

Marxism, Pedagogy and the General Intellect: Beyond the Knowledge Economy, by Derek R. Ford

Palgrave Macmillan. 2021. pp. 132.
ISBN-13: 978-3030838331

Reviewed by Jianxin Guo

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3769-9372>
Changchun Sci-Tech University, China
guojianxin1215@163.com

Jingxian Tang

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0066-0896>
Changchun Sci-Tech University, China
tangjingxian0101@163.com

Lei Zheng

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4421-7717>
Changchun Sci-Tech University, China
hg2583692022@126.com

Cong Wang

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2678-0290>
Changchun Sci-Tech University, China
wangcong_5558@163.com

Derek Ford's book, *Marxism, Pedagogy and the General Intellect*, though short, has been written over a few years, and its arguments and concepts are dedicated to the oppressed working class whose labour power contributes to research and teaching. The author has written a troubling, intricate, and powerful book about the knowledge economy that often demonstrates the author's complex conceptualisation of it. Nevertheless, Ford clearly frames and conceptualises the problem, the research questions, the literature selection, and most of the definitions. Ford focuses on the knowledge economy because it radically determines so many areas of people's 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, its discursive importance necessitates a critical enquiry (p. 4–5).

International bodies have written, discussed, and analysed Marxist theory for more than a century, drawing from economists, management theorists, sociologists, and communications and technology scholars. Theorists from the twentieth century, such as Friedrich von Hayek, Fritz Malchup, Daniel Bell, Peter Drucker, and Alain Touraine have contributed to the body of work on Marxism, the economy, politics, knowledge,



Education as Change
<https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/EAC>
Volume 26 | 2022 | #12507 | 5 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/12507>
ISSN 1947-9417 (Online)
© The Author(s) 2022



Published by the University of Johannesburg and Unisa Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)

education, class struggles, and labour power. This book discusses the history of the knowledge economy in relation to post-Fordism and gives examples of the oppressiveness of the need to acquire more knowledge and why it could be linked to able-ism and colonialism. Juxtaposing the oppressive nature of the need to acquire more knowledge with the liberatory potential of knowledge, the author further contextualises the discussion within the Italian Marxist tradition. Moreover, contemporary issues that revolve around knowledge, as cited by the author, are working conditions, such as pay, problems related to education institutes and graduate students, professors and the privatisation of public education, teachers' status within schools, student debt, media discourse, trade wars between countries, security and surveillance, the collection of data, intellectual property and copyrights, and the challenges concerning oppressed knowledge. Although some of the readers might disagree with the author's solutions to some of these problems, the book nonetheless provides the scope and opportunity for future research.

What readers might find difficult about the book is the complexity and critique of the different narratives from the left, the right, and the centre about the knowledge economy. Each approach acknowledges that knowledge plays a pivotal role in economies, societies, and life in general, and the author further explains that the right and left have contrasting class viewpoints and different agendas for the different classes in society. For example, the right idealises knowledge production in the interest of capitalists, and the left, which is against capitalism, looks at new movements beyond capital. The left's strategy is further to transform the exploitation and oppression in the knowledge economy. These different approaches have unique and antagonistic viewpoints. The policies and contextualisation of knowledge contribute to an understanding of what knowledge is and its modus operandi in favour of capital. The author juxtaposes the favourable role knowledge can play in relation to capital with the role knowledge can play in creating a number of problems for capital. For example, it is not easy to claim knowledge, but it is easy to claim a plot of land. Consequently, the approach via the centre is that it is difficult to ascribe knowledge to the public or private arena, although it has influenced policies. Ford states: "Because it's hard to draw boundaries around knowledge and designate it as a commodity, it's also difficult to exclude people from accessing knowledge" (p. 26). Lastly, Ford contrasts the paradigm shift from the workplace to the academy as knowledge becomes key to life, politics, and production and the university's role continues to be key in serving knowledge for the capitalist knowledge society in the post-Fordist era. This brings us to the discourse of the general intellect from Fordism to post-Fordism.

The author explains the transformation from Fordism to post-Fordism as a result of the anti-colonialists and socialists who challenged the status quo and demanded a place in the general intellect, but the role of capital is always to oppress and ban these movements. Despite this, the author explains further, the post-Fordist era continues to depend on the general intellect and the left continues to demand more knowledge. When the works that birthed these ideologies were read in the late twentieth and early twenty-

first centuries, readers predicted that the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism would occur and the post-Fordism ideology would be verified. For example, the notion of the general intellect predicts the development of industrial production and also the contemporary mode of production. Moreover, a radical change of capital in the post-industrial or post-Fordist era includes not only work or production but life and social relations as well. What are these radical changes? Taboo subjects such as gender and sexual minorities emerged and challenged the rigid discourse of Fordism. Pedagogical paradigm shifts occurred, and queer studies, women's studies, and ethnic studies were included in the United States. A strength of the book is the example of Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso who challenged the replacement of the indigenous knowledge systems by dominant foreign systems.

A gap in the book is the omission of indigenous struggles in other parts of the world to highlight the achievements of other indigenous groups, such as the KhoiSan indigenous group in South Africa. The book shows there is a demand for pedagogical changes and for the inclusion of indigenous knowledge in higher education and not just the modern phenomena of digital networks and computers.

The phenomenon of learning has entered society as a whole, especially the economy. It is not merely a part of educational institutions. Theorists such as Maarten Simons and Jan Masschelein provide an insightful argument that the pedagogy of learning should not only focus on citizens' employability but should encompass diverse subjects such as eating, sex, rearing children, how to communicate, travelling, and what to do during free time. Prior learning is important for citizens and contributes to competency to fulfil these roles. For example, talk shows, TV shows, magazines, books, newspapers, and social media form part of the tools to educate citizens. Here, these authors highlight the fact that because knowledge is constantly changing it is part of a never-ending learning process. This leads to a paradigm shift from an unhealthy to a happier and more successful social actor. Thus, citizens' minds are constantly infiltrated by knowledge as they acquire skills, habits, and competencies.

This is not to deny that globalisation is indeed very competitive, and these social actors have to learn to adjust and manage their own learning and to become managers of lifelong learning. During the Fordism era, the state played a role in preparing students to enter society; during post-Fordism, the state transferred the role to individuals who must become independent lifelong learners. As we reviewed this part of the book, it became evident that during postcolonial times, social media play a major part in citizens' self-learning process. One gap in the study is a comparison of countries where social media and literature are not easily accessible with those countries where they are readily accessible. Further research could be done to establish what role the oral tradition plays among indigenous groups in lifelong learning. We are curious to know how citizens remain employed in these competitive environments without the necessary modern technologies, especially given that traditional oral storytelling and sharing of knowledge of indigenous groups are not recognised and documented.

A strength of the book is the caution about the focus on digital universities and that it prevents educational researchers and educationalists from understanding what is happening among the people on the ground and the arguments between scholars and students.

One of Ford's major critiques in the book is the contradiction of Marxists who are supporting the ruling class in their belief in learning. Lifelong learners are what social actors become within the knowledge economy, hence learning and earning contribute to the capitalist state, to dominate the general intellect. The argument by the author is that ignorance is what starts the process of learning, and this process continues until capital benefits by profiting from it. On the flip side of the coin is an argument by Ford that stupidity is not necessarily a form of unintelligence or ignorance or not knowing, but it is the relation to knowing which is absent that causes stupidity. Hence, the "social brain", or the "general intellect", coined by Marx (1993, 706) is increasingly focused on in society in general and in groups and sub-groups in particular, and these phenomena of the "social brain" or the "general intellect" have a major influence on our daily lives and policies internationally. Thus, no matter the focus areas, it requires a critical enquiry because it is hegemonic. Furthermore, the example of autism used by disability theorists to explain the productive value of stupidity in our view does not contribute to the definition of stupidity and it does not fit the argument being made. We do agree with the statement that "[t]he stupid life is a place for thought that endures without transforming into tacit or codified knowledge or thinking the limits of thought" (p. 101).

Ford demonstrates the approach of Peter Drucker's *Knowledge-Based Economy* of the 1960s, which was often antagonistic in its conceptualisation of the knowledge economy. The author argues that there is not much of a difference between Louis Althusser's and Antonio Negri's Marxism, because both neglected to read pedagogical dimensions while reading Marx's *Grundrisse* and *Capital*. The author discusses the dialectic through Jean-François Lyotard's work and further argues that both pedagogies are important. What stands out in the book as another strength is when the author assesses different arguments on the knowledge economy by reading policies by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank Institute (WBI) and responses to these policies from popular expressions from the West and democratic responses as well as critiques and responses from Marxists, especially Italian Marxists. Here, the reader encounters the author's deeper analyses of the function and role of the general intellect and the changes towards post-Fordism and the knowledge economy. Further empirical and sociological studies about knowledge could fill the gap within this study. It could shed light on the emerging themes during qualitative interviews and it could highlight the sociological and anthropological complexities connected to the pedagogy and the intellect of people, and not just the political and economic phenomena.

Ultimately, it is the logical flow of the arguments and analyses that provides a worthwhile contribution for educational researchers and theorists, and for students and

scholars entangled in these discussions. It provides a much-needed critical approach to the Marxists and anti-Marxists regarding pedagogy, the knowledge economy, and the general intellect. Indeed, this is the first book to challenge the consensus on the right and left that the leftist understanding of knowledge as the key to many problems causes knowledge productivity to stay within capital's circuits.

Funding

This research is supported by Jilin Province's Department of Education Employment Special "University Students Entrepreneurship and Innovation Education Evaluation System Research" in 2019, project number: 2020 Ly502w13. Person in charge: Wang Cong.

Reference

Marx, K. 1993. *Grundrisse*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.