EDUCATIONAL POTENTIALITIES

FOREWORD BY DEREK R. FORD
AFTERWORD BY NONI BRYNJOLSON

TYSON E. LEWIS

COLLECTED TALKS ON REVOLUTIONARY EDUCATION, ORGANIZING, AND AESTHETICS

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INTRODUCTION

From "I will" to "I can": the political and pedagogical playfulness of Tyson E. Lewis

Derek R. Ford

Having the chance to introduce the thinking (and talking) of Tyson E. Lewis to a new audience of revolutionary activists and organizers is exciting and intimidating. It's exciting because this collection of talks, which cover much of his extensive research interests and span more than a decade, is filled with raw materials out of which communists can produce politically timely and incisive educational practices, theories, and experiments. It's intimidating for the same reasons. Instead of writing an introduction, then, I'm going to write three.

Take One: The Personal

I want to first introduce Lewis as a human being, a bundle of atoms and energy holding in place for the time being. I met Lewis in 2013, when I was a graduate student at Syracuse

University and Lewis was an associate professor at Montclair University. I had just reviewed his book, *On Study*, for a journal, and was waiting for his response to it. A few months later, we spoke on a panel about the book at the annual meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society conference in New Mexico, which was the first time we met in person. I was a terrible student in college and most of my primary and secondary schooling (one semester in college I earned a 0.46 GPA), but I *loved* ideas and thinking with others. After some time working and organizing, I enrolled in a graduate course to test the waters, before ending up in SU's cultural foundations of education program totally haphazardly and without any knowledge of education. I was probably annoying my first year in the program because I thought I had something to *prove* to the world. I think I had the same disposition when reviewing Lewis' book, which might be one reason why I ended with a comradely-phrased and, I think, warranted critique about the political implications of the project. In academia, this is a risky move, but it paid off.

Beginning with his responses, Lewis interpellated me as a serious thinker, educator, and organizer and inaugurated a friendship that continues to this day, a friendship that is personal, educational, professional, and political; that is to say, Lewis is a pal and teacher, a colleague and comrade. In each of these roles it's evident that Lewis doesn't only *write* about resisting the capitalist demands of performativity, but he truly practices them. He is uniquely playful, so full of play it's contagious. As he and Richard Kahn put it in their first book, *Education out of Bounds*, "in play, the child's relationship with toys troubles the very distinctions between the proper and the

improper," occurring in "a zone of indistinction" that *moves* educational life outside of capital.[1] His research and writing are experimental and sometimes goofy, his lifestyle choices could easily be read as eccentric and lighthearted, his teaching is comical and cheerful, and his politics are always in joyous motion. In these talks, each the play of the friend, teacher, coworker, and comrade comes through as Lewis quotes The Dude from *The Big Lebowski* to crystallize his theory of curiosity as distracted yielding, as he arranges materials for the educational encounter, or as he formulates the reasons why teachers should be ignorant.

For some of my comrades, the relentlessly playful nature of research and teaching might be frustrating or disappointing. It was when I first read his work. When I reviewed *On Study*, I expressed concern about the radical openness of studying, stating that closures will happen sooner or later, and without proposing any answers ourselves we leave it up to the state and capital to provide them. Interestingly, Lewis addressed this provocation at the end of his review response, but he did so in an inconclusive way that merely postponed any definitive thesis and kept the question subject to study. Providing a clear answer as if it was a debate would be to adhere to capital's demand for constant actualization and articulation and would prematurely shut down future collective endeavors, enclosing us off from one another.[2]

1 Tyson E. Lewis and Richard Kahn, *Education out of Bounds: Reimagining Cultural Studies for a Posthuman Age* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 70, 71.

2 Lewis even wrote an insightful foreword to my first book, which included a similar critique of his work on studying. See Tyson E. Lewis, "Toward a Communist Philosophy of Education: Reflections on

One political principle sustaining Lewis' work is the united front. When forming united fronts, progressives and communists recognize that they hold important and, in some cases, irreconcilable political differences and acknowledge that those differences shouldn't immediately equate to division. The united front, as Brian Becker writes, "is designed to maximize the participation of the largest number of people in the streets, in the struggle together against imperialism. The political struggle over strategy and orientation will continue—and continue without end—but this united front concept establishes the need to mobilize rather than fragment."[3] Instead of enlarging people in the streets, Lewis expands the number of potential allies in acts of education and, in doing so, demonstrates the humility that's so missing in academia. The arrogant can't rally the masses together, and what allows Lewis to constantly work with new friends and comrades, to bring in new theories and topics, is his openness to external forces working through him and his intentional absent-mindedness, both of which enable him to resist the drive for assessment and evaluation and keep his work and practices continually exposed to contingency.

Take Two: The Pedagogical

We've all heard in classrooms or conferences or read in books or feedback that some aspect of the work needs to be "complicated." About 10 years ago, marxist geographer Don Mitchell heard enough of that, and wrote a brief editorial

Method and Methodology," in D.R. Ford, *Communist Study: Education for the Commons* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016).

3 Brian Becker, "Raising Consciousness in the Anti-War Movement," *Liberation School*, 01 May 2006.

against the demand to "complicate" our research, noting that "as an academic cure-all, it's quite simplistic. It's a total fetish." More than that, it's a betrayal of the academic discipline itself, as "complicating" our research does the very opposite of what we're supposed to do. The world in which we research and intervene *is already* complicated, and as such, "the imperative is all the greater that our analyses of it not be, that instead they be clear and incisive."[4]

Importantly, Mitchell's argument was not to rid research of discipline-specific words (i.e., jargon) because such language enables the production of new thought and insights. Instead, his argument was that our expositions should be clear so that we can both enunciate and act in the world, that we should ask each other to think more *critically* about our research and to explain it with greater *precision* rather than asking each other to "complicate" it. I want to propose that Lewis is an example of one who not only explains their own ideas about our incomprehensible world, but also articulates and translates the ideas of others, granting their concepts greater clarity.

Without treading lightly and without any fear of entering the thick weeds of some philosophical thinkers, Lewis has developed a way of not only making remarkably specific ideas and lineages comprehensible, but of making them *come alive* and, even more importantly, making them *educational* and *political*. He's expended an enormous amount of labor doing the hard work of *translating* incredibly dense and complicated theoretical works into educational and political life. This isn't to say that the speeches in this book are exactly *effortless* or

4 Don Mitchell, "A Complicated Fetish," *Social & Cultural Geography* 15, no. 2 (2014): 125.

transparent; they demand care, attention, and persistence. But he leaves clear markers of his theoretical journeys ("first," "second," and "third," or "before we move on, we have to establish X"). He fleshes out his concepts with illustrations that animate the theories and make them accessible.

Take Three: The Political

Jacques Rancière's first major book publication is *Althusser's Lesson*. Released in 1974, the book is a sustained critique of his former teacher, Louis Althusser. Rancière's target is not so much Althusser as it is his intellectual project and the methods and strategies used to carry it out. Althusser's pedagogical practice is one where the teacher's role "is to transmit knowledge to those who do not possess it," a principle "founded only on the technical division of labor" between the student and professor.[5] Althusser was, for Rancière, the epitome of a "philosopher king," or what he'd later call the stultifying pedagogue who begins by assuming an inequality between the teacher and student, repressing the latter's capacities by "transmit[ing] his knowledge to his students so as to bring them, by degrees, to his own level of expertise."[6]

Lewis' first single-authored book was on Rancière (and Freire), although there is a more fundamental commonality between the two. A few years after finishing his graduate studies at the University of California Los Angeles, Lewis published a seething critique of a set of books his former teacher,

5 Jacques Rancière, *Althusser's Lesson*, trans. E. Battista (New York: Continuum, 2011), 144.

6 Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 3.

Peter McLaren, published in 2005-2006. Like Rancière, Lewis' sights aren't set on McLaren as a person; unlike Rancière, they aren't set on McLaren as a teacher. Instead, Lewis proposes an "immanent critique" of McLaren's work, highlighting internal contradictions within the three primary aspects of McLaren's project. First, McLaren's project entails *reason* that reintroduces class analysis within education to correct for the domesticated versions of critical pedagogy that abandon the revolutionary project. By doing so, the second domain of *revolution* enters, as McLaren envisions an educational practice that produces revolutionary consciousness through critique, in which "education and revolution have to be fused together."[7] In other words, pedagogy is marginally considered or "eternally deferred" as there are neither any classroom translations nor examples to move from the abstract to the particular.

For Lewis, "the dearth of examples indicates a *theoretical* error in McLaren's project, muting his clarion call to form a 'philosophy of praxis' through which action and theory interpenetrate one another." In their place, we have "dozens of manifestos that do not realise Marx's own plea for a new sense of action."[8] This leads to the third and most damning critique of McLaren's *passion*: revolutionary critical pedagogy is a philosophy rather than a pedagogy, as he and his co-thinkers at the time were working to recenter the educational problematic within marxism (without expanding it out anymore).

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7 Tyson E. Lewis, "Capitalists and Conquerors Teaching Against Global Capitalism and the New Imperialism Rage and Hope: Interviews with Peter McLaren on War, Imperialism, and Critical Pedagogy," *Historical Materialism* 17, no. 1 (2009): 202.

8 Ibid., 204.

McLaren's passion is the most redeeming for Lewis. This is evidenced in McLaren's writing style that is characterized by a "poetic quality," an attribute of his writing that can make room for "a new aesthetic level of vision for re-imagining political life beyond the current distribution of the sensible."[9] Lewis concludes that McLaren's project has as many aporias as it does answers, and that McLaren can't finish developing his revolutionary critical pedagogy so long as he merely imported marxism into educational theory. Instead, the task of revolutionary pedagogies is to "transform Marxist theory through this articulation" of pedagogical theory in a "dialectical movement between pedagogy and theory."[10]

Lewis continued interrogating his former teacher with another paper published in 2010, in which he figures McLaren (and Giroux) as a prophet of "apocalyptic" pedagogy," an educational understanding and presentation of time as "the end of time, poised between 'ontological terror' from the right and the absolute necessity of revolution from the left."[11] The target here is McLaren's pedagogy of the manifestos, which "dictate proper political action and proper political goals in light of historical necessity and an impending world crisis."[12] Lewis proposes it's plagued by two key problems. The first is that, by structuring it around the endpoint of the great class war, McLaren neglects a more nuanced conception of struggle articulated by Marx. The second is that the introduction of

9 Ibid., 206, 207.

10 Ibid., 207.

11 Tyson E. Lewis, "Messianic Pedagogy," *Educational Theory* 60, no. 2 (2010): 243.

12 Ibid., 244.

marxist-humanism (via Hegel) prevents revolutionary critical pedagogy from the revolutionary potential of the *surplus present* of the now.

If Rancière had to settle accounts with Althusser early in his career, then Lewis had to do the same with McLaren. It caused a fallout between the two of them just before I started my own graduate studies. When I entered Syracuse University in 2012, I was already a long-time marxist and Party member. I investigated marxism and education and, of course, quickly found McLaren's prolific body of work, along with that of Dave Hill, Glen Rikowski, Paula Allman, Sandy Grande, and others. It was incredibly helpful and provided the first time for me to get a "footing" in an entirely new field. At the same time, I was looking for something that would better address the specifically *pedagogical* elements of marxism, revolutionary struggle, and communist organization.

This brought me to Lewis' work, in his 2012 paper "Mapping the Constellations of Educational Marxism(s)" and his 2013 book, *On Study*. His 2012 paper characterized educational marxisms around three domains: knowledge and epistemology (consciousness raising), education for political persuasion to build hegemony, and an ontological project to constitute a new political body. This is where I first learned that Paulo Freire constructed his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* "as a tool to be used within revolutionary organization to mediate the various relationships between the oppressed and the leaders of resistance" and positioned it as a response to or development on Georg Lukacs' work.[13] More importantly, I ex-

13 Tyson E. Lewis, "Mapping the Constellation of Educational Marxism(s)," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 44, no. S1 (2012): 102.

perienced Lewis' nascent methodology for writing educational philosophy.

The cartographic project doesn't privilege or denounce any domain but argues we need to discern the differences between the registers and ultimately utilize them all through a constellational method. Taking a constellational approach enables each domain to enrich the others through their differences but "does not resolve tensions within and between competing theories, but rather realizes that such tensions are productive indexes that both connect and disconnect singular theoretical registers."[14]

This might be Lewis' first stab at a marxist *pedagogy of praxis*: education is the navigation of different registers in marxist educational theory via constellational thinking, which "does not collapse differences between concepts, nor does it simply valorize one conceptual model over the other. Rather they hang precariously together, maintaining an absent center."[15] As Lewis says in the opening to his first talk, his research maps interruptions in dominant forms of educational life and, I'd add, develops new concepts and practices that disrupt the ontology of effectiveness to resist the demand for operativity, dwelling instead in the aporias and gaps of study.

The pedagogy of studying as an alternative educational mode to the domination of learning seemed to be in the air, as Lewis's book *On Study* appeared the same year as Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's work on Black study, *The Undercommons*. Lewis's book was the culmination of a decade or so of working with Giorgio Agamben's philosophy to rethink

14 Ibid., 99.

15 Ibid., 112.

the most fundamental axioms of educational philosophy and practice. His first paper on the topic was rejected from numerous journals, and it took him several years to finally find an outlet for it. We should all be glad he persisted, because I deeply believe the groundwork he lays there is absolutely crucial in the educational dynamics of the revolutionary class struggle. It's there that he proposes learning is the pedagogical motor of biocapitalism, and to do so he deploys what I read as his unique educational and philosophical methodology: listening to the pedagogical silences of the world and letting them speak through him.

For those subjects worthy of investment, "biocapitalism [...] does not depreciate or use-up one's labor power so much as continually invests in the production and reproduction of such power through a total integration of one's potentiality into an economic/learning structure that emphasizes continual reskilling in order to survive within competitive global markets."[16] Rather than examining the political contradictions or possibilities of biocapitalism as an economic, political, and social system, Lewis hears its underlying pedagogical motor: learning. Learning is the movement from ignorance to mastery, from inability to ability, or "the putting to work of potentiality in the name of self-actualization and economic viability."[17] He spends as much time conceptualizing learning as he does alternative logics that divorce potentiality from the demand to actualize. Remaining within potentiality isn't to inhabit a state of inactivity or impotence, but rather an ambivalent dis-

16 Lewis, *On Study: Giorgio Agamben and Educational Potentiality* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 3-4.

17 Ibid., 5.

position in which everything is possible. If learning is about "I will" then study is about "I can." As he writes in chapter 8, "To say 'I can' is a strange act. It is a kind of happening where nothing happens, or a happening in which nothing happens except the potentiality for happening." Because "I can" is only a potentiality, it can't be assessed or measured, evaluated or graded, judged or employed.

This is a book that repeatedly says, "I can," in different languages and settings, through different voices and characters, but for a united cause: the study of that which capital can't exploit, oppress, or enclose. Before reading his voice on your own, I want to leave you with a final comment. Lewis and I do share a common political and educational objective, which is to experiment with and propose pedagogical theories and practices to enable us and others to *experience* an alternative educational form of life beyond learning and capitalism. In place of critiques of educational systems and processes, I've taken Lewis' lead in focusing on how to generate the experience of a revolutionary alternative present in the now of the classroom and library, the union hall and street demonstration, the bus stop and the playground.