



Review of Derek R. Ford (2021). *Marxism, Pedagogy, and the General Intellect: Beyond the Knowledge Economy*

Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. 132 pp. ISBN 9783030838331 (Hardcover)

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Accepted: 14 November 2021 / Published online: 25 November 2021
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Keywords Stupidity · Radical hope · Knowledge economy · General intellect · Marxism · Pedagogy · Machines

Introduction

The general knowledge of people today has been captured and made into a cudgel by the elite drivers of capitalism. This is the driving force behind Ford's newly released book, *Marxism, Pedagogy, and the General Intellect: Beyond the Knowledge Economy* (2021). A potential solution? Stupidity. What may seem at first like an antithetical solution to academic readers is identified by Ford as one of the few methods to escape exploitation from under the hegemonic paradigm. This is because of a fundamental change that has occurred in society, 'as knowledge becomes central to production, politics, and life, some see a shift in the locus of struggle from the workplace to the academy' (Ford 2021: 6). The shift of struggle into institutions of knowledge naturally leads stupidity into being something more than just a one-off act of rebellion. In fact, it is because of its unbelievability and incomprehensibility that stupidity offers a total alternative.

These are bold claims to make to the book's presumed audience of scholars both old and new, especially those following the traditions of Marxism, critical pedagogy, and postdigital studies. For this reason, Ford's goals are succinct, three in total introduced in the first chapter. First, 'providing a point of entry into knowledge economy discourse'; second, 'draw[ing] out and question[ing] the underlying and often unassumed pedagogical assumptions that exist across the antagonistic conceptions of the knowledge economy'; and finally, in drawing from theories of autonomy from the Italian Marxist tradition where capital is reactive to the independent forces of labor, Ford 'reveal[s] that these resources [of autonomous knowledge and communication] need to include new *pedagogies*' (2021: 7, 14) (emphasis from original).

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What Is in the Book?

Ford's first objective to comprehensively introduce the knowledge economy takes shape in Chapter 2. Here, Ford sketches out from the political Right, Center, and Left how each political branch has come to value the role of knowledge as central to production, whether it be in economics or in culture. The result of which is a jarring revelation, no matter the political persuasion, knowledge becomes a site of economic struggle. Ford observes that the political Right tends to welcome this reaping of human capital as economic fuel, while the Center tolerates it to achieve gains for some privileged and isolated class groups. But as for the Left, Ford refers to Hardt and Negri (2009), realizing, 'knowledge production relies on common knowledge to cooperatively produce new knowledge'. Creating knowledge leads to the creation of value. This knowledge value is born independent from the exploitative grasp of capitalism. However, if the capitalist market begins to enclose upon knowledge and its created value via property and ownership rights then we are thrust into 'a struggle over the general intellect' (Ford 2021: 30, 34).

Chapter 3 continues the discussion of the Marxist struggle over the general intellect by first discussing Marx's *Grundrisse* notebooks and particularly what is recognized as his 'Fragments on Machines' (1973). Focusing on machines is key, as when a worker is involved with and even specialized to use a certain type of machinery, the worker becomes in Ford's words 'a relay point in the automated system ... the machine operates the worker' (2021: 39). The factory machinery becomes a tool of entrapment, capturing the worker's knowledge and extracting its value. In the era of Fordism, this mechanized extraction was challenged by union activity, social democratic policy, and regulation. However, now in the post-Fordism era (mercifully used as a more informative replacement for neoliberalism), the struggle of knowledge being mechanically extracted has been internalized into social norms surrounding learning.

There is an expectation of constant self-development, to offer the general intellect up freely to be appropriated as desired by the knowledge economy. Finishing the chapter with a clear image, Ford describes the state of liberal arts college education in today's world. Students and families are marketed liberal arts as a versatile set of skills, applicable to any career path or working condition. At the same time, it is increasingly rare for a college graduate to stay in the same field throughout their working lives. They are constantly being asked to adapt. 'We are never done learning because we are never done re-training and re-skilling ourselves. Capitalism now mobilizes the innate characteristics of knowledge production, such as cooperation, flexibility, precariousness, and indeterminacy.' (Ford 2021: 51).

Ford's second objective, interrogating further how pedagogy is blindly used to uphold the knowledge economy makes up Chapter 4. Again, Ford tackles this from the Right and Left. What these two sides have in common is that both at some point allow the capitalist knowledge economy to have free access to the general intellect, whether it be purposefully via corporate allowance/subsidization

or via open-access measures meant for the public. This reality points to learning as being a reaction to the precarity imposed upon by the knowledge economy's demands. Constant access to an ever-growing general intellect leads to expectations of constant innovation from workers (and future generations).

Ford points to Dyer-Witthford's (1999) understanding of the university as to what allows the harsh demands of the knowledge economy to be unknowingly eased into for the public. The university is the transition point between knowledge and the knowledge economy. The openness of knowledge within the university allows for the cultivation of knowledge by students. The hard limits of privatization are temporarily avoided, only to then immediately prompt students into repaying the market for its leniency by entering the workforce and generating new knowledge to be extracted. Clearly there is a fundamental issue in the conceptions of Left liberation if knowledge and learning, easy targets for exploitation, go unaddressed.

Chapters 5 and 6 have Ford present his new pedagogy of stupidity as an autonomous alternative to the exploitation present in the knowledge economy. Stupidity is clarified to be not a total absence of knowledge but an exodus or withdrawal from the exploitative knowledge economy and its accepted forms of conduct. A powerful example is the idea of a worker's strike, where instead of engaging in bargaining and coming to a consensus with an exploitative boss in an either better or identical contract, the workers take over the factory and resume production amongst themselves, defying the established logic and confines of the 'sensible' economy. Here, it is shown that stupidity is an anti-value in relation to the knowledge economy (Ford 2021: 80, 82). Meaning that stupidity exists outside of the grasp of wage labor and the state, and thus serves as a collective educational alternative to the exploitation of the general intellect of people.

The Call to Explore Stupidity

Ford's work in *Marxism, Pedagogy, and the General Intellect: Beyond the Knowledge Economy* (2021) superbly shakes up the fields of education that have seemingly permanently moved away systems-wide/structuralist theories. Ford problematizes the very ideal of learning as a politically universal social value, as well as the idea that by simply democratizing knowledge we somehow counter the exploitation of capital. These critical arguments are manifested in excellent examples: public-access software becoming the basis for proprietary technology; the continuous deregulation of mental health disorders justifying further market control over our personal lives; and liberal arts education being a gateway to the constant re-trainings of today's work landscape.

Surely as the reader encounters each example, they will think of more to be added to the argument for stupidity and against the exploitative knowledge economy: How do new stupid alternatives avoid becoming gifts, such as arguably some nonprofits and political movements, or does the creation of gifts result in a loss of stupidity? How can stupidity be utilized in underrepresented post-industrial regions? Where does stupidity start and theories of dual-power end? These questions are what makes Ford's work an exciting launchpad for further research, on the other hand also

leaving the reader wanting more. Understandable considering Ford is upfront in that his ‘objective isn’t to definitely say what stupidity is, but rather gesture toward it, to approximate it, to push at the limits of articulation, of intelligibility, and of knowledge so that we can experience that which escapes the demand for actualization’ (2021: 76). What we have here is a call to action to explore stupidity, to consider the unthinkable alternatives in today’s tightening grasp of exploitation.

Readers that are new to Ford’s work or have otherwise not considered the intersections of Marxism and education may get stuck on the specific vocabulary integral to the argument being presented. Momentum builds throughout the work and as definitions (i.e., grasping drive, valorization, exodus) get clarified and continuously refined, and examples are given, the seemingly contradictory academic argument that to be stupid is to escape exploitation takes more and more concrete of a shape. While this speedbump of vocabulary is intentional in its strikingness given the nature of the argument, perhaps alternatives could be utilized to those who are skeptical.

Towards New Forms of Radical Hope

In social-justice-minded spheres we often talk of Lear’s radical hope (2006) as a continuously popular praxis to counter the nihilistic atomization of the powerless. Radical hope has been adapted into pedagogy, being used to teach against the social inequalities brought forth more and more into the public eye by creating hard-working classrooms focused on equity (Gannon 2020). However, in many ways, this hope is still within the grasp of the knowledge economy. Hope is built up in a way confined to the temporary holding space of the classroom and is only defined in reaction to outside inequity, thus remaining susceptible to capitalist exploitation upon exiting the classroom. Integrating Ford’s idea of stupidity into the spirit of radical hope offers a potentially more radical solution. Synthesizing stupidity and radical hope creates a radical naïve hope. With radical naïve hope, the idea of teaching for a world where one can still be exploited by the knowledge economy is circumvented. Instead, we stupidly learn and work towards creating what is necessary to build the unthinkable, a world without capitalist exploitation.

‘It is easier to imagine the end of the world than an end to capitalism.’ This poignant idea attributed to Jameson (2003) and explored in the late Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism* (2009) is both haunting and wholly representative of the limits of where knowledge can bring us as a collective. Rather than closing the book on society, Ford cuts off the back cover and glues on another book, upside down and in another language, with plenty of blank pages in the back to add to.

Marxism, Pedagogy, and the General Intellect: Beyond the Knowledge Economy (Ford 2021) offers a framework to explore a stupidly hopeful solution to a stupidly bleak end for the world. As Stefano Harney points out in the forward, ‘*Stupere* in Latin meant to be amazed, confounded. ... But the stupid do not just sit in wonder, confounded. They confound.’ (Harney 2021: x) (emphasis from original). Consider the popular view of Latin as a premonition of society’s future; both inevitably dead. Perhaps that only means we need to begin communicating in Pig Latin, a child’s

language that is related to Latin in name only and used to talk and plan away from the ears of prying adults. What being naïvely hopeful and stupid offer us are new ways of communication, planning, and a new life away from the foregone path of capitalist exploitation.

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