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**A Pedagogy of Alternatives:
A Peace Education Comment on Mark Webb's "Letter to Naomi Klein"**

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A major characteristic of the pedagogy of peace education as I have practiced it, is positing, assessing, and strategizing alternatives to the current world order, i.e. transforming reality. The pedagogy of alternatives derives from a basic assertion about the world order and the suffering that is integral to it. The assertion can be summed up in a phrase I've used trying to break through the sense of the inevitability of violence and injustice that so profoundly affects the thinking of citizens and is an ever present shadow over class discussions, the specter of realism. It is that specter that lies at the heart of Mark Webb's critique of Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* and her theory of disaster

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capitalism, which *per se* neither he nor I would refute.¹ It is the core of the policies we who inquire into ways of learning to build peace decry. It is the essence of the thinking that must be confronted by any pedagogy of peace education.

In essence realism, the belief that the world is, indeed, the way it appears, hostile and dangerous and cannot be significantly changed. At best we can only manipulate it to serve whatever ends and values motivate us. Should those values be justice and peace and the ends social and economic equity and a non violent world order, those who hold those values and pursue those goals are deemed naïve idealists. Even those who put forth clear analyses of well documented evidence, challenging the appearance of conditions and/or the way they are presented to the public, risk not being taken seriously, deemed unrealistic. Thus the tendency is to challenge what “doesn’t have to be that way” within the realist paradigm, offering counter realistic arguments, rather than challenge the paradigm itself. We have tended to challenge what is by telling more about it than has been previously known, impugning motives and veracity of the powerful who have taken control of reality. Such exposure is a long tradition of American journalism. “Muck raking” has lead to reforms but never to reconstruction. Policies and consequences may change, but the system and the paradigm within it is it constructed and viewed are seldom altered. I think this is the case with the very important and essential work done by Naomi Klein. More citizens will be more acutely aware of the abuses of human well-being perpetrated by contemporary capitalism and the neo-liberal global market economy, but

¹ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, 1st ed. (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt, 2007).

until they are also able to reflect upon and think of alternatives to the core principles driving the economic system, they are not likely to be able to effect change that could steer the world toward justice and equity. The encouragement and facilitation of reflection on alternative possibilities toward transformative change is an essential element of peace education.

Mark Webb in his affirming, constructive critique of *The Shock Doctrine* calls Klein, and more significantly her readers to engage in and exercise of the pedagogy of alternatives by grounding his criticism in a very cogent and provocative work that describes an alternative to the global market system. *The Dilemmas of Social Democracy* by Howard Richards and Joanna Swanger offers the alternative of social democracy in terms that realists should find hard to refute. They claim that what has been could be. “It doesn’t have to be that way” because there is another way, a way that has been undertaken and whose limitations and failures are far from un-resolvable, as is evident in the circumstances of its successes. What it takes primarily for the alternative, or any system, to work is a commitment to principles. This is the focus of Webb’s critique, a comparison of the basic principles of market capitalism and social democracy, the imperative of accumulation and private profit as opposed to that of sharing and cooperation. In so doing, he also illuminates another important aspect of peace pedagogy, the identification of principles and the assessment of the values that principles articulate.

Were we too take the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights as the standards by which to assess economic conditions in the world, asking what principles of social organization might be necessary to realize these standards, sharing and caring would certainly be among them, if not the primary ones. We can assume then that the diplomats who drafted the standards, practitioners of international politics thought sharing and caring could become viable social principles. This assumption stands in stark contrast to the realist assumptions which produced the practice of disaster capitalism which reaps profits from rather than seeks to relieve the human suffering brought by such disasters as wars, tsunamis and floods. The assumption that accumulation and private profit in “the real world” requires “cut throat competition” in which the loser – regrettably but necessarily - loses all underlies most the realist economic practices highlighted by Klein. Another device of the pedagogy of alternatives, analyzing and assessing assumptions is made possible by a reading of the Webb critique.

Reading the three works, *The Shock Doctrine* with *The Dilemmas of Social Democracy* and *Letter to Naomi Klein* would make an excellent exercise in the pedagogy of alternatives, considering one alternative to “the way it is”, identifying organizing principles, analyzing underlying assumptions and several other aspects of this approach to developing alternatives to thinking within the dominant paradigm. One of these others is the form in which Webb offers the critique, a letter inviting Klein to dig deeper into the conditions and mechanisms which facilitate disaster capitalism. It is a significant step away from the adversarial argument and negative refutation that comprises the common

discourse of difference in our culture. Instructors might observe the significance of this approach, inviting students to consider still other alternatives to constructive critique in which the goal is not to reject through refutation, but to clarify ways to an alternative, preferred reality through the identification not only of the differences to be clarified but, especially of the complementarities that further illuminate the need for and possibilities of positive alternatives to the negative problematic. A question might be raised to move us toward a more constructive discourse of difference, how could we pose differences and contradictions in a manner which clarifies a way to finding the complementarities and commonalities which could strengthen a movement toward a preferred condition and, ultimately, to a transformed reality.

Most essential to a pedagogy of alternatives is the illumination of reality as a constantly changing situation perceived from different perspectives. In a culture of the adversarial argument these differences of perspectives tend to lead to a discourse of refutation to “win the argument” characteristic of the realist paradigm, close kin to the “winner take all” ethos of disaster capitalism. That paradigm, I believe, is at the root of Webb’s differences with Klein, a dimension equally important as the differences in principle he presents, tending to point out where Klein might have gone wrong. A pedagogy of alternatives would dig deeper into assumptions and paradigms toward illuminating the roots of the differences. It would, as well, ask, how can these differences be arranged in a common analysis combining diagnosis of the problem - the cause of the human suffering, resulting from the exploitation of disaster as identified within the

paradigm - with a possible alternative – policy based on community sharing in disaster and benefits prescribed within a vision of a transformed reality.

Mark Webb has given us the basis of a rich inquiry into alternatives, by basing his response to Klein on one of the most promising and overlooked alternatives to an unjust global economy. He has given us a lens through which to view both the problem of inequity and the realist paradigm that rationalizes it. It is a tool that I hope many peace educators will use.

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Klein, Naomi. *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. 1st ed. New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt, 2007.