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by Derek Ford, (Madison: Iskra, 2023).

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Review

Teaching the Actuality of Revolution: Aesthetics, Unlearning, and the Sensations of Struggle, by Derek Ford, (Madison: Iskra, 2023).

Sylvester J. Cruz

Analyzing the current pedagogical conjuncture through a framework derived from Marxist aesthetics, Derek Ford's book, Teaching the Actuality of Revolution: Aesthetics, Unlearning, and the Sensations of Struggle, confronts the perceptual, epistemological, and theoretical obstacles to truly revolutionary education. Through careful rereadings of canonical theorists as well as more recent critics of revolutionary critical pedagogy, Ford demonstrates how pedagogical processes are conscripted to reinforce the dominant aesthetic or sense-making regime of ruling-class ideology. While capital's logic of accumulation is applied to the circulation of knowledge as a commodity in education's increasingly privatized economy of "learning," the author engages the work of Paulo Freire and Gert J. J. Biesta to formulate "unlearning" as a site of resistance. Just as capital's totalizing perceptual ecology reshapes Marxist pedagogical practices into forms compatible with its ideology, so may the revolutionary pedagogy of "unlearning" provide arrhythmic disruptions to capital's internalization by the working and oppressed classes.

Key Words: Aesthetics, Education, Pedagogy, Revolution, Sensation

"Marxist education" would, at first, appear to be a categorical impossibility. As Derek Ford's (2023) timely new book, *Teaching the Actuality of Revolution: Aesthetics, Unlearning, and the Sensations of Struggle* illustrates, the current global educational theory industry turns revolutionary pedagogy into an educational commodity amenable to circulation in the neoliberal marketplace, and which is therefore compatible with the anticommunist and antileftist ideology of the ruling class. Ford's book advances revolution from a primarily pedagogical perspective, with a methodology guided by the insights of Marxist aesthetics. Ford skillfully charts new territory as he weaves together the book's intertwining concepts of

educational aesthetics, revolutionary pedagogy, and teaching as the arrhythmic “unlearning” of a dominant perceptual mode.

The book primarily argues that a structural affiliation exists between pedagogy and critique, an affiliation underarticulated in theoretical discourse, and this insight animates the author’s critical analysis of the central importance of aesthetics, or regimes of sensation and perception, in the reproduction or disruption of the ideology of capital. For Ford, capital is not only an economic system but is also a perceptual ecological system that historically produces regimes of “right” perception and sensation through class struggle. Grounding this insight canonically, Ford reads Marx and Engels’s break with the “sensuous certainty” of Ludwig Feuerbach in *The German Ideology* as grounds for his assertion that there is no essentialist relation between objects and faculties of sense. Given that capital’s perceptual ecological system is historically produced and in need of continual reinforcement, the author shows that the primary site of this continual reinforcement is the educational process. Because dominant aesthetic regimes are pedagogically reproduced, it follows that the theory of education may function as a site of resistance to those regimes.

The main points at issue in Ford’s aesthetic intervention have to do with the close relationship between politics and education. Much of Ford’s oeuvre is concerned with the extent to which the relationship between educational theory and the dominant political order is self-sustaining, especially given that higher education in the United States works to prepare individual subjects for the assumption of roles in a global capitalist world-system. In this way, Ford aligns his work with that of scholars such as Peter McLaren, Glenn Rikowski, Dave Hill, Wayne Au, and Sandy Grande, who have turned away from the framework of mere “critical pedagogy” to see education, or “revolutionary critical pedagogy,” as an activist and community-organizational praxis. Ford’s book offers a new perspective on the debate in two ways: by introducing the keyword “aesthetics” into his analysis of the conjuncture and by arguing that the revolutionary movement has a basically pedagogical character that is open to reassessment and redefinition. In Ford’s words, truly political teaching produces an alternative aesthetic and alternate political reception of and orientation to the world: “The possibility of a political subject to carry out the revolutionary task.” The author’s particular focus on the intersections of aesthetics, pedagogy, and the political and his identification of the revolutionary counterpolitical with the pedagogical method itself are what make this intervention so unique.

Along the way, the book articulates its argument by illustrating the centrality of cognition and sensation, or knowledge and aesthetics, in capital’s ideology of sense making. This raises the issue that the epistemology of the class struggle can work against the shaping tendencies of capital’s perceptual ecology only when its aesthetic or sense-making regime corresponds to those tendencies. Chapter 1, for example, identifies a nascent aesthetic pedagogy in Marx’s *Capital*, a pedagogy that leverages capital’s epistemological contradictions in its

treatment of the commodity fetish and “so-called” primitive accumulation. Further, chapter 2 considers this pedagogical project’s complicity within capitalist ideology and offers a new concept of “teaching” as an organized form of unlearning aimed at making alternative lifeworlds in the present, lifeworlds knowable to our faculties of perception. The tension between revolutionary knowledge and aesthetics reaches fever pitch in chapter 3 where Ford draws on Emily Jean Hood and Tyson E. Lewis’s object-oriented epistemology of “thin(g)king” to develop unlearning as a form of Marxist aesthetic education that cultivates the felt experience or sensation of revolutionary possibility. While thin(g)king considers the human subject by way of its encounters with the more-than-human materiality of objects, unlearning promotes the teacher’s role in making possible certain unfixed and unforeseeable encounters with the subject matter; whereas “learning” reproduces labor power by interpellating subjects as laborers with predetermined relationships to objects, unlearning interrupts the perceptual ecology of capital through disinterpellation, redistributing the raw materials of education “to produce a sensation that we can be radically different than we are now.” By taking this approach, Ford distinguishes between knowledge and thought in Althusser’s work on aesthetics, aligning unlearning with the aesthetic. Unlearning thus challenges capital’s epistemological norms and assumptions by shifting the locus of pedagogical and political activity from the cognitive event to the aesthetic experience as the Marxist educator points to gaps, absences, and the possibility of other worlds.

In the latter half of the book, Ford directly confronts the problem of capital’s total perceptual ecology. For if the modalities of both cognition and sensation are ideologically prefigured in advance, how can the revolutionary tactics of de-centering the subject and embracing contingency truly escape the logics of exchange value and accumulation that structure the educational enterprise? Chapter 4 circumnavigates this dilemma by introducing the material intersection of sound and silence and by modeling what Ford calls “symptomatic listening.” Drawing attention to the critical role played by silence in Althusser’s later writing on the relationship between theoretical knowledge and the encounter, Ford illustrates how Althusser’s Marxist pedagogy uses silence to encourage his readers to listen for that which lies beyond the audible within capital’s dominant sense-making regime, thereby repositioning the pedagogical gesture “from the cognitive to the aesthetic.” Ford thus expands upon Althusser’s theoretical praxis by articulating symptomatic listening as a listening “not to know, but to sense” the actuality of revolution. After unpacking the distinction between “hearing” as a form of knowledge accumulation and symptomatic listening as the sonic analog of unlearning, chapter 5 elaborates upon this line of argumentation by introducing Lefebvre’s theory of “rhythmanalysis” into the mix as a framework for thinking about the aesthetics of struggle. Ford illustrates how pedagogical practice structures the rhythms of everyday life as part of our

induction into the dominant perceptual ecology, ultimately raising questions about how education might intervene into capital's shaping of spaces and temporalities.

Overall, the argument of the book is skillfully delivered, but questions remain about the extent to which the book's pedagogy of unlearning might be implemented in a classroom setting. The author's method involves pointing to examples of the pedagogy of unlearning in the work of theorists and major writers in the Marxist tradition in order to better illustrate the pedagogical character of the revolutionary enterprise. A good example is found in chapter 2 with Jennifer Ponce de Leon's reading of Ricardo A. Bracho's "Mexican Laundry," which intervenes in the gentrification of the greater Los Angeles area by refusing decodification in the broader economy of "learning." This approach, however, risks privileging Marxist educational theoreticians over practicing pedagogues with revolutionary leanings as potential audiences of the book.

While I am in sympathy with Ford's characterization of Marxism as a living, breathing doctrine in which there is no meaningful distinction between theory and praxis, the issue remains that the dominant sense-making regime identified in Ford's book is the ideological gateway through which students arrive in our classrooms, a gateway that shapes their understanding of what is meant by the term "education" and their sense of whether education is worth its expense. In other words, Ford's ambitious and energizing study may benefit by further considering the concrete modalities of the classroom and the student-teacher relationship and by including additional examples of how we might engage and include students in the work of teaching the actuality of revolution.