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by Derek R. Ford, Madison, Iskra Books, 2023

Eli J. Pine

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BOOK REVIEW

Teaching the actuality of revolution: Aesthetics, unlearning, and the sensations of struggle, by Derek R. Ford, Madison, Iskra Books, 2023

How do we make-sense of sense-making in a conjunctural moment when disorientation, mystification, and fetishism organize the sensations of 'what is possible'? What does it mean to attend to the affectual realm of class-struggle? If, as Spinoza suggests, affect is to be understood as "affections of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections" (Curley, 1994, p. 154), then how might we experience affects and ideas which compel us to *act* over ones that do not? And what might this mean for revolutionary politics? In their latest book, *Teaching the Actuality of Revolution: Aesthetics, Unlearning, and the Sensations of Struggle*, Derek R. Ford (2023) sheds light on these questions and more as they explore the "perceptual ecology" of capitalist domination and exploitation. Articulating and modeling a pedagogy that allows us to encounter what Jennifer Ponce de León calls "another aesthetics," Ford's writing helps me *make-sense* of the possibility that things could be different.

For Ponce de León (2021), constructing another aesthetics is a rupturous process in which we come to *experience* the world differently—i.e., as alternate to capitalist social totality. For Ford, sensorial, affectual, and pedagogical practices are some of the key ways to bring about such an experience. So, at a time when socialist revolution appears to the US left as neither popular nor possible, Ford's key intervention into pedagogical theory, aesthetic philosophy, and marxist methodology is the cultivation of an "educational modality" that helps us be active and actual in educational endeavors toward revolutionary struggle. Weaving together diverse (and seemingly oppositional) traditions of marxism, such as those of Paulo Freire, Louis Althusser, Henri Lefebvre, and Fredric Jameson, along with other contemporary marxists, Ford brings their combined insights to bear on the problem of revolutionary possibilities, and actualities in formal and informal education. But eclecticism this is not. True dialectician that he is, Ford finds the theoretical through-lines latent in these thinkers to produce new understandings that could not be generated from any one theorist alone. It is a welcome contribution to both theory and practice that may well be read on the picket line, in the university classroom, or by a reading group of comrades.

The book is structured by an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction focuses on the shifting nature of Marx and Engels' thought, the aesthetic, political, and educational stakes of teaching, and the conjunctural moment in which the book is written. In this section, Ford does not merely write to us, but teaches us how to *unlearn* what we think we know by guiding us through Marx's own process of unlearning. As Ford explains, Marx upholds in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* the notion of sensuous certainty that appears in Feuerbach—that human senses are essential and transhistorical. But he later "breaks" with this claim in his and Engels' *The German Ideology* to argue that "the most basic object of our senses results from 'social development, industry, and commercial intercourse'" (cited in Ford, 2023, p. 4). Here, Ford expertly wields the historical materialist method to articulate an important principle that conditions the remainder of the book: "The shape and structure of our sensations and that which we sense are determined by the different modes of production operative in the past, present, and future of any social

formation" and are therefore contingent (p. 6). For Ford, aesthetics are political and pedagogical precisely because how we make-sense of them is determined by the political-economic mode of production and teaching the necessity of unlearning is an educational step toward building "another aesthetics."

Chapter 1, "Pedagogy and the Perceptual Ecology of Capital," advances and clarifies Marx's critique of ideology by examining the aesthetic regime of capital. Working from Jennifer Ponce de León's and Gabriel Rockhill's (2020) meditation on commodity fetishism—the process whereby the labor embedded in a particular commodity is abstracted such that the commodity seems to have appeared out of nowhere—Ford explains that the capitalist mode of production produces a complex web of perceptual ecologies that limit what and how we sense the world around us. But limitations do not mean impossibilities and Ford points us toward the gaps and openings in capitalist ideology to show us that there *is* a way out. To put it another way, capitalism makes-sense to us because it appears ideologically sound, but there remain plenty of ways to disrupt this ideological hegemony. For Ford, it is not that we have "false consciousness" about capitalism, it is that its perceptual ecology—its process of making-sense—maintains a grip on our affectual, sensorial, and aesthetic worlds and those very same worlds could provide a break in that grip.

This point is what I see as an essential revision in the field of ideology critique, particularly in educational theory. If we are to understand ideology as an unconscious process through which subjects come to *know* the world, we can differentiate between knowledge and understanding. Knowing something does not mean we understand it and, if I may return to Spinoza, adequate understandings require us to *experience* certain affectual and somatic processes that move us beyond knowledge. For Spinoza, ideas are either adequate or inadequate. Neither is false per se—and he assigns no moral valence to either form—but rather inadequate ideas are missing a *causal* understanding that requires a reorientation of our body-minds. To read Ford through Spinoza, "false consciousness" is a misnomer because the way capitalism appears to us is not 'false', it is just a form of inadequate knowledge. Whereas inadequate ideas are cognitive for Ford and Spinoza, adequate ideas are somatic and require undergoing sensuous processes that generate causal understandings of the world around us. Ford allows us to think through these sensuous processes to understand that simple critique and knowledge-acquisition are inadequate for a revolutionary pedagogy. Following Ponce de León and Rockhill, Ford argues that teaching the actuality of revolution requires a pedagogy that *demonstrates* through experience the possibility of alternative perceptual ecologies.

On a related note, Chapter 2, "Teaching as Unlearning Another Aesthetic," elaborates the practice of *teaching* as one that helps us *unlearn* the sensations of capital and (re)orient toward 'new perceptual apparatuses'. Three central points become clear in this chapter: 1) the requisite of capital to maintain educational hegemony has relegated teaching to "the facilitation of learning" such that students are now their own teachers; 2) capitalist schooling thrives on this process of 'learning' because it has a certain end goal, whereas education leaves open endless possibilities; and 3) viewing teaching as "the organization of unlearning through moments of breakdown" opens the door to a wider project of rupture that makes it possible to wage the class-struggle in pedagogical form (Ford, 2023, p. 21).

The chapter concludes with an important cautionary note that appears in all of Ford's arguments (here and elsewhere): no pedagogy, sensation, or process is abstractly revolutionary. What I think he shows so well is that the successes of teaching and

unlearning will look different based on location, economic development, and political conjunctures, which is to say that they are contingent upon encounters. Althusser's "materialism of the encounter"—i.e., the historical development of material forces, including those of production, and their resultant social totalities are *aleatory*—strikes me as the most influential theoretical position here. For Ford and Althusser, encounters can surely be organized to produce revolutionary possibilities, but *how* we organize those encounters and *what* we do with them is determined by the class-struggle. This brings us to Chapter 3, "Encounters With the Materiality of Thought" in which Ford provides a revision of Althusser's pedagogical and theoretical practices, arguing with and against Jacques Rancière's writings about his former teacher's pedagogy.

By analyzing Althusser's writings on art, theater, and aesthetics, Ford argues that Althusser teaches us how to move from the cognitive realm of pedagogy and politics to the aesthetic drive for "the Historical moment of revolution" (p. 22)—that is, how to *experience* the actuality of revolution. Taking up the themes of their last book, *Encountering Education*, Ford (2023) offers a compelling reading of Jean Hood and Tyson E. Lewis' (2021) notion of "thin(g)king," which aims to explain educational encounters between human beings and non-human objects. It is here where Ford takes up the mantle of Althusserian materialism in that he explains the deeply anti-teleological nature of marxism. On the one hand, structuring teaching as the organization of encounters that encourage unlearning helps us see education as a tool for class-struggle. On the other, with a sort of radical humility, this section leaves open the possibility that Ford's thesis could be proven entirely inadequate when tested in struggle. This is one of the more admirable parts of this book; Ford is not here to claim they have all the answers.

Chapter 4, "Listening for What We Don't Know," builds on exactly this point. By analyzing sound, listening, and the absence of both as means through which we can learn *how to listen* for moments of uncertainty that engender possibilities, Ford continues their discussion of contingency. Revisiting Althusser's writing on the failures of European working-class movements in which he proposes (but "abandons") a pedagogy of listening, Ford suggests that we must keep our ears open for the silences that fill the gaps of class struggle. In other words, making sense of revolution requires tuning into the silences that create possible ruptures through which we can encounter new ways of sensing the world. Ford's own writing demonstrates this lesson quite well. By this point in the book, it becomes clear that Ford is *teaching* us the very pedagogy they write about. The feeling I get when I read this chapter is that it is *ok* to not understand everything and, in fact, necessary to listen to the silences that come with indeterminacy in order to gain adequate understandings.

But before we take this feeling to be inherently revolutionary, Chapter 5, "The Pedagogy of Arrhythmia," exposes some underlying dangers of treating uncertainty as such. Reading Henri Lefebvre's work on the 'rhythms of everyday life', Ford discusses Lefebvre's once-plausible critique of capital's need to prioritize abstract rhythms (e.g., the unchanging movement of a machine in a factory) over concrete ones (e.g., the movement of bodies through a city) and shows that it no longer holds true. Indeed, one of Ford's greatest insights is that our current stage of capitalism relies on uncertainty and unpredictability because it can at once capitalize on unforeseen events, desires, and so on while making any way out of its totality seem impossible; no rhythms evade it because the process of accumulation can obscure and profit from even the most concrete rhythms. In lieu of this development, Ford builds on Jason

Wozniak's work and argues for an 'arrhythmia' that breaks rhythms entirely and generates an opening for revolutionary sense-making.

Important work is done in the conclusion, too, which is titled "(Un)Learning Through Perceptual Mapping." Building on Jameson's cognitive mapping—which allows us to cartographically locate ourselves in totality and *see* contradictions that compel us to act and (re)orient—Ford introduces a pedagogical model he terms "perceptual mapping." Perceptual mapping is the logical next step for Ford because it allows them to return the more abstract concepts of this book to the *real* project of building socialism through affectual and aesthetic processes. While capital can incorporate and commodify most anything it comes into contact with—including, as we have seen, seemingly anti-capitalist sensations and rhythms—perceptual mapping keeps us from throwing up our hands in defeat because it allows us to constantly *feel* the fact that revolution is an actual, agential process that reorganizes our understanding of social totality. We are reminded here of the successes of socialist state-building—in countries like Cuba, the USSR, China, Vietnam, North Korea, and plenty more—that *have* created alternative perceptual ecologies and that continue to show us a way to listen for the rupture that opens the crack in the fabric of capitalist social totality.

What Ford accomplishes in *Teaching the Actuality* is, I think, akin to what Mike Davis claims of Marx's writings on France: "An original genre of political writing in which theoretical concepts are developed and applied, but not abstractly formalized, in the course of trying to think and enact socialist politics" (2015, p. 53). Ford does not just theorize abstractly for the sake of it, they write for everyone from those engaged in popular political education to those teaching in institutions, from grassroots organizers to organized Parties. The implications of this for further research and struggle are wide-ranging, but can be encapsulated by the way this book encourages us to think beyond the classroom and into the street. If we take seriously the notion that the university and the school are entangled in the prioritization of capitalist *learning* over socialist *education*, we must unlearn the former in pursuit of the latter. Perhaps only then will we make-sense of the actuality (and necessity) of revolution. Indeed, in the final analysis, Ford teaches us that this actuality is presently possible, right here, and right now.

Notes on contributor

Eli J. Pine is a recent graduate of American University with a BA in sociology and education studies. They are an organizer, an independent researcher, and an educator. Their research interests are interdisciplinary, spanning marxist social theory/philosophy, transgender studies, affect theory, and childhood studies. They currently live in Washington, DC.

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Eli J. Pine
ep5456a@american.edu

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