jandrić & Hayes, 2020). While it is easy to agree that human activities can and should be improved, the Silicon Valley idea of disruption is always the same: automate operations, lay off workers, and put profit into the hands of a small circle of technology owners (Williamson, 2019; Arantes, 2020). In this view, technical development becomes neoliberal capitalism on steroids.

Thankfully, the Californian ideology is not the only game in town, and there are other, more humanistic approaches which open up spaces for true critical pedagogy. At this point I will not write about practical examples, such as platform cooperativism, which can be found in my other works (e.g., Jandrić and Hayes, 2019). Instead, I will delve deeper and start with the French philosopher Pierre Lévy's broad definition of collective intelligence as

a scientific, technical and political project that aims to make people smarter with computers, instead of trying to make computers smarter than people. So, collective intelligence is neither the opposite of collective stupidity nor the opposite of individual intelligence. It is the opposite of artificial intelligence. It is a way to grow a renewed human/cultural cognitive system by exploiting our increasing computing power and our ubiquitous memory. (Peters, 2015, p. 261)

Applying these theories to education, critical post-humanists such as Siân Bayne explore the spaces “where the social and the material worlds come together—where the human teacher’s agency comes up against the workings of data to conduct another, and different, kind of teaching which is neither human nor mechanic but some kind of gathering of the two” (in Jandrić, 2017, p. 206). I won’t lament further about one of my favourite fields, philosophy of technology, but I do need to say that contemporary critical pedagogy would do itself a big favour by following in the footsteps of the Frankfurt School of Social Science and getting a firmer grip on human-technology relationships, especially as they relate to the question of what it means to be human in our postdigital age (see Fawns, 2019). Before we embark on this journey, however, we need to ask (see Knox, 2019): What does this entail in relation to knowledge?

### Dear Peter

In “Comrade Jesus” you call for an epistemological alternative inspired by Fatheuer’s (2011) ideas about the right to a “good life” (*buen vivir*), the concept of Mother Earth (*Pachamama*), and Christian mystics, amongst other influences. Your epistemological alternative aims to “to help stave off the epistemicide of indigenous knowledges by means of violent Eurocentric practices,” and to develop “a class struggle of transnational reach.” We already agreed elsewhere, Peter, that this new epistemology cannot be thought of without addressing postdigital challenges (McLaren & Jandrić, 2020). (It is worthwhile to mention that “Comrade Jesus” was written before our many discussions about our postdigital reality.) As I wrote recently (inspired by Peters & Besley, 2019), understanding of individual human experience, huge amounts of data produced by this human experience, and power relationships which co-produce the human experience—as they relate to traditional themes of critical pedagogy such as social justice and education—bring about the need for a new critical philosophy of the postdigital (Jandrić, 2021).

This is where I need to launch a hugely uncomfortable but equally necessary critique of today’s critical pedagogy movement—a critique I believe we agree upon in general terms, but which may also spark some disagreement. Trapped in endless classroom and community space reinventions of Freire’s *circulo de la cultura*, balkanized into various cliques and communities claiming that their critical pedagogy is better than that of their next-door neighbours, informally led by people who claim this

or that sort of ownership over critical pedagogy based on their past and/or present achievements, too many critical pedagogues of today carry, as Raoul Vaneigem once said, “a corpse in their mouth” (1975) [1967]; we developed this argument in detail in Jandrić & McLaren, 2020. Unfortunately, however, today’s critical pedagogy movement largely ignores “blurred and messy relationships between physics and biology, old and new media, humanism and posthumanism, knowledge capitalism and bio-informational capitalism” (Jandrić et al., 2018, p. 896) characteristic of our postdigital age. This critique is related to numerous factors such as politics and economy of today’s academic work, yet deep inside, its essence is epistemological.

Unsurprisingly, the latest generation of critical pedagogy recognizes these problems very well. In the words of Derek Ford, “critical pedagogy is at a deadend. This is not to say that it offers nothing valuable, but rather that it has been stagnant for some time (I would say at least since the beginning of the 21st century)” (Ford, 2017, p. 2). It is not a surprise that people born into the world of computers understand the need to reinvent Freire in and for our postdigital age, yet you, Peter, are amongst a few early architects of the first wave of North American critical pedagogy who do not shy away from these topics. We need more people who are able to connect traditional critical pedagogy and our postdigital condition—and we need them urgently. Here, abovementioned epistemological questions translate into more practical questions pertaining to research methodology. As we emphasized in our works (Jandrić, 2016; McLaren & Jandrić, 2020), answers to these questions lie in accepting one or another form of transcending disciplinary borders such as trans- and post-disciplinarity. And this conclusion begs another important question: How do we connect all those things together?

### Dear Peter

Your response to this question, in “Comrade Jesus” and also elsewhere (McLaren, 2019, 2020), reaches beyond scholarly inquiry and into the realm of myth and faith. Coming from an ex-communist country which has quickly reformed into one of Europe’s bastions of fundamentalist Catholicism, it took me a while to fathom the value of your claim—a detailed description of my intellectual journey can be found in my concluding thoughts in *Postdigital Dialogues*, and which culminated in the following statement:

By now, however, postdigital theory has largely failed to grasp that humans are not only beings of logic and emotion—we are also beings of myth and faith . . . . We want what others want, we seek purification through ritual sacrifice, we are prone to various archetypes, we are puzzled by duality between mind and matter, and we ask, in Peter’s words, “if humans developed as a random occurrence or whether we are here for a reason.” We seek the eschaton of freedom and justice, although we know that we will never get there. We know that people and machines need to work together, but we cannot agree how—even when it comes to our own survival as a species. So how do we even try to reach beyond the academic ivory tower and seek real change? (McLaren & Jandrić, 2020, p. 255)

I don’t know the answer to this question, and neither do you. As you repeated many times, often using beautiful words written by the poet Antonio Machado, we make the road by walking (*Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar*).

We need to walk this walk together, and we need to walk it now. Yesterday could have been better, tomorrow may be too late. While you, I, Suzi, Charlotte, Kevin, and many other friends and comrades understand this need, our community urgently needs to expand and create a strong critical front aimed against the evils of today and toward development of a better society. We need to conscientise others about traditional insights of critical pedagogy, and we need to reinvent critical pedagogy in and for our post-digital age. Our gathering over the last decade shows that it is possible to be together, and appreciate all differences between us, in the uncanny space between the physical and the digital that we now call the postdigital (Jandrić & Kuzmanić, 2020). We are walking a frightening path, but we have each other and our shared (religious and non-religious) faith that a better world is possible.

Yours,  
Petar



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### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> <https://www.springer.com/journal/42438>.
- <sup>2</sup> <https://www.springer.com/series/16439>.