



Review of Derek R. Ford (2021). *Inhuman Educations: Jean-François Lyotard, Pedagogy, Thought*

Leiden and Boston: Brill. 97 pp. ISBN 9789004458819 (E-book)

Katie Crabtree¹

Accepted: 16 June 2021

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Keywords Lyotard · Infancy · Pedagogy · Inhuman · Education · Critical practice

Why Publish?

I assure you that the title of this review is neither polemical nor pejorative. Rather, the question ‘why publish?’ is in dialogue with the themes of resistance to the ‘system’ that Derek Ford finds in Jean-François Lyotard’s oeuvre. I will elaborate my response further below. First, however, I will explain why anyone familiar or unfamiliar with Lyotard’s thought will find Ford’s (2021) *Inhuman Educations: Jean-François Lyotard, Pedagogy, Thought* instructive in educational contexts. Ford’s manuscript is a novel contribution to the field of educational thought and critical practice in that it moves the import of Lyotard’s work past *The Postmodern Condition* (1984). The French philosopher and essayist is oftentimes maligned as a postmodernist, relativist, nihilistic thinker, whose thought cannot be applied to educational practice to any positive end. Ford sidesteps these assumptions and demonstrates the sly and subtle ways that Lyotard’s thought is always resistant to the nihilism of the ‘system’. Just shy of seventy pages, it is a precise and pithy presentation of Lyotard’s more nebulous work on *infancy* and what it might mean educationally. The clarity with which Ford presents what is principally aesthetic and opaque in Lyotard’s work is simultaneously the manuscript’s largest shortcoming: it is a performative contradiction.

The premise of Ford’s text comes from a simple truth that Lyotard identifies: humans are in want of education because we are first *inhuman* infants. We take for granted that infants, still unable to speak, need help, nurturing, and training to become fully fledged human persons. From this commonplace truism, Ford explores the tensions between two different kinds of inhumanity: the infant inhumanity at the

✉ Katie Crabtree
kathryn.l.crabtree@gmail.com

¹ Institute of Childhood Education, Leeds Trinity University, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

heart of human being and the ‘system’ that would force infants to grow up. Ford, of course, is not advocating that we abandon infants to their own feral devices. It is rather that following Lyotard’s writings of and on *infancy* we may find a means of resistance to the ‘system’. This is how Ford encapsulates the many forces that Lyotard is continually attempting to subvert in his writings: capitalism, development, progress, bureaucratization, performativity, signification, in short, *nihilism*. For readers in the educational context, this manifests in familiar and frustrating ways: endless accountability and assessment, benchmarks and ratings, research outputs, and course credits. The ‘system’ requires that infants be made to speak, that everything can be articulated and made commensurate to its logic. It is only what cannot be said that can defy the pressures of the ‘system’, and it is these infantile forces that Ford traces as resistant pedagogic forces in the educational practices of reading, writing, listening, and voicing in the manuscript.

It is Ford’s astute observations of the nuance with which Lyotard writes about the ‘system’ and the failures of *critique* that is among the manuscript’s strongest contributions. As Ford points out, for Lyotard, the ‘system’ does not refer to a specific political economy in history. It is rather a ‘logic’ that is ‘a way of organizing—or trying to organize—the entirety of the world’ (Ford 2021: 5). Its animus, in late capital, is its own ‘optimization’ (8) unattached to any legitimating ideal beyond the system’s own performance. As Ford points out, rather than endorsing the nihilism of the system, Lyotard is keenly aware of its ability to coopt its own critique. Ford (2021: 8) summarizes: ‘Excess and surplus aren’t obstacles for it, but engines for its expansion: the system can continually decompose and recombine, and it must remain open to difference and opposition, and can even encourage them’. Much like the eco-friendly and green choices that are used to market slightly less environmentally damaging products to consumers, the academic who critiques the neoliberal university reifies it when they publish their article in a five-star journal and record the research output for their university’s metrics. The lesson is not that we must give up hope to subvert the system, but we cannot expect criticism, in the sense of posing an opposing or alternate idea or system to replace it, to prevail.

Modern Re-writing and Re-writing Modernity

Ford peppers the discussion of Lyotard’s misgivings about the power of critique with biographic details of Lyotard’s years in Algeria and relationship to Marxism by his membership in activist groups. Ultimately, Ford’s gloss on Lyotard’s unique form of resistance is most convincing when it is instead applied to the oeuvre. Ford offers an incisive reading of the breadth of Lyotard’s oeuvre from the early *Discourse, Figure* (Lyotard 2011) to the later essays in *The Inhuman* (Lyotard 1991) and *Readings in Infancy* (Lyotard forthcoming) that teases out the productive tensions between the system and *infancy*.

For example, Ford applies the logic of the system and what resists it to his reading of *Discourse, Figure*. This text, which served as Lyotard’s submission for the Doctorat D’Etat, pits the *figural*, the density and opacity of matter, and bodily sensation, over and against discourse, which is how Lyotard refers to structuralism and

systems of signification. The uncomfortable tensions between the two, Ford reads in the same spirit that Lyotard invokes as resisting the system.

There is something inhuman at work when we omit, disregard, or repress the body and the indeterminacy of shadows. There's always something else to language than signs and meaning. The shadows of words are like their infancy, which inhabits them as they shift relative to our bodies and the world. (Ford 2021: 8)

While many readers of Lyotard, including Ford himself, are reticent to ascribe a unifying or cohesive project to Lyotard's oeuvre, the intense focus on this reoccurring theme in Lyotard's work goes a long way in dispelling misconceptions about Lyotard to those less familiar with his work. Particularly compelling is how Ford divorces Lyotard's work from the catchall term 'postmodern' with his passage on 're-writing'. As Ford (2021) notes, the phrase 're-writing' was suggested to Lyotard by conference organizers and it is a more accurate articulation of what is invoked by postmodern. Here, Ford distinguishes between modern re-writing and re-writing modernity. Ford demonstrates that modern re-writing feeds the logic of the system by attempting to articulate and establish what is opaque to knowledge as an innovation. Whereas what Lyotard is continually attempting to perform and gesture toward with the postmodern is 're-writing modernity' which Ford describes as writing under the 'as if' clause: 'One tries to finish or complete the writing, but can only ever succeed in *trying* to end it. The writing is initiated without resulting in an innovation' (2021: 26) (emphasis from the original). As such, Ford's text offers an indispensable introduction to readers unfamiliar with Lyotard by dispelling misunderstandings and establishing an affirmative mode of resistance.

Inhuman Educations Against the System

Inhuman Educations (Ford 2021) also offers much to readers more familiar with Lyotard's work and especially readers interested in resisting the inhuman system of education. Ford takes the logic of the system to task by elaborating the ways in which infancy can be experience and unleashed in the educational practices of reading, writing, listening, and voicing. Heretofore, I have only discussed infancy as it pertains to Ford's reading of Lyotard in the biological reality of human infants. In Lyotard's work, however, infancy is more than this developmental stage of human life; it is the remainder of what is said and sayable. Infancy functions more as a force, it is what is beyond the individual human person but its necessary precursor. It is not animus but anima and is never entirely enunciated by Lyotard in any of his works, only invoked in the work.

My definition here will seem vague and insufficient in comparison to Ford's precise articulation of infancy. With clarity and thorough observation of a variety of texts in the breadth of Lyotard's oeuvre, Ford presents infancy as the affective force that deindividuates the subject and discombobulates discourse. As Ford notes infancy in Lyotard's work refers to a constitutive lack, an ineffable unknowable thing, to which all thought

and the human are indebted: ‘The primary question will be how we relate to this debt, how we bear witness to and try to enact infancy to resist the system, to interrupt development, to remain inhuman and, therefore, to stay human.’ (2021: 11)

Ford then uses these as the infantile forces of affect to contrast the practices of reading (gleaning information), writing (articulating innovation), voicing (articulating discourse), and listening (hearing without heading) under the logic of the system with their infantile others. Following Lyotard, Ford sketches reading in infancy as a secret reading without the end of learning but experiencing the text. Writing in infancy is, as mentioned above, to write *as if* one could write off the debt to infancy’s force. Readers familiar with Lyotard’s work will enjoy the breadth of the oeuvre that Ford incorporates into the chapters on voicing and listening where he studies Lyotard’s consistent interest in aural affect. Ford suggests the resistant power of the infantile speech, which cannot say anything in particular but emits auditory force.

Ford uses laughter as an example of infantile voicing: ‘The pagan laughter continually displaces the field of politics. The processions end up *in* the political assemblies, transgressing the boundaries of political action and the respective roles of the people and politicians’ (2021: 48). Here, Ford demonstrates the ways in which our ears are trained only to hear what the system pronounces and proclaims and it is through silence and unrecognizable auditory matter that we might be affected by the infant’s cry. These infantile pedagogical forces build toward what Ford calls ‘sectarian initiation’ (2021: 66), a form of resistance to the logic of the system that allows inhuman infancy to rupture it. It is to practice all the component parts of the system’s education, only without it ends to allow infancy to voice itself, which gathers and disperses. ‘The sect is an infancy that interrupts a trajectory in an elliptical fashion, by breaking away while still being part of it but throwing it off course at the same time’ (2021: 67).

A critical reading, as Ford points out, is the stuff of the inhuman system, what it needs to be. This poses a problem for a reviewer of the text whose task it is to consign the manuscript ever further to the juggernaut of academe. Rather than critiquing the text for what it might lack, I will investigate its adherence to its own logic. Ford explains his reason for and experience of writing on Lyotard as the following: ‘There’s something in Lyotard I desire and I’m writing to communicate this desire. I’ll never be satisfied with it because I’ll never close the gap between my experience with Lyotard’s thought and the words that can communicate that experience’ (2021: 3). The writing, however, succumbs to the order of what Ford calls the beautiful in the system:

In describing childhood, I might seek to articulate something new about childhood, to show how it’s unique. But this would remain tied to the logic of development, in which an event is transformed into innovation, something new that can be sold or circulated throughout the infinite exchange routes of the system (Ford 2021: 30).

In and Against the Logic of Publication

Inhuman Educations: Jean-François Lyotard, Pedagogy, Thought (Ford 2021) delivers on its author’s promise: ‘My hope is that those with and without the theoretical background that can help situate Lyotard’s thinking can find an accessible entry

point into his thought.’ (2021: 13) It is a very coherent and clear explanation of what is primarily the dense and opaque affective work produced in Lyotard’s writing. It articulates what can only be felt. Ultimately what is offered in the text is a very public reading of Lyotard’s work that is articulated beautifully. The form transgresses the pedagogic forces of infancy that Ford delineates.

This is what I mean by the question ‘why publish?’, which is a play on the title of Lyotard’s (2013) text *Why Philosophize?*. If Ford is truly advocating that the infantile forces in reading, writing, voicing, and listening are a sectarian initiation, that they put something into play, I cannot help but wonder if the publication of an academic text is a performative contradiction? It is a research output that will be counted and ranked. This is perhaps a cynical take, but if we are to re-write modernity under the as if clause, ought not we to break the methods for dispersing thought?

Here, the nomadic sectarian might learn a lesson from the publication of wolf-kink erotica. I am entirely serious. Ignoring the content of this fan fiction (fanfic) genre, there is something to the open-source authorship on the web that academics desiring to subvert the system might take heed of. Without a paywall, amateur authors of fanfic are free to take liberties with establishment literature, co-authoring entire worlds guided by almost viral forces of strange erotic rules in an entirely communal online space. The problems arise when a particular author attempts to monetize on worlds that are made collectively by publishing an individual manuscript (Alter 2020).

Academics’ entire careers are guided by this very modern logic of publication, which is personal authorship of words (the matter of thought belonging to no one), compelled by infantile affect (which precedes the subject) into the articulation of innovation. Their outputs fuel the system. It follows on that in order to resist to the logic of publication and to make space for infancy, we might be compelled to combine affective timbres, tensors, pulsions, and infantile intensities outside the conventional forms of publication.

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