

## Encountering education: Elements for a Marxist pedagogy, Disidentifying with capital: An interview with Derek R. Ford on Encountering Education

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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The Centre for Communist Studies, an academic research centre staffed by an artistic and comradely collection of early-career researchers, lecturers, educators and workers, started several years ago to address the pressing need to move intellectual production *outside* of the university. While operating on a budget one could generously call ‘shoe-string’, we have a fantastic, diverse and passionate team of contributors and editors who write about revolutionary theory from *within* revolutionary movements themselves. In this pressing task, we are both joined by and work in collaboration with others, including The People’s Forum, the Hampton Institute, the Critical Theory Workshop, Liberation School and the International Manifesto Group, to name a few. One of our unique contributions to this trend is our focus on rigorous analytical and interpretive scholarship. In service of this, we publish a peer-reviewed academic journal, *Peace, Land, & Bread*, which we launched in 2020 – about the same time that we organised our in-house publishing concern, *Iskra Books*.<sup>1</sup> Through Iskra, we respond to a pressing need for revolutionary scholarship – that is, the publication of print materials both old and new which fulfill the progressive and avant-garde dictum of socialist scholarship more generally: that, if scholarship is to be revolutionary at all, it must not only be at the forefront of human thought, it must also be widely accessible to those who need it most. All of our publications are not only affordable but are also immediately available as free PDFs on our website.

One comrade we were – and are – very excited to work with is Derek R. Ford who, in addition to serving as associate professor of education studies at DePauw University and as instructor at The People’s Forum, is an organiser with decades of experience in a variety of struggles. Because they were a militant *before* entering the academy, even their more esoteric work has always spoken to movement-builders and activists; and, at the same time, their work has helped to open doors for a new generation of radical intellectuals both inside and outside the university – especially with the publication of their first book, *Communist Study: Education for the Commons* (Ford, 2016) and their dissertation, later published as *Education and the Production of Space* (Ford, 2017). In addition to writing and editing over 12 books, Ford serves as deputy editor of the *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* and associate editor of *Postdigital Science and Education*. They’re part of the movement-based projects mentioned above, and especially notable is their service as the editor of Liberation School. Outside of their more ‘traditional’ publications, Ford regularly publishes popularly written work and has even hosted and led the popular podcast series, *Reading ‘Capital’ with Comrades*.<sup>2</sup>

As the editor and creative director of the Center for Communist Studies, I worked closely with Ford on his latest book, *Encountering Education*. This brilliant text was surprisingly popular, and we were both excited at the opportunity to conduct this interview for *Educational Philosophy and Theory*.

**Ben Stahnke:** There is a very fascinating point in the introduction of your book which talks about the notion of *prevailing* modes of production within a given society. I think you draw attention to an important distinction here, because within both revolutionary movements and radical scholarship more generally there is a popular misunderstanding that modes of production *equate* to historical epochs, when modes of production are both *multiple* and *dynamic*: coexisting and competing across the axes of time, society and space. You mention that ‘Even capitalism, for Marx, was not universalising, or totalising’, (Ford, 2022, p. 11), and highlight Marx’s idea that

the Russian communes could be easier transition points to communism than England. How does this relate to revolutionary or Marxist pedagogy?

**Derek R. Ford:** I'm glad you brought this up because clarifying Marx's approach to temporalities and histories is crucial given the prejudice that Marx had a linear, progressive conception of time. Take Marx's critique on primitive accumulation for example. How many times has that been critiqued for relegating the origins of capital to a past and finished historical stage and for projecting a univocal narrative on the entire world? Not only does Marx (1867/1967) in the introduction to that part, acknowledge that 'in different countries' it 'assumes different aspects, and runs through its various phases in different orders of succession, and at different periods' (pp. 669–670), but even within that book there are countless 'origins' of capital! And as you say, the opening sentence says capital *prevails*, not that it's *exclusive*.

Part of what makes marxism a *global theory* is precisely its openness to historical contingencies, yet I don't think educational theory has really explored the pedagogical implications of this aspect of Marx's work. There are never any clear breaks between eras or epochs and revolutionary changes are long and ongoing processes, which is important for revolutionaries to remember today to, first, counter the *urgency* that we have to do everything *right now*, even regarding the movement, and, second, help us locate our actions within a longer and broader and more complex trajectory of defeats and setbacks, of minor and major transformations that really persisted or faded away. For example, there's a tendency for people to be discouraged after spending years organising because we don't see any real change, or because we were really close to a victory only to have it snatched away. Well, looking back at the struggles of working and oppressed peoples, how many of our greatest heroes have lived their entire lives fighting for something that still hasn't happened? That's why we look up to them, and there's a pedagogical relationship we can establish with that history so we can sense its presence today.

We can also think about pedagogical methods to help us experience other kinds of social relations in the present. This is not to say that we make our classrooms mimic the world we want, but that educational experiences can give us a glimpse into the alternatives present right here, right now. I was at an emergency protest to defend Roe v. Wade in early May 2022, and a small group of reactionaries tried to march into our rally and disrupt it. The police were down the street, and they were just standing around with the road barricaded. The crowd immediately and spontaneously barricaded them. Now that was possible largely because of the collective experience we've had in the streets over the past few years, but it really helped everyone there *feel* what it means to say we don't need cops and we can protect each other.

**Ben:** I was fascinated by your idea of the dialectical understanding of *inquiry* and *presentation* (p. 24) with regard to the ways in which this both *has been* and *can be* led by and for the workers' movements. How do you think this dialectic of inquiry and presentation can/should translate into practical solutions for *party* education in organising spaces?

**Derek:** This is a theme I've been developing in various ways over the past few years because I see it as Marx explicitly articulating his own constellation of pedagogical modes that actually animated the study and writing of *Capital* (e.g., 2021). One way I've developed it is by translating the dialectic to that of learning and studying, which is a still growing area of radical educational theory (e.g., Lewis, 2018; Wozniak, 2022).

Marx's distinction between inquiry and presentation is that the two are not irreconcilable opposites but dialectically related forms of pedagogical engagement. After all, one can't study a text without first having learned to read. At the same time, learning to read is filled with moments of study. The first is clearer, so I'll give an example of the latter from my own childhood. I remember learning that 'rose' signalled not only a red and thorny flower but also the past tense of rise, and that a ruler referred not only to our main measuring device in school but also to a king, queen, or Tsar – and later to a state of class domination. I came to learn these are homonyms, or words that share the same spelling but different meanings. Even so,

I've always found homonyms fascinating educational models that show how even within the developmental process of learning we can make room for inquiry.

An interesting historical example that highlights these divergent pedagogies and their implications for organising comes from the split between the socialist and communist parties in the 1920s and how the Socialist and Communist Parties organised their youth groups. As Paul Mishler (1999) writes:

Rather than being simply educational institutions, controlled by parents and local party organisations, the Communist children's groups were to be political organisations, fully integrated into the political structure of the party. Communist children's groups would thus encourage children to engage in political as well as educational activity, and these groups would be separate from direct parental influence.... 'We are not only preparing the child for future participation in the class struggle – we are leading the child in the class struggle now! (p. 31)

The Socialist Party maintained that children needed presentation before engaging in their own action and inquiry, while the Communist Party, following Marx's pedagogies, engaged children in presentation and inquiry *through* action.

We don't need to turn to history to see the importance of keeping Marx's distinct pedagogies in play, however. Consider how, in many organising meetings, the logic of presentation dominates. I'm not referring to speeches or reading articles, but to the domination of the *end goal* and, more specifically, an end goal that has to be realisable and 'winnable'. This shuts down the process of inquiry and, more specifically, revolutionary inquiry, by keeping us trapped in what we can win *without overthrowing capitalism*. It keeps us trapped within the present, unable to see beyond it. It's incredibly frustrating.

As an alternative, we could start with the end goal of the revolutionary transformation and restructuring of society. This isn't winnable by any action, protest, campaign, etc., and so the end goal is there, but suspended; it's not clear how exactly it unfolds. When we start here, with this goal in mind, we open ourselves up to the process of research that Marx held so dear and without which we wouldn't *have* Marxism, let alone the Marxist theoretical and practical history on which we draw.

**Ben:** How might you envision the articulation of a distinctly revolutionary [marxist] pedagogy within socialist futures dealing with *pedagogical hangers-on* from capitalist and feudal temporalities? That is, how might your idea of the revolutionary *pedagogy of the encounter* (Ford, 2022, p. 11) subsume, interact and deal with – or, as you mention, 'sublate, modify and adapt' (p. 14) – the oftentimes problematic pedagogical elements which are bound to thrive alongside it?

**Derek:** I don't think there's anything inherently revolutionary or progressive about any particular educational modality or operation, and so the same educational relation can, even in the same classroom or at the same event, have different effects. In our current conjuncture, however, I think a primary task of revolutionary pedagogy is to facilitate encounters with educational matter in a way that we might experience something unexpected and unsettling. Again, this is a contingent statement, because to valorise these as educational or political goals/goods in themselves is wrong. After all, how many of us just need some damn regularity and routine? How many of our lives are *already* unexpected and unsettling? I'm referring to a specific kind of educational encounter that provokes a disidentification with our current position relative to the structures of oppression and exploitation today. In other words, those moments in which we don't *feel* like who we're told we are or should be, or who we think we are or should be, and we feel estranged from ourselves, *can* be productive in that they generate, or at least serve as reminders, of a collectivity that is more vibrant and enduring than the fragmented individuals that capital makes us.

But openness to contingency and history is just one aspect of revolutionary pedagogy, and this is where pedagogy and politics get messy. The encounter is a pedagogical dynamic, but we can't just be open and defamiliarised forever. At some point, we have to do something, and

that's where politics enters. I think about the movement against the Iraq War, where a lot of soldiers were coming home knowing that the U.S. government was the terrorist, and the Iraqis were freedom fighters. That knowledge represents an educational crack but there's nothing determining in what political direction it will lead. That's why progressive anti-war veterans started March Forward!, which was trying to get soldiers to switch sides as it were, to get them out of the army, to get them active in the movement against imperialism, because if organisations aren't there to win people over, then the reactionaries will.

**Ben:** Yes, and when you talk in chapter 2 about *reclaimed grasping* as a key pedagogical element, this might be one way in which the pedagogical dimensions of earlier modes might not only coexist but become subsumed and co-opted by a communist pedagogy in which the acquisitive drive itself is banished, but the tools of knowledge-acquisition persist. There you're discussing Glissant's (1977) *Poetics of Relation*, where you argue that what is translated as 'grasping' is the pedagogical logic of colonialism, as grasping is the act of reaching out, enclosing something, and bringing it back to the subject. 'The grasping drive', you write, 'positions opacity as a potential that must be realised ... an orientation that sacrifices opacity as such' (Ford, 2022, p. 43).

On my reading, this seems to be such a brilliant articulation of the capitalist counterposition to communist pedagogy; the exact opposite of Marx's method described earlier in your book, with regard to the idea that we, as revolutionary workers and pedagogues, must go to the world with an openness and a receptivity, taking from the world only an impression and an internalisation, returning to the world with nothing more than an (hopefully truer) *understanding*. That is, where capitalist study seeks to divide, to grasp and to own, communist study seeks only to understand, to change, and to understand some more. With *grasping*, you seem to say that there is an impetus to *take* as opposed to *receive*, to take from an impetus of *holding-on*, as opposed to an impetus of *understanding*.

You note that grasping is the pedagogical drive of colonialism, and this seems to ring true if we counterpose Marx's own method as an opposing or an oppositional (i.e., anti-colonial) pedagogy. This further seems to take root in the idea of a colonial transparency versus an anti-colonial opacity, in which the world itself is not up for grabs, but exists opaque, as a thing in itself to be understood and not secured. This is because you argue that enclosures are necessary in the struggle. But by freeing grasping from the grasping *drive* – in other words, by liberating grasping from capitalist and imperialist relations of production – we can divorce it as a pedagogical gesture, and this might be what learning looks like in a revolutionary society.

And since we're back to pedagogy and social formations, can I ask what you're working on now?

**Derek:** First, thanks for that comment because I hadn't actually thought about reclaiming the pedagogy of grasping in that manner, and you've helped me sense that maybe that's precisely what Marx's presentation is all about. After all, Marx never claimed to 'understand' capitalism and he never claimed to present a final understanding, but that didn't prevent him from learning about it! That's actually part of my current project – to tease through the distinct forms that inquiry and presentation take in Marx's work (although it's relatively minor, so if anyone reads this and is looking for something to do, please take it up!).

It's more of an entry point or a bridge to my next book, *Teaching the Actuality of Revolution* (Ford, in press), which should hopefully be out (through Iskra) later in 2022. The main problems I'm trying to work through revolve around the aesthetics of capital and the class struggle, and I mean aesthetics broadly – as that which is sensed – rather than 'art'. So the first chapter presents capital as an aesthetic ecology – not just a political economy – and part of that includes a reading of the three volumes of *Capital*, through which I argue that Marx doesn't 'lift the veil' to show us the truth but rather helps us sense the ruptures of capital and the future and past possibilities in the present. Not surprisingly, I argue that pedagogy weds us to capital's perceptual ecology, and so I develop a theory of unlearning

that, when mobilised in our current conjuncture, can help advance the struggles of working and oppressed people.

How about you? What's next for the Centre for Communist Studies and Iskra?

**Ben:** This was such a brilliant response, and I want to thank you for both your time and your deep reflection during this interview! *Encountering Education* is such a phenomenal text, and I think that part of its immense popularity is due to the fact that not only do you perfectly capture the progressive, critical and avant-garde nature of socialist scholarship, but that you do so in a way that brings these oftentimes abstruse and complicated theoretical considerations down to earth, so to speak. Part of the critique that gets lobbied against us as theorists working in revolutionary movements seems to land on the idea that theory can oftentimes present itself as radically disconnected from practice; or that theory itself has no bearing on revolutionary practice. In actuality, nothing could be further from the truth. Theorists do not – and should not – sit above, beyond, or outside of the movement; in fact, they are tied tightly to the movement itself.

As Lenin (2019) mentioned, 'Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement' (p. 148); and, more recently, Fred Hampton (1969) emphasised the dialectical interconnectedness between theory and practice, contending that, 'If you get yourself involved in a revolutionary struggle then you've got to be serious. You got to know what you're doing. You got to already have practiced some type of theory' (p. 12). I think what I am getting at here is that revolutionary theoreticians have a lengthy and important history that is not somehow distinct or divorced from revolutionary action; and that, more specifically, the *best* and most critical revolutionary theorists are those who are themselves both situated within the movement and who are able to speak most clearly to the movement. With regard to all of this, your work stands out – to all of us here at the Centre, and to those of us in contemporary revolutionary organising more generally – as some of the most critical, important and accessible theoretical work currently being published.

While the best and most important theory *is* both tied tightly to and emerges from the movement itself, so often theory can – when situated *inside* of the academy alone and *outside* the revolutionary movement – present itself as incredibly disconnected from practice. As theorists, and as people working within the academy producing academic scholarship, we must always struggle to stay connected to and to situate our work within, the revolutionary movement – the danger being that we risk obscurantism, abstrusity or pedantism if we somehow find ourselves divorced from the movement, or unable to speak clearly to others in the movement. Your work is such a brilliant representation of the kind of rigorous intellectual scholarship that both emerges from and *speaks to* revolution; work that moves beyond the academy and into the real lives of people within the struggle. And for this we are very grateful – honoured, in fact – to have published *Encountering Education*!

With regard to projects on the horizon for both Iskra Books and the Centre, we just moved our main office from the Midwestern to the Northwestern United States – and as we get situated in our new location, we are excited to say that we have quite a few books scheduled for publication for the remainder of 2022 and beyond. Most importantly, as you have mentioned, we will soon be releasing your next book, *Teaching the Actuality of Revolution: Aesthetics, Unlearning and the Sensations of Struggle*, along with an edited collection of writings from the brilliant philosopher, Tyson Lewis, entitled *Educational Potentialities: Collected Talks on Revolutionary Education, Aesthetics and Organisation*, which you yourself have both arranged and introduced.

In addition to these, we will soon be releasing the long-awaited fifth issue of *Peace, Land and Bread*, Luna Nguyen's excellent translation and annotation of the Vietnamese university textbook, *The Curriculum of the Basic Principles of Marxism-Leninism*, a new translation of an older work by Domenico Losurdo, a collection of political ecological essays entitled *Marxism and the General Dialectic of Nature*, a new edition of the *Collected Works of Lenin*, a collaborative primer series with our colleagues at the Hampton Institute, and much, much more. It is a busy time for us here at the Centre, yet we all deeply love the work – it is work that brings us all quite a bit of fulfillment, joy and satisfaction as we consider it to be both revolutionary and academic service.

As not only a political theory, but as a living, dynamic doctrine of revolution in the modern era which guides the equalitarian policies, legislations and developments of extant socialist states as well as radical movements within capitalist states, communist theory is – and must be – progressive, new and constantly up to the challenge of meeting us where we are at; meeting the revolution where it is at. It is in this spirit that we are incredibly excited to publish your work, Derek – work which exemplifies so well the newness, excitement and revolutionary spirit of a transformative, materially-grounded and radical theory of education.

## Notes

1. <https://www.peacelandbread.com/>; and <https://www.peacelandbread.com/books>.
2. <https://www.liberationschool.org/reading-capital-with-comrades-podcast/>. The series is available on all major streaming platforms.

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