Book Reviews

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Brown, P., Lauder, H., & Cheung, S. Y. (2020). *The Death of Human Capital: Its Failed Promise and How To Renew it in an Age of Disruption*. Oxford University Press. 304 pp. $27.95 (paperback)

Ford, D. R. (2021). *Marxism, Pedagogy, and the General Intellect: Beyond the Knowledge Economy*. Palgrave Macmillan. 117 pp. $69.99 (hardback)

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The discourse of "skills" has dominated educational policy for the last thirty years; soft skills, hard skills, transferable skills, marketable skills. I have found myself, many times, in the midst of bizarre moments where a university administrator or a funding agency has asked me to reframe a syllabus, a graduate degree, a community program, and even an extra curricular offering, in the language of skills. Everything in education, it seems, must be a unit to count, measure, accumulate, and then, hopefully, take to market. While we struggle with the corporatization of adult and higher education institutions, the austerity that defunds pedagogical work in communities, and the neoliberal logics that reduce students to clients and consumers, we find ourselves constantly negotiating our viability as a field of practice and scholarship in relation to the "human capital" we might produce.

Human capital is, and should be, a vexed issue in the field of adult education. If the idea of it doesn't vex you, take a pause. For some, certainly, human capital has been a boon to the field. The idea that "human capital" is the solution to economic woes, the path forward for a knowledge economy, and the building blocks of future prosperity has certainly benefited some aspects of the broader field of adult education. (Some) programs are expanding and (some) areas of expertise are gaining (some) more traction. All of this expansion is slippery, however. Of course, it seemed that 20 years ago adult education as a scholarly discipline was disappearing from universities across the world. I would argue that this transformation is still ongoing. The historical iteration of this discipline, more closely tied to social movements, community organizations, and grassroots education, still needs to be defended. The aspects of the field that are conducive to, and in fact provide ideological cover for, neoliberal political economy have seen their prospects change, usually over to a business, human resources, or industrial relations program. But for many in the field, human capital and its articulation through the language of skills has been a heavy burden. While

we are constantly driven to articulate the market value of our programs or to generate revenue through increasingly convoluted frameworks of credentials, we sense that the reduction of adult learners to homoeconomicus fundamentally negates humanist, emancipatory, critical, and even progressive approaches to education.

In the midst of the pandemic, two new texts have emerged that offer unique, interesting, disquieting, and (hopefully) empowering ways to think about the question of human capital. Both should convince readers that human capital as a theory is in its twilight moments of explanatory efficacy. They should also convince readers that there is nothing ethically, philosophically, or politically redeemable about articulating people's minds, bodies, souls, and histories as instruments of capital.

The first of these texts is pointedly titled *The Death of Human Capital?*. It comes from the research team of Phillip Brown and Hugh Lauder (with new co-author Sin Yi Cheung), who eleven years ago published the excellent *The Global Auction* with David Ashton. Together these texts chart the promise and decline of the orthodox human capital argument, which the authors termed the "opportunity trap" in their first text. Disputing the formula "learning equals earning", the new text systematically dismantles the argument that investments in human capital, via (micro)credentialization and upgrading or even good old fashioned bachelors' degrees, will necessarily increase one's viability in an internationally competitive labor market. They remind us that the digitalization of many kinds of work, even in service economies, has led to workers competing against each other across borders, time, and space. Human capital is exposed not as a source of value, but rather as a neoliberal ideology of "talent", which obfuscates the role that already congealed forms of social power play in determining access and opportunities within the knowledge economy. They also explore the ways in which long standing social inequalities impact access to the means of acquiring human capital and mediate its realization once people take their capital to market. The situation is bleak and for this reason the authors propose a revision of the concept. Their rationales are based on a recognition that capitalism is endemic with crisis and that the internal contradictions of this particular way of life defeat the argument of human capital from the jump off, leading to credential devaluation and decline in the value of labor. For these reasons, we can no longer give credence to the myth that human capital is a path to individual freedom and social prosperity; in fact, they argue the opposite, human capital leads to individual deprivation and anemic social connection. Their response is to re-center human well-being and capacity in our design of economic life, instead of the inverse, and to call for both academics and policy makers to re-orient our own way of thinking and working under these conditions as we pursue a more purposeful, hands on approach to organizing our collective economic life.

While *The Death of Human Capital* ends with a call for revitalized approaches to social democracy, Derek Ford's *Marxism, Pedagogy, and the General Intellect: Beyond the Knowledge Economy* calls for exodus, which is a more difficult vision forward as it precludes the option of reform. After concisely situating knowledge and the knowledge economy within the social relations of capitalism, Ford posits stupidity as a mode to resist the endless drive to accumulate and valorize knowledge

within capitalism. The difficulty of Ford's vision is found both on its surface and in its depths. On its surface, this text is a call to embrace stupidity. Stupidity, for Ford, is not the same thing as ignorance; it is not an absence nor a refusal. As Ford argues, "[s]tupidity is not a refusal of production, but an *inability* to produce: it's an anti-value" (p. 82). His conceptualization of stupidity is somewhat opaque; it is not a place of arrival or departure, but more of an embodied political position. Despite the provocativeness of this claim, it is hard to imagine how one, beginning where you are "at" (as Myles Horton might say) arrives at stupidity. Ford does not provide sufficient guidance on this point and overall, the text is underdeveloped after making some rather thought-provoking claims. A particular strength is his return to the notion of the general intellect, through which Ford reminds us that "knowledge is never the product of an *individual*; it's always a *social* product, and in particular, the product of the collective worker" (p. 40). What we acquire as "human capital" is the collective good of human connectivity; it is not private property. When human capital is actualized, it is those human relationships that are denigrated through privatization and exploitation. Through the concept of the general intellect Marx identified that what capitalism exploits and expropriates is the collective capacity of society, experienced through the individual worker. The alienation that results is both personal and social. The difficult depth of Ford's argument is his push for us to acknowledge the limits of reform. Can we rename this problem we face and in renaming it articulate a new vision of society (as Brown, Lauder, and Cheung argue)? Ford is not convinced that negotiation will produce the political imaginary necessary to overcome the crisis and violence of capital. Rather than being trapped within the logic of capital, he argues that as educators we should chart a path of exit that begins with refusing the terms on which knowledge making begins.

Both of these texts, while insightful and interesting, struggle with the social science burden of reification. Both do an excellent job of critiquing orthodox economics and mainstream (to center right/left) social science for the various conceptual blunders and assumptions mistaken for natural conditions. Nevertheless, both also struggle to write about "human capital" and "knowledge economy" without turning these complex social formations composed of tangled mixes of social relations, ideology, contradiction, and actual practice into agetic "things" that guide human action and decision making. This is a self-defeating problem because reification erases the class interests and activities that create the conditions of life on this planet. While neither group of authors pulls any punches about the roots of the crisis of knowledge and learning within capitalism, these problems with reification present somewhat unclear paths forward, particularly in relation to pedagogical responses from critical educators. Reification of capitalism and economy erases their composition through conscious human activity and forms of ideology, making it very difficult to conceptualize an intervention or disruption through acting or teaching or, in Ford's view, studying. Nevertheless, there is much here to inspire educators to stop participating in the reproduction of myths that do all harm and no good, especially for adult learners, many of whom are particularly vulnerable to the story of "learning equals earning".