

Book Reviews

Capital & Class
2022, Vol. 46(1) 133–154
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DOI: 10.1177/03098168221078662
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Derek R Ford

Marxism, Pedagogy, and the General Intellect,

London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021; xii + 117 pp.: ISBN 9783030838348, \$69.99
(hardcover)

Reviewed by Collin Chambers,
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Since receiving his PhD in Cultural Foundations of Education from Syracuse University in 2015, Derek Ford has quickly become a prominent theorist in educational philosophy and pedagogical theory. His latest and sixth book, *Marxism, Pedagogy, and the General Intellect* fits nicely in a recent trend of scholars within educational theory that seek to avoid simply critiquing capitalism from the left, but instead attempt to offer new pedagogical forms and styles that can be deployed in the class struggle in the present (Backer 2019; Ford 2016; Lewis 2017). Ford argues that in the era of the ‘post-Fordist knowledge economy’, in which the pedagogical form of *learning* predominates, the pedagogical form of *stupidity* should be put forth in order to wrestle the ‘general intellect’ away from the capitalist class and into the hands of the working class and oppressed. Put simply, *stupidity* has revolutionary potential.

Ford contrasts the pedagogical forms of learning and stupidity in the context of the ‘knowledge economy’. Despite the valid critiques from more orthodox Marxists about the analytical usefulness and the ‘fetishisms’ involved in concepts such as the ‘knowledge economy’, ‘informational economy’ and ‘post-industrial society’ (see, for example, Roberts & Joseph 2015), Ford makes a compelling case that the knowledge economy has replaced industrial capitalism as the *dominant form* of the capitalist mode of production (pp. 3–5). What Marx (1993: 706) called the ‘general intellect’, or the ‘social brain’, has increasingly become a new locus of accumulation on an expanded scale (pp. 37–41). Ford focuses on the knowledge economy because it

radically determines so many areas of our lives and ways of being in the world. Whether it is real or not, a new development or not, the fact is that it is discursively hegemonic, that it structures and guides not only international policies but our daily lives. Whatever the case, the fact that it’s discursively hegemonic necessitates a critical inquiry. (pp. 4–5)

The dominance of the knowledge economy has put education and pedagogy in a primary role in the reproduction of capitalism – education is the ‘fundamental *motor*’ of the knowledge economy (p. 7). Indeed, the capitalist class pays close attention to educational

practices and forms. Ford calls for Marxists to spend more time theorizing educational practices and forms in order to find pockets of resistance within the capitalist knowledge economy. Ford's major critique in the book is that at the present moment Marxists are united with the ruling class in their belief in *learning* (p. 65). In the knowledge economy, we must all become lifelong learners as '[l]earning is the educational logic that allows capital and the state to absorb the general intellect and even to accommodate oppositional or subjected knowledges' (p. 55). The pedagogical function of learning begins with *ignorance* and moves into learning in never-ending spiral thus creating a constant expansion of the general intellect that capital can profit from (pp. 78–79).

To counter this never-ending spiral, Ford puts forth the pedagogical form of *stupidity*. Stupidity 'undermines the question asked. When we're in a state of stupor, we're not even sure what the reference points for any discussion are' (p. 81). Ford reminds us, however, that stupidity 'is not unintelligence, or the absence of knowing, but rather "the absence of a relation to knowing"' (p. 81). Stupidity is composed of forms of knowledges that cannot be extracted by capital, they are 'anti-values', and thus interrupt the 'constantly expanding process in which value is produced, circulated, and realized through purchase and consumption' (p. 82).

The pedagogical form of stupidity is useful for the resistance within the knowledge economy for two reasons. First, stupidity is a form of 'exodus' which can radically 'shift the coordinates of the struggle' (p. 80). Ford gives the example of workers taking control of the factory and resuming production without the bosses during a strike rather than making their demands *legible* and waiting for a new contract. This is an instance of immersing the struggle in pedagogical stupor – taking control of the factory suspends 'our knowledge and experience of existing orderings of life' (p. 80), new possibilities become immanent. *Legibility* relates to the second reason why stupidity is useful. Capital is able to take advantage of 'the legibility of resistance' (p. 78), by drawing it into the general intellect to incorporate it into the process of capital accumulation. This is precisely the colonial 'grasping' nature of learning. Learning is a 'gesture of enclosure if not appropriation' (p. 11). The colonized must be known, understood and made transparent in order to subject them to colonial rule. By refusing to be legible to capital, and by refusing 'to advance demands, the aspirations the working class can't be absorbed into or accommodated by capital' (p. 83). Most importantly, stupidity is useful because it is a 'radical collectivity' and 'transcends individual subjectivity. Stupidity is everywhere, always ready to strike, and difficult to defeat' (p. 88).

Ford gets his inspiration of the 'exodus' function of stupidity from the Italian 'autonomous' Marxist tradition, specifically Tronti's (2019) 'strategy of refusal'. This strategy developed in a different historical and political context than our current one – a context of a still-existing mass labor movement in the 1960s and 1970s. In that historical context, it may not make sense *strategically* to legibly lay out demands to capital. In our current political landscape, however, there is hardly a real *legible* labour movement. *At the moment*, resignation reigns supreme. As Louis Althusser (2017) puts it, 'resignation generally dominates "ordinary" people's spontaneous philosophy when they aren't mobilized in struggle' (p. 27). Thus, by overemphasizing illegibility, refusal and exodus, that is, the pedagogical form of *stupidity* one can run the risk of ultra-leftism in our current historical moment of working class 'resignation'. This is just a warning because Ford himself

does not do this, as he treats the pedagogical forms of learning and stupidity in a more dialectical fashion. He reminds his readers that '[i]t would be a mistake to valorize stupidity and annihilate learning. Instead, both are necessary educational processes. It is only after one learns to read, for example, that they can study a text' (p. 100). Today's working class may first need to go through a phase of *learning* before deploying the pedagogical logic of *stupidity* as the class struggle becomes more acute, which it necessarily will. In fact, the current 'resignation' that dominates the working class might allow for a rapid development of 'stupid' revolutionary struggle. Once the *mass* labour movement begins again, we can start afresh – workers will not be so influenced by bourgeois ideology and thus not so *legible* to the capitalist class.

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The Debt System: A History of Sovereign Debts and Their Repudiation,
 Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2019; 262 pp.: ISBN 1608463095, £16.99.

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The Greek and Argentinean debt defaults in the last two decades were voluminous and sent shockwaves to various investors across the globe. Ecuador's debt audit in 2007–2008 also stimulated debates on sovereign debt restructurings. Moreover, since the COVID-19 pandemic had a drastic impact on the global South economies and created debt distress, the topic will be of interest to policymakers, academics and progressive social and political movements in the upcoming years.

At first sight, the mainstream policy agenda regarding sovereign defaults is straightforward: Implement good faith principles that will stimulate orderly restructuring while putting your house in order so that the country can serve debt. Yet, despite the widespread mainstream tropes in debt discourses, the concept of illegitimate debt remains