

## **LEARNING EXODUS**

### **Education, Value, and Resistance**

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For more than twenty years, Ultra-red have identified as a sound art collective. Over this time we have observed the problem of participation assert itself across a range of institutional struggles in North America and Europe. Pursuing sound investigations in diverse contexts, most notably the long-term political organizing work of the collective's members, has shifted our artistic focus from organizing sound to the organization of listening. Thus sound becomes less of an artistic medium than the object that causes a desire to listen. The literacies of listening, inherently social, have only further accentuated for us the problem of participation under the conditions of worldwide value and the proletarianization of labor, particularly the labor of social reproduction. The following propositions seek to test these problems in the specific field of education. In light of the fact that "Against Participation" will take place in a university setting, it is important to engage the issues related to this context. Doing so will provide students a way to enter into the theory through experiences that resonate with them. And given the specific struggles in the University of California system related to tuition fees, budget cuts, and the degradation of academic labor, we can anticipate that the subjectivities of students and of instructors are organized around the structures in education.

#### **A. From Participating in Education . . .**

1. Since the global economic crisis of the 1970s, wages have flatlined or diminished over the subsequent decades. At the same time that global wages remain low, global productivity has soared. The difference between productivity and wages constitutes profits amassed by fewer and fewer transnational corporate monopolies. Historically, the capitalist centers have used a portion of the surplus between wages and productivity to provide public services. Those services include medical care, housing, infrastructure, transportation, police and military, and culture, including education. Public institutions like education represent only a small portion of the larger sector of surplus absorption. As the amount of surplus continues to grow, and overall wages continue to decline across the board, the economic system becomes steadily more unstable requiring greater speculation. The term privatization is generally understood as the sale of public institutions and services to private concerns. However, the really existing motivation of that privatization is to create new sectors for speculation alongside the processes of proletarianization of the workforce and monopolization of profit. Once thought of as firmly middle class professions, educators find themselves experiencing the same degradation of working conditions as previously seen among industrial and agricultural workers. Those conditions include the erosion of union representation, precarious employment, deskilling, bureaucratization, division of labor tasks, and mounting competition among workers and with the armies of the unemployed.

2. Today, as provincial and national governments seek to dismantle public education at all levels, it is important to hold in our hands a number of contradictory observations. First, there is the social use of education that demonstrates, even under its current highly fraught conditions, that education possesses a crucial social use. Progressives would rightly fight for even greater expenditure of capitalist surplus on institutions such as education. This latter point reminds us of those political strategies that have historically demanded full participation in public benefits thus forcing a crisis in the liberal claims of bourgeois democracy. Examples of the tactical demand for full participation include equal and free education opportunities for all, universal healthcare, universal housing, and full employment and/or the universal social wage. It is therefore no accident that education practice also produces spaces in which the very mechanisms of value can be challenged and diverted.

3. At the same time that social sector institutions have the potential for counter-hegemonic subjectivity, public education like all public institutions in capitalist states, have been paid for by the value stolen from the majority of people who depend upon wages for access to life's necessities. In the capitalist centers, that theft is not limited to the national working classes but extends around the globe wherever capital coerces workers into selling their labor power for poverty wages. The profits gleaned from global exploitation rarely stays in the countries of the underdeveloped world but returns to the home address of the global monopolies, residing in the centers of capital.

4. Participation in formal education, in tandem with the proletarianisation of education labor, produces what Ivan Illich and others have described as a "hidden curriculum." Public and private education under capitalism reproduces social divisions between people who are deemed educated and those deemed uneducated. These distinctions are naturalized according to class, racialization, gender, etc. Such naturalized social divisions assume differentiations between white and blue-collar work and between immaterial and material workers. All of these differentiations mask the coerciveness of wage dependency experienced across these divides and thus perpetuate the myth that unemployment produces dependency whereas waged labour produces freedom. Conveniently effaced is the fundamentally coercive nature of the wage, which could otherwise form the basis for solidarity between people with various forms of education, and between all who sell their labor power and therefore are all subject to the proletarianisation process regardless the hue of their collar. The former notion of freedom understands autonomy as an individualized negative (freedom from), while the framework of solidarity understands freedom as a collective potential (freedom to).

5. The valuing of education also proceeds along parallel trajectories of participation in debt and the entrepreneurialization of knowledge. The proletarianization of educators and the neoliberalization of education institutions compel all participants—educators and pupils—into greater debt. Given the nature of financialization to speculate on debt failure, the debting of education participation accelerates the proletarianisation process by producing greater wage dependency and the grounds for greater exploitation. It is no accident that this process runs parallel to engaging people in a subjectivation process that valorises individualized knowledge production over collectively produced knowledge. Wages and debt set up the conditions by

which student work and the research industrial complex produces an alienating entrepreneurialization of the “educated” from other social milieus and other knowledge production practices outside of formal education institutions. This subjectivation process is not only at play in disciplines tied to venture capital speculation. It can often be found within critical and even activist areas of study, as well as areas of study linked to emancipatory struggles against racial, gender, and sexual oppression. The latter often focus more on preserving the individual’s survival and research autonomy than aligning with adjacent struggles against proletarianisation. This can also be the case within campus and student movements who do not understand their struggles in this light. Spatially separating students and educators from the society that surrounds them and perpetuating social segregation;

### **B. . . . To Unlearning Participation**

6. Observing the consequences of the valuing of education within neoliberalism helps to clarify the social bonds and labor capacities subjected to the control systems of proletarianization of people and neoliberalization of practices. In other words, we can identify the points of resistance in the breaks. For example, the matriculation of a student into lifetime debt completes the function of education as commodity at the precise moment when the student terminates even the modest mentorship relationship he or she experienced with educators and peers. Mentorship as a basis for reflecting on experience, critically analyzing reflections, and then testing analysis in action, ends at the moment when a student enters into the labor force wherein critical skills could be actualised in action. Practice in the labor force proceeds without the mentorship of collective reflection and critical analysis that could produce knowledge in of the field of practice; dangerous knowledge. It was for this reason, against the pedagogical modes of professional development that militant inquiry amongst workers embedded in the labor force gathered in party cadres to orient critical thinking away from participation and towards transforming the capitalist mode of production.

7. Formal education is organized under conditions that also produce the specific affects. Those affects internalize the terms of neoliberal education such as individual autonomisation and social separation. Health research has shown that educators and pupils alike suffer real somatic and psychic trauma resulting from profound anxieties about failure. Such anxieties expose the cruel lie of postmodern valorization of failure as disconnected from material conditions and their social consequences. An image of the failure to survive, the failure to repay loans, and the failure to express oneself play in a closed loop. The stasis of the loop makes such images all the more difficult to surmount (though not impossible). The violence of value within the institutions of education reminds us that psycho-somatic illness that inflicts individuals and human relations cannot be reduced to professional rivalry or personality. We are talking about a war on workers, educators and pupils alike. It is a war whose deployment of value seeks the subjugation of the knowledge of the slave by the master. The experience of that subjugation begs the question; if proletarianization has the overall effect of eroding psycho-somatic well-being for individuals and for entire social classes, then what forms of knowledge autonomy is education so keen to suppress?

8. Informal educational practices within social movements can enable spaces where learning in response to life conditions is possible. Learning takes place immersively in the process of struggle. Education of this kind is often associated with long-term mentorship, between movement elders but also in collaborative peer-to-peer processes. By mentorship we mean a relationship whose foundation of trust make it possible to pose questions that catalyze reflection and critical analysis. Mentorship can also interface with the struggles of formal education. When they do, they often breath life into the otherwise hermetically articulated struggles within these milieus. At the same time, the informal nature of such education practices does not automatically negate the same forms of value found in formal education. Informal education within social movements can equally be involved in commodification of knowledge and a turn towards individual aggrandizement and entrepreneurialism. Through this process—one that has become common in the non-profit sector—political and cultural learning are monetized.

9. Value can also turn informal and alternative modes of education towards the wage model. Employing bureaucratic and state processes to accommodate alternative education to the demands of value has the effect of creating new hierarchies and distinctions between roles. Responding to the pressures of the wage system, social and community education assumes the task of training workers for the workforce. The proletarianization of education also leads to greater dependence of the system upon unwaged or underwaged support work often in the framework of community engagement, community oversight of curriculum development, and teacher assistance. Within the framework of the system itself, demands for wages and even for unionization has the appearance of a just fight when in fact the overall social investments in education does not increase. All the while the overall amount of surplus produced by the global system grows and becomes more and more consolidated in fewer hands.

10. The rear-guard maneuvering of value has also responded to the early challenges of popular and radical pedagogies that defined education within the cultivation of critical consciousness. Raul Zibechi has described how popular education has been used by community-based organizations in Latin American countries to attract community members looking for ways to leverage personality and leadership capacity to then move into the chain of dependency between local organizations and the global non-profit strata. Popular education becomes the means by which community members demonstrate their ability to succeed in that structure. Popular education does not reach, however, those who wish to retain their autonomy. Zibechi's critique of popular education practices found in the global periphery can also be directed to comparable programs in the communities peripheral to the cosmopolitan centers of capital. In both situations, activists practice popular education with a narrow focus on local issues and personal expression. Popular education is never used to call into question broader state policies or structural arrangements. Instead, neoliberal states, corporations, and other institutions use informal and popular education protocols to bring people into line with vertical policy frameworks that align with principles of "glocal" imperialism and the circulation of global capital.

### C. Learning the First Work Again

11. We are reminded of Grace Lee Boggs' essay, "Education: The Great Obsession." Writing in 1970, Boggs evinces a weariness around the terms of the debate. Understanding that we have been here before invites us to interrogate what is similar and what is different about this moment. In the early decade of neoliberalism, many education reformers organized around the call for community oversight of schools. An aim of oversight included the formation of culturally specific curricula as a way of fostering deep participation in education in historically excluded working class, racial, and ethnic minority communities. Conversely, radicals such as Boggs argued that communities should directly organize their own education programs, eschewing in part or in full the state-management of schooling. The latter not only was thought to make it possible to create more culturally relevant curricula but also to situate learning within mentorship ("each one teach one") and movements ("the community is the classroom"). A ferment of education experimentation catalyzed around these two poles.

12. Fifty years into the neoliberal project, we have at our disposal an analysis of the problem of participation that considers its value-form that drives proletarianization directed at all levels of education. The crisis of stagnation in capitalism and the degradation of labor, including traditionally "white collar" and professional labor sectors such as education, places greater pressure on states to adjust the institution of education. The range of actors executing those adjustments range from education policy-makers, for-profit and non-profit education think tanks, education service corporations, teacher-training programs, education administrators, educators, teachers unions, parent advocates, students, school district planners and developers, and the contradictory demands of communities. In the past education was a means of reproducing particular class subjectivities. Today education is reorganized at all levels to amplify its role within the absorption of surplus capital. In the past, functioning within what Baran and Sweezy termed Department III of capitalist economies (i.e. sectors of the economy that keep surplus in circulation), provided the economic basis for the expenditure on public institutions such as education. Today, however, expenditure is increasingly eclipsed by speculation. Hence we see an exponential growth in education corporations, integrated within the general monopolies. With their access to state policy, education corporations have advanced a radical transformation of education around testing, rubrics for monetized reward and punishment, for-profit education, franchise education, industrial control over curriculum, the service and consumer model of education, etc.

13. How does an analysis of the value of education and participation in education as educators and pupils transform the terms of our demands beyond the dichotomies of community oversight of schools versus community-controlled schools? In other words, are we trying to fix the education system for capitalism or to articulate the role of education for movement building (i.e. in Zibechi's terms, "the movement as education")? Another way to ask this question would be, what is the social function—*qua* the social use—of education? This line of inquiry has implications for the ways we define educational practice and therefore the politics we pursue in relation to education labor, both as educators and as pupils. The question of

whether our politics seek to improve education under capitalism or to situate education in relation to anti-capitalist movement building may seem merely rhetorical. However, there is the immediate problem of our current situation; all the while students and educators remain immersed in the existing educational system.

14. How then do we inhabit the contradictions of education ourselves now? We can describe a few basic stances. Many educators delineate the scope of their labor capacity within the classroom. This means that the administration of the expropriation of that labor power is always seen as a constantly encroaching external force. It is a force that clearly conditions the encounter between educator and pupil, between pupils, and between educators. But the intentionality of the classroom seeks to hold those conditions at bay. Preserving the intentionality of the classroom entails approaching the classroom as a laboratory for generating and cultivating literacies among students, introducing protocols of *conscientisation* for ourselves and for students. It may involve introducing “marginal” literatures from other struggles, other intellectual and revolutionary traditions, and developing tools for critically engaging bourgeois and petite bourgeois thought. The educator may take leadership from students in terms of their issues in an active and reflective way. Instead of attempting to use the classroom for ameliorating student concerns, the classroom becomes a space to anxieties as systems and then build a literacy that makes it possible to attend to subjective experience as deeply connected to larger struggles. All of these strategies involve maintaining the life of the classroom within social movements, talking from a place of accountability, and defining a different space of learning. In this sense, the classroom is not only a laboratory but a linking space between experiences the students bring with them and with the social movements organizing outside of the institution. The classroom is no longer conditioned by, “Will I succeed? But rather, “Why are we here? What are we doing? And how are we doing it?” In this way, educator and students collectively search for the terms of the demand that exceed the conditions of the classroom.

15. For the educator, it becomes crucial to resist the tendencies that see students in the terms provided by value. Many educators experience these terms at an affective level; “I would be a better teacher if I had better students.” Instead of subjecting themselves to all manner of moralistic correctives, the educator could listen to the complaint for the kernel of a critical analysis of education under capital. Rather than diffusing, resolving, or even policing the tension, the educator could further concentrate it, inviting students into the problem to collectively interrogate how the student throws educators into crisis. This would entail critically reflecting on our crisis as educators, listening to that crisis by slowing down and bringing teacher and students to a juncture of decision-making. How does the student challenge the way we teach? How do we move beyond the neuroses that underpin narratives about bad students, and begin to practice articulating when and how to ask questions like, What does this research allow you to do? What is its social use?

16. The pressures of value upon the institutions of education possess a degree of legibility unlike anything we have seen before. But as we bring the analysis of value to bear on pedagogical practice, the hard shell of education cracks. What is the difference between

education and mentoring? Is mentoring and its processes and problems the opposite of education; like the opposition of labor power to waged labor? Avoiding the question, educators make the mistake of claiming that the classroom in itself is the equivalent to a community. The refrain of the Black Panthers, “each one teach one,” is emptied of its radical intentionality and merely becomes a set of protocols for aiding pupils in their familiarity with participation in its value-form; social entrepreneurship, dependency, and performing the role of the middle management of the poor. The problem is not merely resolved in the development of radical skills. As crucial as it is that people learn how to organize, canvas door-to-door, compose an agenda, facilitate a meeting, critically speak through the media, and differentiate the subject of solidarity from tactical allies. All of these skills could just as easily serve participation in its value-form. Likewise, the importance of failure in learning can easily become a fetish. After all, at the heart of financialization is the speculation on failure. The point of mentorship is to nurture the continuation and refinement of anti-capitalist knowledge in practice.