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The Urgency of Derek R. Ford's Teaching the Actuality of Revolution: Aesthetics, Unlearning, and the Sensations of Struggle

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In the wake of threats to dismantle the Department of Education, proliferating academic and political censorship, and the repression of dissent on university campuses, revolutionary change in higher education and elsewhere feels like a utopic dream. As the Trump campaign and The Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 threaten to constrict institutions of higher learning, fascist takeover of the capitalist state finds new means of control. But resisting burgeoning forms of domination remains, steadfastly, possible. In fact, it is the enduring power of what's possible when "success is neither certain nor probable" that makes engendering social and political alternatives so urgent (Malm 2021, p. 147). Such enduring possibility is precisely what activist and scholar Derek R. Ford 2023, (23)02 emphasizes in his book *Teaching the Actuality of Revolution: Aesthetics*, *Unlearning*, *and the Sensations of Struggle.*

Written before the reality of a second Trump candidacy and increasing threats to higher education with the proposal of Project 2025, Ford's text is now more relevant than ever. Ford seamlessly weaves together contemporary Western Marxism and revolutionary pedagogy, revealing his expertise as a critical educational theorist. Emphasizing the intersections of education, politics, and aesthetics, *Teaching the Actuality of Revolution* explores how pedagogical politics are rooted in the perceptual and the sensual. Ford writes that "education is, *by definition*, aesthetic in that it always rests upon, reinforces, or challenges dominant regimes of perception, or hegemonic ways of seeing, feeling, smelling, hearing, and tasting" (p. 50). Ford asserts that the politics of aesthetics—how sensation and perception shape and are shaped by the structural conditions of contemporary life—must be examined in order to teach the actuality of revolution.

Ford's emphasis on the aesthetics of education is critical for educators concerned about teaching amid the possible onslaught of proliferating forms of authoritarianism enabled by capitalism. "Capital," for Ford (2023), "is an aesthetic ecological system," meaning that capitalism not only structures economic policy and political practices, but also cognition,

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sensation, space, and time (p. 32). Ford understands capitalism as an aesthetic force constructing a world "where capital makes sense" (p. 32). Capital's sensemaking, Ford argues, shapes education, putting pedagogy to work for either capitalism's survival or its demise.

Ford therefore supplies tools to challenge dominant regimes of perception through pedagogy. Thinking with art educator and critical theorist Tyson E. Lewis, Ford argues that teaching the actuality of revolution "aims at the experience of revolutionary possibility, or the *sensation* of the revolution to be accomplished" (p. 74). In emphasizing the aesthetics of education, Ford prioritizes pedagogical form over content. He foregrounds the *how* of education over the *what* (p. 10), though he admits both are "politically decisive" (p. 10). His focus on pedagogical form offers ways to engage in political pedagogical practices, proposing tools for teaching the actuality of revolution amid a neoliberalized education system and the increasing possibility of proliferating political repression.

Before laying out his pedagogical toolkit, Ford engages with Lewis as well as educational theorist Gert J.J. Biesta, critiquing "the contemporary learning apparatus." The dominant learning apparatus is geared towards "[inaugurating] us into the perceptual ecology of capital" (p. 57). So called "learning" undertaken within this machine is capitalist pedagogy (p. 53), positioning knowledge "as an external and distinct object with a use value and exchange-value we can acquire or transmit" (p. 53). Knowledge is thus formulated as a commodity, meaning that education must be assessed on its utility. The commodification of knowledge is dangerous for various disciplines, not least the humanities, as the relevance of each field must be "defended within the capitalist regime of value and becomes a chief means to achieve external ends, reinforcing the logic of capital" (p. 50). Such logics, moreover, will persist in the United States regardless of the outcome of the coming election. Ford's suggestions are aptly suited for this current political moment—he opposes both capitalist pedagogy and the contemporary learning apparatus, encouraging educators to disrupt the coherency of capital's sensemaking through revolutionary pedagogy.

Ford's project, then, is to "further enunciate some pedagogical possibilities we can experiment with" from within the contemporary learning apparatus (p. 57). Ford presents *unlearning* as one such pedagogical possibility. While he concedes that "teaching is never anything more than a possibility without guarantees" (p. 58), unlearning produces "the conditions for an unforeseen encounter" which can "break open an experience of being 'in-between' the world as it is and as it could be" (p. 59). Unlearning entails aesthetic interruptions: it produces ruptures creating "moments of breakdown" and disorientation suspending the logics of capitalism and fascism (Lewis, 2018, p. 130). Such moments are crucial for imagining alternatives amid ongoing political, ecological, and socioeconomic crises.

Ford turns to Jennifer Ponce de León's (2021) reading of a poem by Richard A. Bracho for an example of unlearning (p. 61). In "Mexican Laundry," Bracho grapples with gentrification in Los Angeles, employing multisensorial language. Through his use of prose, Bracho invites readers to *feel* "the past that is not past;" the communities that remain even in their absences (Sharpe 2016, p. 13). This, Ford attests, reveals how unlearning can show the "alternative that exists in the world as it is, the community that can never be eliminated" (p. 61). Bracho's poem interrupts capitalism's aesthetics, revealing how alternative possibilities are latent in everyday life.

In chapter three, Ford engages with French Marxist Louis Althusser to consider unlearning's epistemology. Ford suggests shifting away from universal and absolute knowledge claims, creating a disjunction between "knowing" and "thinking," agreeing with Althuss-

er's rejection of epistemic essentialism. Where *knowing* aims at mastery and incorporation, *thinking* "fractures the ability to know in the first place" (p. 76). For these theorists, there is no "true" philosophical thesis, only "correct" theses for specific historical conjunctures (p. 70). As such, attending to the "complexity, contingency, and heterogeneity of capitalist social formations" is crucial for teaching the actuality of revolution, and precisely what makes Ford's suggestions flexible enough to grapple with both Trumpian educational politics and Democratic neoliberal approaches (p. 69). Ford's formal pedagogical suggestions leave room for "multifaceted and provisional circumstances, contradictions, and encounters" present in varied educational situations—place, time, and political regimes all shift the terrain of a given educational situation (p. 69). Aesthetic education does not entail a truth to be learned, known, and mastered. Rather, it aims at engendering experiences of the possibility of living, learning, and sensing otherwise.

Chapters four and five offer the pedagogical tools of *symptomatic listening* and *arrythmia*. Ford frames symptomatic listening as a "negative pedagogical form" because it entails listening for what one does not yet know (p. 92). Sounds are both "dispersed" and "errant," Ford asserts, connecting listening with the aforementioned practice of thinking (p. 94). Akin to symptomatic listening, the pedagogy of arrythmia points to gaps in capital's diverse rhythms, suspending capital's aesthetics long enough to sense the possibility of revolution. Listening and thinking, unlike hearing and knowing, are pedagogical practices engendering political encounters with alternative aesthetic worlds—a necessary practice for educators interested in resisting ongoing assaults on education. Ford contends that revolutionary struggles must grapple with the complex aesthetic operations of capital, including the gaps in capitalistic sense, in order to make alternatives sensible.

Given the complexity and heterogeneity of capitalist social formations, as well as his focus on pedagogical form rather than content, Ford does not provide many tangible examples of his pedagogies in practice. This absence points to the importance of attending to the particularities of conjunctures in which pedagogical practices are taken up. Ford's proposals are aptly suited for the contemporary moment when the complexities of the world demonstrate the inadequacies of universalist prescriptions.

Ford offers pedagogies engaging varied senses. He mentions taste twice (p. 2; p. 50), though he does not develop gustatory analyses beyond these passing comments. Consideration of the pedagogical power of eating—within and outside of formal educational settings—could help situate calls for a revolution in perception within everyday institutions like the supermarket or the school cafeteria. These food spaces can be understood as critical classrooms in which the dominant logics of capital are reproduced (Bishop 2024). As Bradley Rowe and Sammuel Rocha (2015) point out, the school cafeteria in particular entails a hidden curriculum, teaching students what, when, and how to eat. Such practices, often thought of as noneducational, induct students into food and eating practices that quietly condone the logics of capitalist consumption. Engagement with the ways in which food and eating practices partake in the implicit, hidden curricula of ordinary life would strengthen Ford's analysis. Moreover, while Lewis' (2012; 2013) work on perception is a key reference point for Ford, more explicit engagement with art education might help develop his conceptual framework, and likewise bolster his call for teaching the actuality of revolution. Despite these limitations, Ford's work adds an indispensable Marxist theoretical genealogy to questions of perception, sensation, and pedagogy, while simultaneously offering specific practices for teaching amid contentious political situations.

Ford's work is a fruitful contribution to the rich histories of critical and revolutionary educational theories. As educators and students continue to be targeted for their politics in increasingly polarized political situations, Ford offers a timely toolkit for teaching the latent presence of potentiality, even when things look and feel hopeless. Emphasizing the intersections of pedagogy, politics and aesthetics, this text is accessible to professional academics, graduate students, and activists. While his work is decidedly Marxist, Ford's contributions are valuable to revolutionary pedagogy broadly. Unlearning is a tool for revolutionary struggles, a pedagogical form attempting to teach the actuality of revolution by transgressing the boundaries of capital's perceptual ecologies. In concert with practices like symptomatic listening and pedagogies of arrythmia, Ford supplies hope for alternative futures in the form of radical pedagogical weaponry. *Teaching the Actuality of Revolution* shows readers that fissures in dominant regimes of perception—fascist, capitalist, or otherwise—are always possible, and such possibilities must be sought pedagogically to bring the actuality of revolution into being.

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