

Critical Education

Volume 8 Number 9

June 1, 2017

ISSN 1920-4125

Making Marxist Pedagogy Magical From Critique to Imagination, or, How Bookkeepers Set Us Free

Derek R. Ford
DePauw University

Citation: Ford, D. R. (2017). Making Marxist pedagogy magical: From critique to imagination, or how bookkeepers set us free. *Critical Education*, 8(9), 1-13. Retrieved from <http://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/criticaled/article/view/186183>

Abstract

Claiming that critical education generally, and marxist education specifically, is stuck in a dead-end of impotent critique, this article seeks to reinvigorate the fields by making marxist pedagogy magical. We have to, in other words, not just engage in productive and revolutionary critique, but more importantly, engage in the magical act of imagining possible futures. Selectively reading the three volumes of Marx's Capital, I demonstrate that Marx figures communism in different ways and with seemingly antagonistic emphases. At heart, then, Marx poses communism as a pedagogical problem and as one that demands magical thinking. Insisting that our history and present be the real concrete stuff of learning, experimenting, and doing, I next make the claim that we have already been post-capitalist (i.e., socialist), and that we have to reclaim the successful history of the international struggle of the dispossessed and exploited. In disavowing this history, we reinforce the neoliberal claim that there is no alternative to the market and democracy. I conclude by offering the U.S.-based Party for Socialism and Liberation as an example of magical marxist educators, calling on their imaginative Party program.



Readers are free to copy, display, and distribute this article, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and *Critical Education*, it is distributed for non-commercial purposes only, and no alteration or transformation is made in the work. More details of this Creative Commons license are available from <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>. All other uses must be approved by the author(s) or *Critical Education*. *Critical Education* is published by the Institute for

Critical Educational Studies and housed at the University of British Columbia. Articles are indexed by EBSCO Education Research Complete and Directory of Open Access Journals.

Introduction

In *Magical Marxism*, Andy Merrifield (2011) contends that marxism has become too stagnant and predictable, too explanatory and stultifying. Workers and students don't need any convincing that capitalism has nothing to offer them. Young people can see through the pile of debt they accrue that capitalism has defuturized them. No critical pedagogy is necessary to lift the veil of ignorance, to engage in the process of demystification. At the same time, however, marxists have remained fixated on explanation and critique, spending all of their time documenting, detailing, and analyzing capital's destructive tendencies. Merrifield takes aim specifically at the radical academics who occupy the pages of the *New Left Review*. "The journals lack of imagination," he writes, "the disdain it shows towards little germs of new possibilities quietly incubating in the world, its obsession with scouring the political landscape for global oppositional forces, and nothing less, betrays the mandarin cynicism it contents itself with peddling" (p. 146).

To reinvigorate marxism, Merrifield asserts, we need to rattle it up, breathe new life into it, transgress from within. We need to make marxism, in a word, magical. The magic that he has in mind is not that of the Los Vegas magician hawking illusions with high-tech gadgets and carefully choreographed scripts, but that of the magical realist. For magical realism, fiction and reality, history and myth, cut across and through each other, each pushing back on the other. We access and construct truth through language and imaginings, while we envision and fantasize through our material reality. "Magic is concrete: its arena is real life. Magic is an imaginary representation of one's real conditions of life" (p. 21). Engaging magic is a deeply materialist affair, one that reveals the materialism of literally everything, for the supernatural can't exist without the natural. Magic is labor and creation. It doesn't just happen. Merrifield's argument is that, while marxism shouldn't abandon critique, it needs to start imagining and dreaming. In seeking to provoke, Merrifield takes it a bit too far. Although he begins his book with the idea that magical marxism has to exist in "comradely opposition" to scientific marxism—the marxism of laws and tendencies—he quickly abandons this position. The history of the actually-existing socialist movement is thrown out the window along with mass politics. Instead, we have to carry out small, autonomous actions, as if we could somehow defeat—or even threaten—global capital and its powerful states with communes and issue-based micropolitics. At one point Merrifield even suggests that we embrace the joblessness and precariousness of economic crisis and recognize it as a blessing in disguise, one that allows us to break free of the law of value and the imposition of work through the commodity-form. Sometimes Merrifield crosses over from magical marxism into maniacal marxism. Nevertheless, I proffer that educationalists would do well to take Merrifield's provocation seriously.

Quite honestly, the field of critical education makes the *New Left Review* look like a cutting-edge, vanguard publication. Our field is, I contend, stuck in a dead-end, circling a cul-de-sac of vague critiques. The problems are identified as neoliberalism and authoritarianism, a "zombie culture," and the solutions are identified as reinvigorated democracy and an enhanced public sphere. The problem is even worse when we propagate counterproductive critiques. As Curry Malott (2016) has persuasively demonstrated, the field of critical education remains mired in anti-communism, the closing of ranks with imperialism and its mouthpieces. Certainly, we do often echo the demands of U.S. imperialism, deploying its language, categories of analysis, and even judgments. Malott reveals the appearance of anti-communist declarations (always unsubstantiated) in the founding texts of critical pedagogy, going to far as to say that the entire

school of thought was founded “as an attempt to dismiss socialism” (p. 63). Even the marxist literature in education tends to be on the defensive, remaining content with showing that it is really the logic of capital that is the problem.

It is as if there is a consensus that if we can just keep listing everything that is wrong with neoliberalism or capitalism, change will spring forth and unfold organically. Our role, it seems, is that of the enlightened and isolated researcher that reveals the truth behind the curtain. But we can't stray too far from the mainstream, we don't want to risk too much. So at best, we end our articles with a vague call for resistance, a few sentences to rouse the masses into action. Affirming the importance of education, we insist that public education is an imperative for a just world. And then, radio silence.

Those of us educationalists who want to contribute to revolutionary transformation, then, have a difficult task. We not only have to engage in productive and revolutionary critique, but we have to engage in the magical act of imagining futures, too. In this article, I want to contribute to both of these tasks and to demonstrate that this double-movement presents us with not a political, economic, or social problem, but with a pedagogical one. I do this first by turning to the three volumes of Marx's *Capital*, strategically and selectively searching these texts for references to communism. What I demonstrate is that Marx figures communism in different ways and with seemingly antagonistic emphases. Whereas volume one focuses on freedom and decision, volume two concentrates on management and planning, while volume three synthesizes and extends these two different intensities. *At heart then, Marx poses communism as a pedagogical problem, as a quandary that demands the intervention of magical educational thinking.*

Next, I examine the question of the future, to what comes after—or what is other to—capitalism (or, if you wish, neoliberalism). I do so by asserting an astonishingly overlooked fact: *we have already been post-capitalist*. I seek to reclaim the history of the international struggle of the dispossessed, exploited, and oppressed, concentrating specifically on the first workers' formation, the Soviet Union, which not only established socialist relations of production, but was also fundamental to the wave of socialist and national liberation struggles that freed much of the global south from the shackles of colonialism. Our history and our present, I hold, have to be the real concrete stuff of our magical learning, experimenting, and doing. Critical education has failed at each of these junctures, and it is my hope that this article can serve not just as a corrective, but rather as something that invigorates and provokes. As such, I conclude by offering the Party for Socialism and Liberation as an example of magical marxist educators, calling on their imaginative Party program. The Party program is not a testament of critique that brings like minds together, but a collective dreaming that brings like spirits together. This movement from critique to imagination makes it so the present doesn't just *seem* detestable, but actually *feels* foreign, thereby instituting the affective dis-jointedness that is key to political struggle.

The Communist Pedagogy of *Capital*

Marx demonstrates clearly, if not unconsciously, the movement from critique to imagination and the insoluble linkage between the two. Indeed, this is one way in which to understand Louis Althusser's (1965/2005) reading of Marx, which separates out Marx's science from his philosophy (or, in other words, his magic). Althusser poses that there is a necessary lag between science and philosophy. This lag is a general law and is not specific to marxism: “great

4 *Critical Education*

philosophical revolutions are always preceded and ‘borne along’ by the great scientific revolutions ‘active’ in them, but long theoretical labour and long historical maturing are required before they can acquire an explicit and adequate form” (p. 14). Marx’s first discovery was historical materialism, the science of history, or social formations: the idea not that class struggle existed, but that it was the motor force of history. Only later could Marx attend to the theoretical work of elaborating the concepts and frameworks necessary to understand, imagine, and intervene in the world.

Marx’s contribution to philosophy, as Althusser (1971/2001) insists, is “a new *practice of philosophy*. *Marxism is not a (new) philosophy of praxis, but a (new) practice of philosophy*” (p. 42). This lag between science and philosophy poses not just a temporal problem, but rather a political one. As Tyson Lewis (2011) puts it, “Because philosophy is always belated, pre-existing ideologies come to fill the vacuum opened by the discovery of a new object of inquiry, leading to confusions rather than clarifications of the object” (p. 258). Marx lived this divide and couldn’t determine the contours of this lag, and Althusser’s project was therefore to perform this labor. As is well known, this is what leads Althusser to locate an epistemological break between the “young” and the “mature” Marx, between the Marx of Hegel and the Marx of Marx. As such, marxist philosophy is to be found in *Capital*. This is the work in which Marx’s real magic comes out, when Marx imagines how the communist future can come out of the concrete capitalist present. I would even argue that *Capital* is a deeply utopian text, one rooted not in hope but in the concrete, practical political struggle. While Althusser posits a young Marx against a mature one, I want to assert that the young Marx not only inhabits, but finds its clearest and highest expression, in the mature one.

In the three volumes of *Capital* Marx figures communism in diverse and discrete ways. The communism of *Capital*, then is haunted by the problematic of utopic imagination, and I claim that it presents us with a pedagogical problem: how to navigate and hold in tension these various and, at times, contradictory, demands that the communist project places on us? This is a similar claim to the one that Lewis makes based on his readings of Althusser and Fredric Jameson. Lewis here claims that “education is not simply a practice subservient to philosophy... but is rather a general practice that supersedes all other practices” (p. 269). Marxist pedagogy, on this reading, “becomes a noted point for re-imagining the relation between cold and warm streams of Marxism.” Lewis, in other words, posits marxist pedagogy as a magical endeavor of voyaging across the constellations between science and philosophy. I want to take the pedagogy that Lewis forges out of Althusser’s philosophy and Jameson’s aesthetics and apply it to *Capital* itself. What follows is thus not a systematic reading of *Capital*, but a scattered reading, one that is meant to highlight the pedagogical problematic that Marx unconsciously lays out for us.

Marx’s first volume of *Capital* focuses on the production process. This is undoubtedly the most well read volume, and with good reason. It’s a meticulously argued and brilliantly written book, filled with jabs and jokes, painstaking explication and revolutionary fervor. Not coincidentally, it is also the only volume that Marx was able to complete during his lifetime (Engels later cobbled together volumes two and three). Marx asks us to imagine with him a communist future early on in the book, during the last section of the first chapter. This is the section on commodity fetishism where we learn about the ideological effects of commodity production, the ways in which what are really relations between people come to be understood and experienced as relations between things. When I do my weekly grocery shopping, the commodities that confront me in the store appear to me as things—as objects with prices—when

they are also, at their heart, *social* products of particular forms of labor, relations that encompass workers, bosses, unions, CEOs, politics and immigration officials, and so on. So too, when I reach for my wallet and my credit card, I feel I am exchanging a thing, but in actuality I am enacting and taking a position within this web of social relations. (Thus, while many critics of neoliberalism pat themselves on the back for critiquing individualism, it was Marx who, in 1867, first told us about capitalism's individuating effects.)

Marx asks us to imagine an alternative situation, a communist situation of production and distribution. "Let us now picture to ourselves," he writes, "a community of free individuals, carrying on their work with the means of production in common, in which the labour-power of all the different individuals is consciously applied as the combined labour-power of the community" (Marx, 1867/1967, pp. 82-83). In this picture everything is a social product, not an individual one: "One portion serves as fresh means of production and remains social. But another portion is consumed by the members as means of subsistence. A distribution of this portion amongst them is consequently necessary." This association of free individuals laboring freely determines what this distribution is. The social relations of production are clearly visible and intelligible in this picture, as compared to the capitalist picture in which they are fetishized, hidden, misdirected.

How we make this picture a reality is something that Marx addresses in the penultimate chapter of the first volume. As the accumulation of capital progresses, the story goes, so too does human misery and drudgery,

...and with this too grows the revolt of the working-class, a class always increasing in numbers, and disciplined, united, organised by the very mechanism of the process of capitalist production itself. The monopoly of capital becomes a fetter upon the mode of production, which has sprung up and flourished along with, and under it. Centralisation of the means of production and socialization of labour at last reach a point where they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. This integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated. (p. 715)

Here we see Marx at his best, his most furious and his most poetic. Marx makes us *feel* the negation of the negation, the possibility of revolutionary transformation. The development of capital lays the foundations for communist revolution. The fetishism of the commodity is torn apart by its very own logic as the price tags in the grocery store are no longer able to cover over the social nature of production. Through force, that "midwife" of transformation, the expropriators are expropriated and we are free to labor collectively, to decide what to produce, how to produce it, and how to apportion and distribute it. In the first volume of *Capital*, we get a communism that emphasizes freedom of association and deliberation, one that emphasizes social agency and the power of laborers for self-determination.

This stands, so I wish to suggest, in a slight opposition with the picture of communism that Marx paints in the second volume, which focuses on the circulation of capital. In this volume Marx explores the complicated and intensely contradictory process of circulating—and *realizing*—values within the capitalist mode of production. Whereas in the first volume communism was figured as a free association of collective laborers who seize negation to wage a war against the expropriators, in volume two communism is figured as a process that is carefully managed and diligently planned. For all of the coordination that capitalism demands,

6 *Critical Education*

communism will require more. Take accounting, for example. When examining the costs of circulation for the capitalist, Marx (1885/1992) says that book-keeping “becomes ever more necessary the more the [production] process takes place on a social scale and loses its purely individual character; it is thus more necessary... in communal production than in capitalist” (p. 212).

Later, regarding the turnover of capital—or the transformation from labor-power into wages into market purchases for means of subsistence back into means of production and labor-power—Marx observes that, under capitalism, this process is mediated through the money form. By contrast,

If we were to consider a communist society in place of a capitalist one, then money capital would immediately be done away with, and so too the disguises that transactions acquire through it. The matter would be simply reduced to the fact that the society must reckon in advance how much labour, means of production and means of subsistence it can spend, without dislocation, on branches of industry which, like the building of railways... supply neither means of production nor means of subsistence, nor any kind of useful effect, for a long period, a year or more, though they certainly do withdraw labour, means of production and means of subsistence from the total annual product. (p. 390)

In capitalist society, the turnover of variable capital and the production of means of production and means of subsistence are uncoordinated. Those projects that require a good outlay of capital and a long time for construction are either organized through the state or financed through loans (which is something Marx takes up in volume three). Communism will allow these endeavors—like all production—to be planned. The fundamental difference with this planning is that it is done according to the needs of society and not the needs of the owning and ruling classes. This, as Marx notes, will have to be done without money.

Some particular form of the representation of value, however, will still have to operate, for this is how the workers’ society will be able to “reckon” with the differing outlays of investment required for different projects. “With social[ist] production just as with capitalist production,” therefore, “workers in branches of industry with short working periods will withdraw products only for a short time without giving other products back in return,” while those “with long working periods will continue to withdraw products for a long time before they give anything back” (p. 434). Workers producing means of communication and transportation, say, constructing a new network of solar energy apparatuses, will not produce a useful effect for some time, depending upon the scale of the project. During this time they will need to receive compensation for the value that they are producing. Such a value distribution will be in contrast with that operating in regards to workers producing goods that have a shorter turnover time. Marx’s proposal here is that “producers should... receive paper tokens permitting them to withdraw an amount corresponding to their labour time from the social consumption stocks.” These tokens, however, “are not money; they do not circulate.” These representations of value cannot be hoarded, bequeathed, invested in means of production, and so on.

The tension between volumes one and two of *Capital*, then, is the tension between freedom and planning, autonomy and centralization, negation and affirmation. We see these tensions in volume three of *Capital*, too, as this volume focuses on “the process of capitalist production as a whole.” As a result, we have excursions into the centrality of double negation and

expropriation coupled with emphases on planning and centralization. With the analysis of credit and finance capital, for example, Marx (1894/1981) points to the immanence of the socialist mode of production within the capitalist mode of production. The development of the joint-stock company, which aggregates capital ownership and separates ownership of means of production and labor is, he says, “a necessary point of transition towards the transformation of capital back into the property of the producers” (p. 568). This united movement of concentration and separation is even more radically posited: “This is the abolition of the capitalist mode of production within the capitalist mode of production itself, and hence a self-abolishing contradiction, which presents itself *prima facie* as a mere point of transition to a new form of production” (p. 569). The capitalist mode of production immanently produces *points* of transition, what we can seize as gateways and opportunities of transition, not as predetermined or causal inevitabilities. The agency of the proletarians—the exploited and the expropriated—organized through the communist party, has to carry this out through force.

Under capitalism, these joint-stock companies, which act as the collective capital of the capitalist class, follow the rate of profit wherever it is highest, paying no regard to social need. This question of planning according to social needs, according to use-value, raises an important problematic that Marx addressed in volume two: how to “reckon in advance” and how to apportion the product of value to the producers in a non-exploitative way? In the last part of volume three Marx poses this answer explicitly and unequivocally:

...even after the capitalist mode of production has been abolished, though social production remains, *the determination of value still prevails* in the sense that the regulation of labour-time and the distribution of social labour among various production groups becomes more essential than ever, as well as the keeping of accounts on this. (p. 991, emphasis added)

The revolution, the expropriation of the expropriators, may eradicate the circulation and function of money, but it will not in one fell swoop eliminate the *determination of value*. Keeping track of the production of goods—who is producing what and what resources are consumed in the production process—not only remains important, but increases in importance, and thus, so too does the role of the accountant or bookkeeper. Hence, a good deal of organization and planning—and the bureaucracy that inevitably comes with such requirements—will be necessary. Bookkeepers set us free. Yet it is not only that freedom *begins* once all of the accounting has been taken care of. Instead, bookkeeping and freedom are heterogeneously blocked together, condensed into a contradictory unity that is always in movement and never quite resolved.

Engels found the third volume in a state of great disrepair, a fact that he belabors in his preface. First, there were the personal difficulties, Engels’ trouble with eyesight and the time spent corresponding and meeting with the various socialist and workers’ movements. Then there were the problems of deciphering the manuscript, gaps in the writing, and the absence of a preplanned outline. As for Engels, the volume poses difficulties for the reader too. These difficulties, I contend, can be pedagogically reframed by being understood as precisely the tensions of the construction of communism. Marx couldn’t leave us a thoroughly worked-out analysis of the entire process of capitalist valorization, nor could he detail the question of communist transformation or the outline of the communist society. Unfortunately, however, while Marx has been engaged very little in the field of critical education, even those who have turned to Marx have tended to elide this tension.

Now, there are many likely reasons for this elision. For one, it may be the result of only engaging with volume one of *Capital* and with Marx's other works on ideology and philosophy (those that Althusser assigned to the "young Marx"). For two, it may be because in this neoliberal era it is bad practice to talk about centralization, planning, and the state. Here, as Jodi Dean (2009) makes clear, much of the Left is at fault. In the face of the neoliberal assault, the Western Left responded by "forfeiting its historical solidarity with workers and the poor, retreating from the state, and losing the sense that collective solutions to large-scale systemic inequalities are possible and necessary" (p. 35). Instead, individual freedom—or in academic language, the freedom of "singularities"—was embraced, and the state was posited as yet another enemy. The neoliberals were busy wielding the state to achieve their objectives, and the market was busy producing commodities for these free singularities to purchase. Relatedly, for three, the default position of the Western Left has tended to be the default position of the West: actually-existing socialism is bad, a repressive failure, a massive gulag. This position is repeated ad-nauseam without any inquiry at all, or, at best, by resorting to ad-hominem attacks. Malott (2016) provides several demonstrations of these attacks in the field of critical pedagogy. Even in the marxist educational literature, however, it persists. Mike Cole's (2008) *Marxism and Educational Theory*, for example, makes several digs at the Soviet Union, and each dig is unaccompanied by any evidence.¹ While the causes of this lacuna are surely important, I am mostly interested in the effect that it has had on the field, and the ways in which it has left us stultified and unimaginative.

We Have Already Been Post-Capitalist (Read: Socialist)

The idea that we need to imagine a future beyond and after capitalism needs to be buttressed with an indisputable but neglected insight: we have already been beyond and after capitalism. The questions of framing and scale come into play here, for the entirety of the globe has never been post-capitalist. Nevertheless, significant portions of the globe have, at one point or another, wrested themselves free from the domination of capital and imperialism, liberating use-value through a war against exchange-value. This process has been messy, violent, uneven, and littered with mistakes and errors. It has, in other words, been *real*. As Gilles Deleuze (2011) put it so well toward the end of his life, in an interview with his former student, Claire Parnet, "Who ever thought that a revolution would go well? Who? Who?" Or, as Mao Tse-Tung (1966) famously formulated it, "A revolution is not a dinner party" (p. 11). Rather than acknowledge and deal with this reality, rather than engage in careful, thoughtful, and partisan critiques of actually-existing post-capitalist formations, critical education—and most of the Western Left, too—has joined in the bourgeoisie's chorus of condemnation. The consensus, then, is: *there is no alternative!* When critical education does pose an alternative, it is democracy, which is paradoxically posed as an alternative to what we have now: democracy!

The Left needs to reclaim our history. We need to relocate ourselves within the history of the actually-existing struggle against capitalism and imperialism, a history that is first and foremost inspiring because it has demonstrated our success. We have moved beyond capitalism. We have shown that there is an alternative. We have expropriated the expropriators.

¹ Cole (2008, p. 131) even criticizes the Soviet Union for creating "socialism in one country," as if the Soviet Union is to be blamed for the absence of workers' revolutions in the West!

To back this up, I want to turn to an impressive study of the Soviet Union by the sociologist Albert Szymanski. Unlike so many of us who grow up indoctrinated into anticommunism, Szymanski (1979) set out to investigate his indoctrination. As he writes in the book's acknowledgements, "Accepting the anti-Soviet notions current amongst all those who grew up in the U.S. in the 1950s, it was natural for us to accept the analysis offered of the Soviet Union by the Chinese" (p. 1). Following the official Sino-Soviet split in 1960, the Chinese communists launched a series of escalating polemics against the Soviet Union. While these polemics had existed for some time, they had previously been aimed at specific policies of the Soviets. With the split, these polemics targeted the actual social system of the Soviet Union itself, describing it as "social-imperialist" and arguing that capitalism had been restored in the union. Szymanski set out to scrutinize this claim, analyzing the role of profit, commodity markets and prices, labor markets, the distribution of rewards, the political structure and composition of the Communist Party, as well as Soviet economic and military relationships with the Eastern Bloc, the non-socialist third world, and the socialist third world. Utilizing empirical data, Szymanski conclusively demonstrates that the Soviet Union was in fact a socialist society, that markets did not have their own logic, that labor-power was not a commodity, that a central plan guided the economy, and that there was no exploiting class.

While I can't perform a comprehensive and detailed summary of Szymanski's findings here, I would like to cover just a few points that prove Szymanski's conclusion, which I have grouped around labor markets and political rule.

Labor markets: Labor in the Soviet Union was not treated as a commodity. While it was distributed through markets, these markets were not autonomous but were guided by the central plan. Stated differently, wages served the functions of allocating workers to particular tasks, motivating performance, and distributing consumption goods. Workers could be fired from their jobs, but for limited reasons and with many avenues for recourse, and they could only be fired directly by a manager if the factory and local trade union committees agreed upon the termination. Further, for all workers who were dismissed, "only about 40 percent... took more than 10 days to find a comparable job" (p. 50). Moreover, while wage disparities existed, they were relatively minor. To take the most extreme example, "the top Soviet managers (the leading officials of the economic ministries) average only three to four times as much as skilled workers" (p. 52). Additionally, wages were equalizing in the Soviet Union in the 1970s: "The spread between the highest and lowest paid groups was 2.12 times [in 1973], while in 1965 it had been 3.20 times" (p. 63). Anti-parasite laws meant that collecting rents and purchasing labor-power were crimes.

Political rule: Labor in the Soviet Union was the ruling class. There are numerous ways by which the ruling class asserts power: through the initial revolution, elections, decision making bodies, membership in the ruling party, and so on. The bourgeoisie in imperialist countries point to the astronomically high approval ratings for successful candidates in socialist or independent countries as evidence of electoral fraud. Yet the final vote in the Soviet Union was actually the last step in a long process with widespread input and debate. Candidates are vetted at the grassroots level, being first "nominated at meetings of workers and members of mass organizations after sounding out their opinions and evaluations of the candidates by local election committees and Communist Party members. Anyone at a meeting has the right to propose or oppose a candidate" (p. 81). Moreover, during the final election, if a majority voted no for a candidate, then another candidate must be nominated. This was, thus, not a rubber-

10 *Critical Education*

stamping process. For example, “In 1965, 208 candidates for local Soviets were rejected by the voters at the final stage of the election process” (p. 81).

Beyond the electoral process, governmental agencies were always held accountable to workers. The media played an important role in this, as each mass media outlet had letter departments that filed and forwarded letters to government agencies: “By law any agency against whom a complain or suggestion is directed must respond within 15 days and the sender must be notified of the results” (p. 85). These complaints resulted in a range of actions, including criminal prosecutions. Within the workplace, workers also had many mechanisms to voice their demands and to hold authorities to account through general meetings in which managers “submit themselves to questioning from the floor... according to one pro-U.S. business observer ‘everyone and everything’ is fair game for the workers” (p. 55).

The Soviet Union was a socialist social formation. This does not mean that it was a paradise (although, when compared to our situation in the U.S., one couldn’t be faulted for thinking it was!). The working-class held state power and they produced according to a plan. Not only that, but they continually defended their social system from imperialist aggression, and provided considerable and indispensable aid to other revolutionary and progressive-nationalist revolutions and states across the global south. It is remarkable, then, that the Soviets continue to bear the brunt of so much “critique” from the Western Left.

The Magic of Communist Pedagogy

Remarkable, too, is how this history is distorted or disavowed. The tremendous accomplishments of our class should be points of pride. Our resistances should stand as testaments to our will. *They should be the raw materials of our magical acts and our magical thinking.* All socialist societies have to engage in the precarious and contingent act of constructing a new set of social relations. The contradictory assemblage of freedom and repression, agency and determination, and autonomy and management can’t be determined in advance or from outside. Critical education hasn’t engaged these concrete contradictions. Not only does this distort our location within history, but by avoiding these contradictions we actually deprive the international proletarian struggle of our expertise: pedagogy. For these contradictions have been debated almost exclusively as technical, political, economic, and social questions. There is no doubt that they are of these natures. Yet they are also, and at their heart, pedagogical questions. They are questions of breaking points, of ruptures, of reproductions, and of reassemblings. This is exactly what the discipline of education is: the study of how we disorient and reorient ourselves, of *learning what is and imagining what can be, and experimenting with our history and our limits.*

By way of concluding, then, I want to turn our attention to the magical thinking of the Party for Socialism and Liberation. As a Marxist-Leninist Party in the United States, the PSL was founded in 2004. As hopeful revolutionaries, the small cadre of communist organizers who formed the Party recognized that it might appear to be an odd time to start a new communist organization, given that communism was at its lowest ebb perhaps ever. Yet as students of Marx, they knew that a new economic crisis was coming. They knew that we have to organize before the revolutionary moment occurs. Yet they also knew, and continue to embody, that analysis and critique aren’t sufficient, that they alone can’t give life to the revolutionary struggle. They recognize that we need to dream up alternatives. As such, when they had grown, solidified, and

established themselves as the leading, most active, and most diverse communist formation within the U.S., they wrote and published a book, *Socialism and Liberation in the United States: What We Are Fighting For*. The first part of this short, accessible book is the *program* of the PSL, a program that is always under revision, but that represents an outline of what a socialist government in the U.S. would look like. It provides an example of and material for magical marxist education:

The primary function of the new government shall be planning and administering the economy in the interests of working and poor people... Participation and representation in the new government shall be guaranteed through democratically organized workplace, neighborhood and social committees... There shall be no distinction between the legislative and executive functions of government... There shall be primary government institutions created guaranteeing representation of all nationalities inside the United States... The current legal and criminal justice system... shall be replaced by a new justice system based on the democratic organization of the working class and its right to defend its class interest on the basis of solidarity and unity. (pp. 13-14)

The defense of the revolutionary government shall be organized on the basis of the armed, organized working class. All foreign military bases shall be closed immediately... All occupations, military interventions and military proxy wars, agreements and alliances carried out by the previous imperialist government shall be ended immediately... The exploitation of labor for private profit shall be prohibited... Citizenship rights shall be granted to every person living in the United States... The new government shall provide decent housing for every person in the United States. No person shall pay more than 10 percent of their income on housing costs... The new government shall recognize that the well-being of the environment is essential for the future development of the economy and society, indeed for all workers and oppressed people... Penal institutions shall be organized on the principle of social education and rehabilitation. (pp. 15-19)

The new government shall recognize the inviolable right of all oppressed nations to self-determination with regard to their means of gaining and maintaining liberation. In the United States, this includes the right of self-determination for African American, Native, Puerto Rican and other Latino national minorities, the Hawai'ian nation, Asian, Pacific Islander, Arab and other oppressed peoples who have experienced oppression as a whole people under capitalism... The new government shall institute a program of reparations for the African American community... All U.S. colonies shall be granted independence, including Puerto Rico, Samoa, Guam, the Virgin Islands and the Mariana Islands. The new government shall honor all treaty obligations with Native nations, and shall provide restitution for land and resources stolen by the capitalist U.S. government. (p. 19)

All U.S. workers shall have the right to speak the language of their own choosing. All government services and education shall be provided with multilingual provisions. Sexism and other forms of male chauvinism and oppression of women shall be eliminated as an immediate task, recognizing that this goal will not be achieved automatically or by decree... There shall be a sustained public education

12 *Critical Education*

campaign promoting the goals of multinational working-class unity and international solidarity, the advancement of women's rights, the promotion of respect for sexual orientation and gender expression, as well as exposing the evils of racism, sexism, anti-LGBT bigotry, xenophobia and national chauvinism. Affirmative action measures shall be instituted wherever needed to eliminate the effects of historical discrimination in education, employment, promotion, housing and other areas. (p. 20)

While the PSL understands the logics of capital accumulation and the contradictions therein, they don't belabor to document every crime of capitalism because they know that revolution needs more than critique, much more. Through critique we can find like minds, but through imagination we find like spirits. We become comrades not by denouncing the present, but by collectively dreaming of the future. In so doing, we gain a critical distance from the present. Whereas critique makes the present *seem* detestable, imagination makes the present *feel* foreign, producing an affective dis-jointedness and sense of possibility that is key to any political struggle.

This affective dis-jointedness, however, has to be organized, and it is on this key point that Merrifield (2011) slips from magical to maniacal by his subscription to the "Imaginary Party." This Imaginary Party doesn't overthrow capitalism, but takes leave of it spontaneously. We don't have to assert our power, we have to vacate the places of power; "there's presumably no one left to assume dictatorship" (p. 61), as he says. Merrifield thus, in the end, refuses to deal with the tension of communism and the necessary question of struggle, contributing to the left's inability to adequately confront the problems (capital and its state) that we face. In conclusion, then, I want to suggest that the left has retreated from the question of power and politics precisely because it has not acknowledged the communist project as a pedagogical one: how to chart and navigate the heterotopic space of transition.

References

- Althusser, L. (1965/2005). *For Marx* (trans. by B. Brewster). London and New York: Verso.
- Althusser, L. (1971/2001). *Lenin and philosophy and other essays* (trans. by B. Brewster). New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Cole, M. (2008). *Marxism and educational theory: Origins and issues*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Dean, J. (2009). *Democracy and other neoliberal fantasies: Communicative capitalism and left politics*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Deleuze, G., & Parnet, C. (2011). *Gilles Deleuze from a-z* (trans. by C.J. Stivale) [film]. Cambridge and London: Semiotext(e).
- Giroux, H. (2009). The Iranian uprisings and the challenge of the new media: Rethinking the politics of representation. *Fast Capitalism*, 5(2). Retrieved on 22 May 2016 from: https://www.uta.edu/huma/agger/fastcapitalism/5_2/Giroux5_2.html.
- Lewis, T.E. (2011). The pedagogical unconscious: Rethinking marxist pedagogy through Louis Althusser and Fredric Jameson. In B. Frymer, M. Carlin, and J. Broughton (Eds.),

- Cultural studies, education, and youth: Beyond schools* (pp. 255-271). Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Malott, C.S. (2016). *History and education: Engaging the global class war*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Mao T.T. (1966). *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*. Peking: Foreign Language Press.
- Marx, K. (1867/1967). *Capital: A critique of political economy (vol. 1)* (trans. by S. Moore). New York: International Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1885/1992). *Capital: A critique of political economy (vol. 2)* (trans. by D. Fernbach). London and New York: Penguin Books.
- Marx, K. (1894/1981). *Capital: A critique of political economy (vol. 3)* (trans. by D. Fernbach). London and New York: Penguin Books.
- Merrifield, A. (2011). *Magical marxism: Subversive politics and the imagination*. London and New York: Pluto Press.
- Party for Socialism and Liberation. (2010). *Socialism and liberation in the United States: What we are fighting for*. San Francisco: Liberation Media. Also available online at: <http://liberationschool.org/program-of-the-party-for-socialism-and-liberation>.
- Szymanski, A. (1979). *Is the red flag flying? The political economy of the Soviet Union*. London: Zed Books.

Author

Derek R. Ford is assistant professor of education studies at DePauw University. His most recent books are *Communist Study: Education for the Commons* (Lexington, 2016) and *Education and the Production of Space: Political Pedagogy, Geography, and the Urban Revolution* (Routledge, 2017). He is chair of the education department at The Hampton Institute and is an organizer with the Answer Coalition. He can be reached at derekford@depauw.edu.

Critical Education

criticaleducation.org

ISSN 1920-4175

Editors

Stephen Petrina, *University of British Columbia*
Sandra Mathison, *University of British Columbia*
E. Wayne Ross, *University of British Columbia*

Associate Editors

Abraham P. DeLeon, *University of Texas at San Antonio*
Adam Renner, 1970-2010

Editorial Collective

Faith Ann Agostinone, *Aurora University*
Wayne Au, *University of Washington, Bothell*
Jeff Bale, *University of Toronto*
Theodorea Regina Berry, *U of Texas, San Antonio*
Amy Brown, *University of Pennsylvania*
Kristen Buras, *Georgia State University*
Paul R. Carr, *Université du Québec en Outaouais*
Lisa Cary, *Murdoch University*
Anthony J. Castro, *University of Missouri, Columbia*
Alexander Cuenca, *Saint Louis University*
Noah De Lissovoy, *The University of Texas, Austin*
Kent den Heyer, *University of Alberta*
Gustavo Fischman, *Arizona State University*
Stephen C. Fleury, *Le Moyne College*
Derek R. Ford, *Syracuse University*
Four Arrows, *Fielding Graduate University*
Melissa Freeman, *University of Georgia*
David Gabbard, *Boise State University*
Rich Gibson, *San Diego State University*
Rebecca Goldstein, *Montclair State University*
Julie Gorlewski, *SUNY at New Paltz*
Panayota Gounari, *UMass, Boston*
Sandy Grande, *Connecticut College*
Todd S. Hawley, *Kent State University*
Matt Hern, *Vancouver, Canada*
Dave Hill, *Anglia Ruskin University*
Nathalia E. Jaramillo, *University of Auckland*
Richard Kahn, *Antioch University Los Angeles*
Kathleen Kesson, *Long Island University*
Philip E. Kovacs, *University of Alabama, Huntsville*
Ravi Kumar, *South Asia University*
Saville Kushner, *University of Auckland*
Zeus Leonardo, *University of California, Berkeley*
John Lupinacci, *Washington State University*
Darren E. Lund, *University of Calgary*
Curry Stephenson Malott, *West Chester University*
Gregory Martin, *University of Technology, Sydney*
Rebecca Martusewicz, *Eastern Michigan University*
Cris Mayo, *University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign*
Peter Mayo, *University of Malta*
Peter McLaren, *University of California, Los Angeles*
João Paraskeva, *UMass, Dartmouth*
Jill A. Pinkney Pastrana, *U of Minnesota, Duluth*
Brad J. Porfilio, *California State University, East Bay*
Kenneth J. Saltman, *UMass, Dartmouth*
Doug Selwyn, *SUNY at Plattsburgh*
Özlem Sensoy, *Simon Fraser University*
Patrick Shannon, *Penn State University*
John Smyth, *University of Huddersfield*
Mark Stern, *Colgate University*
Beth Sondel, *North Carolina State University*
Hannah Spector, *Penn State University, Harrisburg*
Linda Ware, *SUNY at Geneseo*