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Marxism, Pedagogy, and the General Intellect Beyond the Knowledge Economy

Derek R. Ford

*With Foreword by
Stefano Harney*

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“Radical stupidity and a rejuvenated General Intellect versus capitalism’s knowledge economy: In this landmine of a book, Derek R. Ford convinces us that we have everything to gain by choosing the former.”

—Glenn Rikowski, Visiting Fellow, *College of Social Science, University of Lincoln, UK*

“Ford’s book beautifully cuts into the pedagogical how of knowledge emerging and returning from noise, how learning, which both the capitalists and the leftist endorse, makes knowledge emerge from noise to be ‘grasped,’ made transparent, and actualized. More importantly, in this stupefying yet clear presentation, he shows how stupidity can work as an alternative pedagogy that gestures toward an exodus of returning to the noise as it remains and sustains to build a communist world.”

—Weili Zhao, Assistant Professor of Curriculum and Instruction, *The Chinese University of Hong Kong, China*

“Marxism, Pedagogy, and the General Intellect provides crucial suggestions for the design and conceptualization of a ‘new’ public. The creatively and innovatively surprising argument generatively builds on Marxist theory and practice, and will be indispensable for adequately approaching the contemporary situation and redressing the problems generated by the contemporary capitalistic knowledge economy.”

—Ryom Munsong, Associate Professor of Faculty of Foreign Languages, *Korea University (in Tokyo)* and Vice Chief, Research Team on Contemporary Korean Studies at the *Center for Korean Studies*

“One would have to be truly stupid to enjoy this book, as it has no value whatsoever! Normally, such a comment would be considered the greatest insult, but Ford has written a book with a surprisingly subversive thesis that demands an equally surprising endorsement. If the left is to challenge the knowledge economy, it must recognize the collective power of stupidity as a refusal to instrumentalize, measure, and thus commodify education in the name of capitalist value production. Drawing on a wide variety of sources ranging from Karl Marx to Édouard Glissant to Avital Ronell and others, Ford produces a unique genealogy of stupefying pedagogies that enables social movements to claim the opacity and incomprehensibility of stupidity as resistant to the ignorance and arrogance of educators on the right and the left.”

—Tyson E. Lewis, Professor of Art Education, *University of North Texas, USA*

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This book is dedicated to everyone who has ever experienced “impostor syndrome.” Know that the only imposters are those who think they know what they’re doing.

FOREWORD: “YOU MUST LEARN!”

“You must learn!” announces KRS-One and Boogie Down Productions. The lyrics of the song are an injunction to “learn” global black history. But in the video that both accompanies and revises the song, we see a particular figure: a bearded black man dressed in robes. He seems to represent the wisdom and history KRS-One urges his listeners to learn. He stands holding two tablets reminiscent of the Jewish prophet Moses. But Moses is not portrayed with African features in either religious or historical texts, and this wise man wears dreadlocks. According to our “knowledge” of Moses, this man cannot be Moses. And yet we are familiar with the portrayal of Moses holding the tablets. With this figure in the video for “You must learn,” learning has already turned against itself, undermined itself, cast itself into doubt. It is more than a correction in knowledge. It is a subversion of learning. In short, learning has turned to study, as Derek Ford would put it in the revelatory pages to follow.

The incitement to acquire knowledge has been disrupted by this figure who challenges our knowledge. It raises the question of what KRS-One means by learning. The image cannot but invoke an unsettling of the knowledge of who Moses is and what is on those tablets. Moreover, the image of this prophet in dreadlocks also invokes what might be considered an antagonism to settled knowledge, a different way of knowing, a different way of study. Groundings—as it has most famously come to us from the conversations Walter Rodney recalls with Rastafarians in Jamaica—disrupt and detour this command to learn with an insistent and ongoing black study.¹ Fifteen years ago, when Fred Moten and I first started to make the distinction between black study and black studies we did not

have the benefit of Derek Ford’s work.² But we did have Lawrence “Kris” Parker, better known as KRS-One. What both Ford and Parker teach us is that learning, or in this case black studies, emerges from study, from black study, and that *this* is real injunction: to practice study, black study, in the face of settled, settler, knowledge.

Next, the wise man tosses the tablets into the air. They land as two records on the turntables operated by D’Nice during the performance in the video. The presumably written knowledge on the tablet has landed in the middle of an unruly aesthetic, in the middle of a hip-hop song. It has been transformed into the genre in art that has perhaps had more to say about concept of time, and by extension history, than any other contemporary art form. Now learning is not only cut and undercut by the orality of groundings but also by the musicality of hip hop.

No matter the prophets/profits of the hood, as Imani Perry would rightly remind us, when any knowledge of history moves through music, its communicability and transparency as knowledge and as history become attenuated, opaque, and undecidable.³ And other forms of value emerge. Music then requires a kind of substitute unit of value, a singer, a track, a concert, a download. But those only temporarily individuate and commoditize what has become, as it has always been, collective study. This is what Fumi Okiji shows us in her wonderful discussion of record collections in *Jazz as Critique*. Against the European tradition where knowledge of music equates to its internal coherence, the jazz record constantly fails to capture the performance which is the form, Okiji suggests, and by failing “cackles with … incessantly reforming constellations.” A jazz record collection “holds within it a multitude of heterophonic choruses” in black study.⁴

* * *

So, when KRS-One raps “you must learn” he is hardly advocating the path to success in what was already becoming known as the knowledge economy. For Derek Ford, in his bold analysis, it is the knowledge economy that brings into relief the implicit pedagogy of capitalism. Capitalism’s pedagogy also commands us to learn. One might even say forces us to learn by accusing us of ignorance. Learning under capitalism produces knowledge for sale. And Ford notes that only knowledge that can be sold is even given the title knowledge. But he reminds us that this knowledge also produces ignorance, where ignorance is nothing other than the

pressures of capitalist accumulation for more. This ignorance can only be addressed by more learning, and thus more productivity. Ignorance has too often also accepted as the starting point for Marxist praxis. By accepting ignorance as a starting point, Marxists risked accepting the capitalist definition of knowledge. Only knowledge that can be put to use for accumulation and growth was worthy of the name. Thus, Ford reminds us capitalism drew Marxism into a dialectic of ignorance and learning on its own terrain. In contrast Ford will stress for us the possibility of maintaining an antagonism to learning, and an exodus from the knowledge economy. Boogie Down Productions starts learning and ends up studying, using the antagonism of groundings to keep knowledge a step behind, off the pace and off the beat.

Key to the concept of exodus in Italian workerist and post-workerist thought is that with the coming of a knowledge economy, to flee capitalist work is to smuggle out the goods. On the way out of Egypt, exodus escapes with the social relations that produce value in a knowledge economy. Fixed capital becomes unfixed in flight. But just as knowledge is haunted in its unending revision in groundings, the Italian exodus is also shadowed by another exodus. Except this exodus throws any knowledge of the way out of Egypt into confusion. Because the way out of Egypt is through Ethiopia. And it might be the movement of Jah people. But it is not clear—as in transparent and communicable—how to get there. This movement trails exodus with fugitivity, leaving it unfinished and unmapped. Think of Gregory Isaacs singing “if I could reach the border/than I could step across.” As if he planned to step “out of dis country” and into “Africa.” But then he continues “I’m leaving out of Babylon/leaving out/I’m leaving out to roam/leaving out to roam.” His plan defines the knowledge of direction and geography. It’s a fugitive plan.

Hiding study where they will not look for it and practicing study where it can flourish emerge as Derek Ford’s real concern. Here the fugitive requirement to hide in plain sight or close quarters emerges. And the knowledge economy in turn reveals itself as nothing more than racial capitalism’s latest innovation in seeking, sorting, and managing, and where necessary destroying, or trying to destroy, what it cannot capture. Gerard Hanlon in his book *The Dark Side of Management* uncovers a precursor text of the field of management studies, written in 1915.⁵ In this text, called *The Job, the Man, the Boss*, the authors Blackford and Newcomb identify nine physical variables of the human’s capacity to labor in the body, among them skin color, texture, and proportion. From these

variables the authors claimed, a boss can find the right role for every worker. As Hanlon tells us not much has changed in human resource management, though managers no longer seek to examine palms and skulls as Blackford and Newcomb would have ideally liked to do with each worker. In the knowledge economy, the variables become more thoroughly mental than physical, though the mental bears the social history of the physical. New variables emerge, such as ignorance and stupidity. Ford tells us whereas ignorance as a variable is easily slotted into the new division of labor in the knowledge economy, stupidity now sits at the bottom of the capacity list, redundant and unemployable.

Stupere in Latin meant to be amazed, confounded, struck dumb not perhaps by superior knowledge but by something superior to knowledge. But the stupid do not just sit together in wonder, confounded. They confound. They hide their knowledge in records and turntables, in groundings and study. The philosophy is not in the music. The music is the philosophy as Okiji teaches us, contra Theodor Adorno.

Or as Derek Ford sums it up perfectly: "there is always the noise from which knowledge emerges and to which it returns."

Vancouver, BC, Canada

Stefano Harney

NOTES

1. Walter Rodney, *Groundings with My Brothers* (New York: Verso, 2019). See also Devyn Springer and Derek Ford, "Walter Rodney's Revolutionary Praxis: An Interview with Devyn Springer." *Liberation School*, August 12, 2021, <https://liberationschool.org/walter-rodneys-revolutionary-praxis-devyn-springer-interview/>
2. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, "Debt and Study," *E-Flux* 14, March (2010). Available at: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/14/61305/debt-and-study/>
3. Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).
4. Fumi Okiji, *Jazz as Critique: Adorno and Black Expression Revisited* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 94.
5. Gerard Hanlon, *The Dark Side of Management: A Secret History of Management Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 36.

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Finally, while my name is on the book, the concepts, ideas, arguments, and stupor in it aren't "mine" but were produced by the convergence between the international movement of working and oppressed people and the specific group of that movement whose concrete labor power takes the form of teaching and research.

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Derek R. Ford received his PhD in Cultural Foundations of Education from Syracuse University in 2015 and works as Assistant Professor of Education Studies at DePauw University, where he teaches and researches around the nexus of pedagogy and politics. He's published four monographs—the latest of which are *Inhuman Educations: Jean-François Lyotard, Pedagogy, Thought* (2021) and *Pedagogy and Politics in the “Post-Truth” Era: Insurgent Philosophy and Praxis* (2019)—and edited or co-edited five books—the latest of which are *Keywords in Radical Philosophy and Education: Common Concepts for Contemporary Movements* (2019) and *Learning with Lenin: Selected Works on Education and Revolution* (2019). Ford helps run three book series, including *Radical Politics and Education*, which is co-edited with Tyson E. Lewis. Additionally, he's associate editor of *Postdigital Science and Education*, assistant editor of the *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, chair of the education department at *The Hampton Institute*, and editor of *LiberationSchool.org*.