

DePauw University

## Scholarly and Creative Work from DePauw University

---

Education Studies Faculty publications

Education Studies

---

4-18-2018

### Queer Communist Study: The Sinthomostudier Against The Capital-debt-learning Regime

Derek R. Ford

DePauw University, derekford@depauw.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarship.depauw.edu/educ\\_facpubs](https://scholarship.depauw.edu/educ_facpubs)



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

This is an accepted manuscript of an article published by the Taylor & Francis Group in *The Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* on April 18, 2018 and available online at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15505170.2018.1437575>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Education Studies at Scholarly and Creative Work from DePauw University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Education Studies Faculty publications by an authorized administrator of Scholarly and Creative Work from DePauw University.

It is not only “the tradition of all the dead generations” that “weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living,” but the traditions of the present and future generations, too (Marx, 1963, p. 15). In fact, to many of today’s indebted subjects it seems as though it is the nightmare of the future that weighs most heavily on us, that most constrains our subjectivity, defines our social relations, and guides our movements and decisions. Under such conditions, revolutionary movements require not only critique and inquiry, but also the generation and organization of possibility, imagination, and hope. We have to believe and feel the potentiality for ourselves and our world to be otherwise. Where is this potentiality, what is its relationship to our contemporary order, and how can it be harnessed pedagogically? This paper cultivates some resources and develops some concepts to offer political movements exploring these questions, and in doing so it locates possibility, imagination, and hope in an unlikely place: Lee Edelman’s polemic against the future.

Part of the “antisocial” turn in queer theory, Edelman’s polemic has triggered much debate within that field (e.g., Caserio, 2006; Dean, 2006; Halberstam, 2006; Muñoz, 2009; Stockton, 2009). And while his work has been considered in educational research (e.g., Gilbert, 2006; Greteman & Wojcikiewicz, 2015; Meiners, 2015), the *pedagogy* of his provocation has not yet been investigated. Rather than applying Edelman to education, in what follows I parse through Edelman’s polemic and his scattered remarks on education and pedagogy in order to develop the figure of the *sinthomostudier*. The point is not to “uncover” a hidden pedagogy in Edelman, but rather *to study his hopeless wager*, and, in order to push beyond it, to redeploy and direct it toward political ends—communist ends, to be precise. I propose the *sinthomostudier* as part of a concept and praxis of queer communist study, a mode of political and pedagogical engagement located in the growing constellation of communist theorizing and organizing. While

encompassing various valences, communism today flags collective movements embodying and enhancing one side of the antagonism that constitutes the political (Dean, 2012; Ford, 2016b, 2017a; Malott, 2017). In this way, communism stands opposed to democracy, which attempts to mediate, smooth over, and/or police antagonism through inclusion, dialogue, and deliberation (which, as I show below, binds it tightly to capitalism).

I begin this paper by characterizing the current structure of capitalism as a triumvirate of capital, learning, and debt. Specifically, I argue that the logic of learning and the rhythm of debt prop up and reinforce capitalist relations of exploitation and domination. To break out of the capital-debt-learning triumvirate, we need to imagine and enact different pedagogical forms that disrupt its rhythm and that actualize and organize a gap in the world as it is. This is the aspiration of queer communist study. To develop this study, I go first to Edelman's book, *No Future*, which figures the Child as the organizing principle of reproductive futurism and as that which commits us to the logic of identity, meaning, and repetition, and ensnares us in a future that can only be more of the same. Queerness here opposes the future, and to make this argument Edelman turns to the death drive, the subject of which he terms the *sinthomosexual*. Through mining and explicating Edelman's dispersed notes on education and pedagogy and reading them back through *No Future*, I formulate the practice of *sinthomostudying*, which paradoxically situates us within the gap of identity and the internal surplus of the Symbolic order. The *jouissance* of *sinthomostudying* opens up a world of potentialities, but these potentialities do not necessarily stand in antagonism to the capital-debt-learning regime, which brings us to Edelman's political limit. I demonstrate that this praxis of study is a necessary but insufficient educational axiom, as the configurations of communicative capitalism are sustained by the disruption and instability of the drive. Thus, I ultimately posit that for queer study to be properly communist it must be

organized into a force capable of sustaining, inhabiting, and expanding the gap, thereby redirecting the death drive toward a new way of being and relating.

### **The capital-debt-learning triumvirate**

The concept of study has emerged in recent years as a necessary and compelling site of pedagogical and political theorization. This emergence is a response to the domination of learning in education, politics, and society; the rise of what is variously called the “learning society” or the “learnification” of politics and society (Biesta, 2014; Ford, 2016b; Lewis, 2013; Masschelein, 2001). Although there are nuances and divergences within this literature, it in general points to the ways in which education is now comprehended and exercised as the inauguration of subjects into the existing social, economic, and political order (i.e., the capitalist mode of production). Education is hence reduced to the acquisition and actualization of skills, knowledges, habits, and beliefs that will help the student fulfill their future role in society. Significantly, these qualities are always predetermined, which is how they are able to be measured, quantified, comparatively ranked, and so on. In other words, it is only because we *know* what *x* subject, *y* citizen, or *z* worker looks like that we are able to teach students to *be* those kinds of subjects, citizens, and workers, and that we are able to judge their development and proclaim their competency or inadequacy. Again, this is not in any way specific to the realm of education proper. Learning as a process is now diffused throughout all of society. As one of the learning society’s main advocates said, the “defining quality” of a learning society is that it “has learning as its organising principle” (Ransom, 1992, p. 71).

Learning is the educational logic and demand of the capitalist mode of production. Ultimately, with an endlessly shifting economic landscape, we must all become learners who continually re-tool and re-skill ourselves to meet the human capital needs of the globalized and flexible economy. In higher education, for example, we don't necessarily learn *things*; rather, we learn *how to learn*. The assumption here—which I hear regularly from administrators and admissions officers—is that we are preparing our students for jobs that don't yet exist. As Tyson Lewis (2013) has formulated it, learning and capitalism are wedded through the “capitalization of potentiality,” which is “the *untapped reserve of creative energy* needed to expand the knowledge economy through the dual process of employability and enterprising skills” (p. 5). We are interpellated as lifelong learners through the capitalist regime of debt: “Graduates will live in the shadow of their debt, either through defaulting or living to service their debt” (Backer & Lewis, 2015, p. 334). Even prior to graduation, “students and their families sense the pressure of debt at every turn: which classes to take, books to buy, and food to eat” (p. 334). The logic of learning works hand-in-glove with capitalism to produce the perpetually-indebted-lifelong-learner. The subject in this triumvirate is pedagogically structured by the social, economic, and political dictates of the present order and its promissory future.

In this landscape, studying materializes as an alternative educational logic that has the ability to pedagogically disrupt the learning society and the capitalist order that it undergirds (Harney & Moten, 2013; Lewis, 2013; Ford, 2016a, 2017b). Whereas learning is about actualizing predetermined potentialities, studying is about forgetting ends and dwelling within a state of suspension, it is about appropriation and redeployment. Studying scorns attempts to quantify or measure it, as it is a *pedagogical style* that renders existing and foreordained norms, conditions, and standards inoperative. By rendering such conditions inoperative, studying

radically opens up the possibilities of what *can* be, as the dictates of what *is*, *must*, or even *ought* to be are held in abeyance. It is not, then, that these edicts or other objectives and standards of learning are abolished or negated, but rather that their smooth functioning is interrupted as they enter a state of latency. The ebbing of already-existing meanings and identities enables the learner to become a studier, wherein they open up to the world as otherwise than it is, and indeed even construct an otherwise, an outside that is really here. The logic of studying therefore unfolds within the capital-learning-debt triumvirate as the annexation of its internal surplus.

In his somewhat brief remarks on studying, Giorgio Agamben (1995) points to the relationship between studying and stupidity. He writes, “those who study are in the situation of people who have received a shock and are stupefied by what has struck them, unable to grasp it and at the same time powerless to leave hold” (p. 64). Those who are stupefied—the stupid—are neither ignorant nor naïve. Instead, they are in awe of an encounter, lost in a place of non-knowledge, overwhelmed by the other, the idea, the scene. Capitalism and the learning society look upon such a reaction as inadequate and inefficient, as failure, as a display of deficiency to be overcome as quickly as possible or to be disinvested from, cast out. The studier, on the other hand, makes the choice to take up residence in stupidity. To put it in a different context, I would propose that studying is the pedagogy of flirting. When flirting, I and the other sway between “we can, we cannot,” between potential and impotential. Each movement, touch, or sound makes a proposition that withdraws back into itself. We are neither committed nor uncommitted to each other, but rather not-not-committed. Like flirting, studying is a heterogeneous composition of pleasure and pain, joy and despair, anxiety and boredom.

Efforts to theorize study have focused on a range of pedagogical attributes, such as studying’s rhythm, architecture, eros, and affect. What has not been thought through thus far is

the relationship between studying and the future. This lacuna is surprising given the absolutely pivotal role of futurity in both the learning society and the capitalist economy. Regarding the learning society, Backer and Lewis (2015) note that “the learner is the result of a learning process whose only result is the process itself: hence the eternal return of labor built into the very structure of lifelong learning and lifelong indebtedness” (p. 338). Accordingly, to interrupt the functioning of the learning society we need to wrest ourselves away from this eternal future that must be actualized, even if the exact contours of that future are to be determined.

Regarding the capitalist economy, we can look to Marx’s analysis of capital, which he insists is not a thing but rather a social relation that is constantly in process. Marxist educational theory focuses on capital as a social relation but, interestingly enough, it has neglected to consider capital as a process without end. This, I suggest, has to do with a preoccupation with volume one of *Capital*, and a neglect of the second volume. For whereas the first volume focuses on an analysis of the *production* of capital—focusing on the scene and agents of production—the second volume focuses on the *realization* of capital, the fact that what is produced must be financed, transported, and sold. Marx (1892/1972) here breaks down the circulation of capital into the circulation of money capital (finance), productive capital (production), and commodity capital (merchant), locating the different breakages and disruptions inherent within and between each of these circuits. For example, if capital doesn’t flow into commodities then money forms a hoard; if capital doesn’t flow into production then labor-power is rendered inactive and no surplus-value is produced; if capital isn’t realized on the market (i.e., if goods aren’t sold), then backlogs of commodities prevent capital from being transformed back into money. As a whole, then, for capitalism to function properly it needs (among other things) the future as repetition. After all, no one is going to invest in production if they don’t have some confidence that the

circuit will be realized, that their capital will be returned in an augmented fashion. There is a drive to make sure that what is desirable today will be desirable tomorrow or, alternatively, that what is produced or invested in today will be desirable when it reaches the market. The shape and details of the future can be drawn and filled in later, but the future as a continuation of the present as such must come, must be inevitable. In other words, while the particular contours of the future are open and flexible, its structure will necessarily be that of today, which paradoxically traps the future in an eternal procession of the present.

The debt regime solidifies the learnification of capital and subjectivity through futurity. Here, the recent work of Wozniak (2015) is helpful. Wozniak establishes how debt institutes a distinct rhythm that depends on the futural fulfillment of the present by producing “a memory in a person of a future-to-come,” one that is “lodged in a subject’s memory” (p. 75). Wozniak spells out the subjective implications of this:

the memory of a future-to-come ends up shaping the way that one lives in the present.

The memory of debt haunts the subject; it is an ever-present specter in the present of a future already colonized and delimited. Thus, with a memory of debt ever hovering, one ends up shaping one’s self and daily activities so that one will be able to survive as an indebted subject... Stated in different terms, debt, as an obligation to repay one day, travels back from the future to occupy the present. (p. 75)

The best I can do is defer my student loans to a further point in the future or to default on them, and in either case the specter of my debt as only grown heavier on my being in the present. Every decision that I face—from where, what, or if to eat or drink, to where and how many hours I will



sleep at night—is governed by the future-to-come. This is a credit-debt rhythm, and the proposal, for Wozniak, is to construct schools as a kind of temporal hideout—an undercommons, perhaps—from this rhythm, spaces that “will not only offer a much needed respite from the pace and pressures of indebted life, but also... defamiliarize people from habituated indebted life and the routines it forces on us and, maybe, inspire us to imagine days and nights that are once again our own, rather than the userers” (pp. 78-79). Capital is a barrier to this defamiliarization, to our ability to suspend the given and open up to an otherwise, an otherwise that belongs to us and not to our lenders. Through the continual expropriation of our lands and labors, it binds our lives and relations to its needs. Faced with our debt and the daily struggle for survival, our stupidities are cut short and devalorized.

The argument that we live our lives according to an indebted rhythm is not only compelling but, more importantly, accurate. Debt deeply shapes our subjectivities and our social relations, the ways in which we encounter ourselves, others, and the world. Taken together, the logic of learning and the regime of debt prop up a system of oppression and exploitation, in which the suffering and injustices of today are undergone for a future that never quite seems to arrive. As recent social movements on campuses and in cities across the U.S. have unequivocally demonstrated, we the indebted are well aware of our status and its seemingly permanent nature. We don't need yet another analysis of the law of value, or another screed against neoliberal authoritarianism. The task, rather, is one of imagining and enacting. We need to imagine, feel, and inaugurate a different educational logic that is tethered to a different mode of production and, therefore, a different temporality. While Wozniak's proposal that we *hope for inspiration to imagine* is a fine and necessary one, it is politically and pedagogically wanting. To address this

lack, I propose a theory of queer communist study that rejects futurity, forces the inhabitation of a gap, and moves us to organize this gap and this rejection for something else.

### **The queer against the future**

Edelman (2004) contends that it is not the right-wingers, the bourgeoisie, the neoliberals, or the religious conservatives that we have to combat. Rather, we have to turn our attention and our polemics to that which we have in common with these forces: the Law of the Child. The Child holds our supposed enemies and us captive together. The Child totally dominates the horizon of possibility in our world, dictating the limits of what can be said, thought, proposed, learned, debated, studied; determining not only political possibilities but the political itself. The Child, he says, “terroristically holds us all in check and determines that political discourse conform to the logic of a narrative wherein history unfolds as the future envisioned for a Child who must never grow up” (p. 21). That is to say, political struggles are all framed entirely around and for the Child. We have to ban abortion for the Child! No, we have to allow abortions for the Child! We have to ban gay marriage for the Child! No, we have to legalize gay marriage for the Child! The logic of the Child even allows the religious right to maintain completely contradictory positions, such that those who will oppose abortion on the grounds that it takes the life of a child can wholesale argue against the humanness of the child-cum-queer-adult.

More than dictate the content of politics, the Child draws the entire grid of social intelligibility, framing everything around the logic of reproductive futurism: the idea that we must reproduce so that we can have a future. What are we to do to resist this? We have to break out of this opposition, oppose it in some way. We can't negotiate with this terrorist of a Child.

Rather than insisting that we are really the ones operating in the best interest of the Child, we have to embrace the radical negativity placed on the queer, our radical opposition to the Child, our opposition to the opposition that it frames so completely. The right, in other words, is right: queers *are* a threat to the social order; “*queerness* names the side of those not ‘fighting for the children,’ the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism” (Edelman, 2004, p. 3). Whereas the Child guarantees the endless drive for stability and equilibrium, fulfillment and resolution, the queer figures as the social order’s inevitable and constitutive failure, the endless yet suppressed disruption of identity and regulation. We routinely unsettle the social order and the very possibility of regulation: “queerness can never define an identity,” as Edelman puts it, “it can only ever disturb one” (p. 17).

There is no political program here, nor are there steps to be taken to break out of this paradigm. What Edelman latches onto is pure negativity. As he so eloquently and pointedly puts it, “Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capital ls and with small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relation and the future that serves as its prop” (p. 29). While Edelman’s conclusion may be—or may appear to be—simple, the way he reaches it isn’t quite so. For one, the Child to which Edelman refers is not actual, fleshy, or living. Rather, the Child is a figure of reproductive futurism. As he makes clear early on, “the image of the child” is “not to be confused with the lived experiences of any historical children” (p. 11). The Child, that is, represents a telos and a guarantee of and investment in the future. Some have argued that Edelman projects a privileged child to the status of Child (Meiners, 2015; Munoz, 2009), noting that not all children are imbued with the promise of the future. This is an

absolutely correct observation, one that is traumatically amplified every time police, security forces, or soldiers brutalize and murder young children of color, children from oppressed communities, nations, and states, poor children, queer children, disabled children, and working-class children. Yet instead of disproving Edelman's argument, this observation in fact confirms it: the innocent (U.S.-born, white, heterosexual, bourgeois, abled, English-speaking) Child is precisely that which makes some children not children: those who can never be disciplined into growing up into the social order.

For two, the Child is bound up in the Symbolic that is the social order, and Lacan therefore plays a primary role in his argument. Edelman's reading goes something like this: The Symbolic order is the arrangement we enter that allows us to participate in society, the order that establishes the rules concerning language and desire, epistemology and ontology. The Symbolic order stands opposed to—or, better, *beyond*—the Real, which is authentic reality, that which is prior to signification and symbolization. Because the Symbolic cannot capture all of the Real, there is a permanent remainder of the Real that is internal to the Symbolic. We are always in excess of who we are. The Symbolic order, consequently, “only bestows a sort of *promissory* identity, one with which we can never concede in fully coinciding because we, as subjects of the signifier, can only be signifiers ourselves, can only ever aspire to catch up to whatever it is we might signify by closing the gap that divides us and, paradoxically, makes us subjects *through that act of division alone*” (p. 8). Because all identity is promissory it rests on a continual deferment to the future, and so to be queer is to not require that future.

For three—and this is the focal hinge on which Edelman's polemic rests—there is a determining link between queerness and the death drive, wherein “the death drive names what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form

of social viability” (p. 9). The death drive is the excessive surplus endogenous to the Symbolic that threatens that order’s stability, working against the order to disrupt and unravel it. The Symbolic is, then, a non-identity of being and non-being, possibility and impossibility. This order is plagued by a remainder beyond meaning that Lacan names *jouissance*, which is something more than enjoyment, something in excess of the split between pleasure and pain. *Jouissance* can head in two directions. On the one hand, it can solidify around some “particular object or end... congealing identity around the fantasy of satisfaction or fulfillment by means of that object” (p. 25). On the other hand, *jouissance* can break these attachments, “undoing the consistency of a social reality that relies on Imaginary identifications” (p. 25). The first represents the future, and the second represents the queer. Queer *jouissance* thus “tears the fabric of Symbolic reality as we know it, unraveling the solidity of *every* object, including the object as which the subject necessarily takes itself” (p. 25). Queerness marks the spot of the gap in the Symbolic, the opaque place between discourse and its other, and Edelman is calling on the queer project to inhabit this gap, this negative non-place that the Law of the Child seeks to continually cover over.

### ***Sinthomostudying***

The *sinthomosexual* is the queer political subject without a future, against the future. The *sinthome* is a Lacanian concept that enunciates the radical singularity of the subject, or the singularity of the subject that cannot be articulated or expressed within the Symbolic. It is not, however, excluded from the Symbolic, and actually occupies a foundational place within that order. The Symbolic, to put it differently, depends on a gap between what is and what can be

signified, between the world and the word. Whereas the subject is driven by the belief that this radical singularity will one day be articulated, the *sinthomosexual* embodies the gap of the Symbolic order and the *jouissance* that this gap allows. The *sinthomosexual* “scorns such belief in a final signifier, reducing *every* signifier to the status of the letter and insisting on access to *jouissance* in place of access to sense, on identification with one’s *sinthome* instead of belief in its meaning” (p. 37). In the same moment as the future-looking subject faithfully awaits the closure of the gap, the *sinthomosexual* subjectivizes it. The gap between the world and the word becomes the position from which we act and experience.

Another way to understand the *sinthomosexual* is by way of the distinction between desire and drive. Edelman understands desire as requiring futurity. The *objet petit a*—a stand-in for the object of loss—is the cause of a desire that can never be fulfilled. Desire becomes an end in and for itself, we desire to desire; we desire now to desire in the future, because we want to attain *objet petit a* and, like the subject, must cling to some faith in our final attainment of it, lest desire collapse in on itself. Hence desire, on this reading, “does not partake of desire itself; instead it consists of the *jouissance* that desire must keep at a distance insofar as desire *relies* on that distance, on that lack, for its survival” (p. 86). Desire guards against *jouissance*, while the *sinthomosexual* accedes to it, dissolving the futurity of desire.

While Edelman’s polemic against the future is not entirely foreign to education (e.g., Greteman & Wojcikiewicz, 2014; Meiners, 2015), no one has yet inquired into the *pedagogy* at work in his project. True, Edelman doesn’t write about education or pedagogy in *No Future*, but we can feel a pedagogy within its pages, or perhaps, in excess of its pages. Further, in his dialogues with Lauren Berlant (2014) he makes a few explicit references to both pedagogy and education. These are never developed in any way, but remain rather potential sources for

excavation and study. We can study these references in relation to *No Future*, reading Edelman back on himself. In doing so, we can sense a kind of queer studying, or rather, we can advance the thesis that studying is necessarily a queer thing to do. Queer study is a method of educational engagement that wrests us from our endless learning and from the indebtedness that keeps us wedded to the present through the logic of the future. I call such a mode of engagement *sinthomostudying*.

In *Sex, or the Unbearable*, Berlant and Edelman (2014) engage in an exchange around the political and theoretical openings offered up by sex, which is figured as the site of an encounter with otherness that is as unbearable as it is necessary. Sex, for Edelman, is in some ways averse to education. Early on in the book, he offers what could be read as a hedge against his stronger claims against narrativity in *No Future*, that also introduce a concern with educational theory. He prefaces the story that he tells, “by starting with the problem of the story as such:”

However attenuated, qualified, ironized, interrupted, or deconstructed it may be, a story implies a direction; it signals, as story, a movement that leads toward some payoff or profit, some comprehension or closure, however open-ended. This leading *toward* necessarily entails a correlative “leading *from*,” the “leading from” or “out of” at the root of “education.” (p. 3)

The story occasions a linear progression that is nothing without a finale, a finale that sets the coordinates of what is possible in the meantime. Edelman, for his part, is quick to acknowledge that even the rejection of narrative calls for a narrative of rejection.

Here education as narrative emerges as something done in the name of the Child, the frame of the real that holds us hostage. What Edelman wants to do, then, is explore sex by “posing it over and against education as a ‘leading out’ of ignorance, inability, and bewilderment and into the condition of mastery, understanding, and realized sovereignty” (pp. 3-4). If education leads one from incompetency to mastery, then sex turns the subject around. Sex is “experiencing corporeally, and in the orbit of the libidinal, the shock of discontinuity and the encounter with nonknowledge” (p.4). Sex, that is, marks the duration of time and being when we enter into a radical relationality that disrupts our sense of self and sovereignty such that we become *incoherent to ourselves*. We transition from a sense of self to a nonsense of self. This is no steady course of action, but is rather a *shock*, something that disrupts any possibility of an intelligible transition that could, even in retrospect, be brought to signification. Such a shock “displaces what we thought we knew or could reliably predict and reveals the presence of something else at work in the decisions, desires, and acts we think of as our own” (p. 15). Subjective displacement bears a pedagogical force that signals beyond the Symbolic and toward the Real. It is a displacement that places us firmly in the gap that is both within and beyond the Symbolic.

This is, so I suggest, a displacement into the *gap that is proper to study*. With this in mind, Edelman is not writing about education but rather about learning. While Edelman is surely right that education is necessarily a process of leading out, the *nature, content, and direction* of that process are not definitional of education at all. Education, in other words, can be *both* a leading out of ignorance and into mastery *and* a leading out of mastery and into ignorance, *both* a construction *and* a deracination of sovereignty. In the first and last instances the difference will hinge on the *mode* of the educational encounter. This is not solely a matter of semantic



clarification. On the one hand, the latent yet prominent status of educational theoretical concepts in Edelman's remarks indicates that they are important to his project. More significantly, however, if there is indeed a relationship between education and reproductive futurism—and the permanently indebted lifelong learning upon which capitalism depends—then we must be precise about how we conceptualize education. Reading Edelman's remarks back into *No Future*, we can appreciate the queerness of study as a distinct form of pedagogical encounter of bewilderment, interruption, and presence.

*Sinthomostudying* directs us away from the false promissory note of the future—wherein the gap that founds identity is finally and fully filled in—as it exposes and rejects the possibility of fastening the gap. The pressing pedagogical question is how one is to enact this study, what such an act of study would look like. One answer can be found in Edelman's observations on irony and the queer, which will also allow us to continue to flesh out the political role of narrativity and futurity, the irony of which Edelman writes

should not be confused with some particular form of affect—with a hip sensibility, a casual indifference, a privileged aloofness, a hard-boiled attitude, or any other mode of self-presentation. Instead, such irony undermines every affirmative presentation of self and guarantees only the persistence, in its multitude of forms, of the negativity, the unresolved question, that drives us to pick at the scab of selfhood that aims to suture the wound of being. (pp. 108-109)

*Sinthomostudying* is to learning as irony is to narrative: irony dwells within narrative, thereby introducing a discontinuity into it, while *sinthomostudying* actualizes a state of suspension and

quiescence within the path to comprehensive surety; it is stupefaction in the face of incontrovertible facts. Irony derealizes the linear unfolding of the story and marks within it interruptions of opacity, which, in turn, decompiles the narrative. The temporality of irony is the architecture of the present and the instant, an intervention that abbreviates our gaze and leads us away from the moment of resolution.

Irony represents a paradigm for *sinthomostudying*, and not a tool or a tactic. The value of pedagogical philosophy is that it short-circuits the demand for “practical application,” a demand that prohibits thought from taking place. Nonetheless, before giving an example from Edelman of queer study, I want to sketch a bit more precisely what queer study as a mode of collision entails. When we engage an educational object—say, a text or a piece of artwork—as learners, we form an identification with it through rendering meaningful the symbols or lines on or in the object. Through processes like contextualization and historicization we make sense of the object. When engaging the object as *sinthomostudiers*, by contrast, we uproot the object and ourselves, engaging the lines not as *representations* but as *lines*, as libidinal charges that exist outside of graphic, textual space (see Ford, 2015). The assignment here is to obliterate the sense of the object, to forget its context and history, its placement within the narrative of its discipline. Through this engagement, we lose our own footing as learners and identities, undergoing a process of desubjectification.

The ultimate irony in Edelman’s schema (2004), which he introduces at the very end of *No Future*, is the *sinthomosexual* repeating of the U.S. (educational) mantra of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century: Leave No Child Behind. Through this queer repetition we “bring out what’s ‘impossible, inhuman’ within it: a haunting, destructive excess bound up with its pious sentimentality, an overdetermination that betrays the place of the kernel of irony that futurism

tries to allegorize as narrative, as history” (p. 153). This ironic scene makes more consistent the political slogan we noted earlier: “Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized” (p. 29). Whereas this slogan reproduces the structural logic of opposition that disavows negativity, the ironic scene Edelman ends with resists this reproduction the only way one can: by airing, drawing out, and ultimately *inhabiting* the gap always already within the logic, the narrative, the story. Stated otherwise, rather than learning a story, *sinthomostudying* effectuates the founding gap of the Symbolic, exerting a pedagogical force that harnesses the death drive, opening up the present beyond the possible.

### **Making queer study communist**

Edelman’s polemic against the fascism of reproductive futurism and the future to which it binds us is, to be sure, a political one. By identifying the Child as comprising the field of the politically possible, Edelman forces open that field. What was formerly the impossible of thought—the inhuman of the human—becomes possible. Queerness as pure negation is conceivable. The political disposition here is one of a fundamental division: “the division *within* community as well as the division *from* community; the division that leaves community, like the self, an always unresolved question” (Berlant & Edelman, 2014, p. 109). Edelman’s reliance on psychoanalysis indicates that he is interested not in historical phenomena but rather in what he understands as phenomena structural to the psyche, for the death drive is not the product of a particular mode of production, system of political representation, stage of linguistic development, etc. The death drive persists, is characteristic of human being in general. One question that arises is, if the death

drive is a general and persistent attribute of the psyche, and if politics is about division, then how precisely does the death drive motivate a politics of division and antagonism?

In raising this question, the point is not just to critique Edelman or point to an inconsistency in his theory, but rather to insist that, if we are to study Edelman's provocations and deploy them to construct a theory of study that is antagonistic to the learning society, perpetual indebtedness, and the capitalist order that they together sustain, then we have to insist on a division that is both uncommon and common. If we don't take this step then we risk writing a theory that remains a mere alternative—and not an opposition—to capital. For capital has an exceptional capacity to absorb all sorts of alternatives within it, alternatives that can work to increase the functioning and performativity of its system (Ford, 2016b). Take, for example, Strike Debt, a decentralized network that facilitates debt refusal. On the surface, this seems to threaten the future of capital, for it severs the circuit of capital and prevents its realization. And yet capital is able to accommodate this strategy through financial derivatives and securities that allow capitalists to bet on defaults and repayments, so our refusal to repay debt can end up fattening the coffers of savvy investors. Indeed, the social order depends on instability as much as it depends on stability, depends on order just as much as disorder.

Moreover, even though the death drive may be more structural to the psyche than to history, it undoubtedly bears a relation to history that we have to take into consideration. As such, I want to make one final formulation in this article: *for queer study to be communist, it has to be organized*. To justify this, I want to turn to Jodi Dean, who shows us how in the contemporary moment the death drive can be that which actually *nourishes* capitalism. This, in turn, provides a bridge of sorts between psychoanalysis and historical materialism, for it demonstrates how society's position relative to the drive is bound up with particular political

orders. In other words, although the death drive is a permanent feature of being in general, the relation of being (and the organization of beings we call society) to it will transform throughout history.

Dean (2009) names the present configuration of capitalism as communicative capitalism, which is the consolidation of capitalism and democracy by way of communicative networks. “Ideals of access, inclusion, discussion, and participation,” she writes, “come to be realized in and through expansions, intensifications, and interconnections of global telecommunications” (p. 23). Although the proliferation of communications technologies makes it so that increasing numbers of people can debate and weigh in on all sorts of disputes, the meaning and effect of this participation dims in the endless circulation of words. Moreover, rather than equalizing “distributions of wealth and influence, instead of enabling the emergence of a richer variety in modes of living and practices of freedom, the deluge of screens and spectacles coincides with extreme corporatization, financialization, and privatization across the globe” (p. 23). Our desires, beliefs, likes, and outrages are swept up in the valorization of capital, converted into raw materials for capitalist production and prediction. Production takes place across society and throughout the day. Even when we are on break from work (or study), checking our phones and social media accounts, we are producing for capital. Communicative capitalism can for this reason be distinguished from modern capitalism through a change in the mode of production’s relationship to the drive. Under modern capitalism the drive was held at bay through various kinds of symbolic authority (the nation, the state, the family, etc.), while communicative capitalism is marked by the absence of symbolic authority.

The death drive is the constituting instability of the subject, the social, the Symbolic. It is the enduring wrench in the world of meaning and sense. Its instability, however, also constitutes a primary motor of communicative capitalism, which

is a formation that relies on this imbalance, on the repeated suspension of narratives, patterns, identities, norms, etc. Under conditions of the decline of symbolic efficiency, drive is not an act. It does not break out of a set of given expectations because such sets no longer persist as coherent enchainments of meaning. On the contrary, the circulation of drive is functional for the prevention of such enchainments, enchainments that might well enable radical political opposition. (Dean, 2010, p. 31)

We are trapped in circuits that depend on the death drive's refusal to reach a goal or an end, in relations of production that succeed on the failure inherent in the drive. The lack of solidified meaning and closed identity doesn't actually disrupt capitalism. This absence *fuels* capitalism as it sends us googling, clicking, writing, and posting, generating raw materials and revenue for capital. The problem at hand is that of either escaping or redirecting the drive.

The drive's loop engenders *jouissance*, but communicative capitalism capitalizes on this *jouissance*. Crisis, after all, can be incredibly productive for capital. Crises discipline workers and students (by driving down wages and increasing insecurity) and lay the groundwork for new rounds of investment and accumulation. Instability and crisis only create the conditions for political action and open up the possibility of rupture. The same goes for studying. *Sinthomostudying* is, after all, a *mode* of educational engagement, and doesn't have an inherent political orientation. The gap instituted through the act of *sinthomostudying* needs not

necessarily a predetermined direction, but an organizational ethos and form capable of providing direction for the gap, organizing the remainder of the Real internal to the Symbolic and generating the force to redirect the death drive. Edelman (2004) comes close to recognizing this in his analysis of Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*. He offers us Leonard who, at the direction of his boss, ruthlessly plots the death of the film's protagonist Roger Thornhill, as a *sinthomosexual*. Leonard "materializes the force of negation, the derealizing insistence of jouissance, from which Scrooge and Silas Marner were led by the hand of a little child" (p. 70). Edelman notes in passing that Leonard is an "agent of America's cold war enemies," but he doesn't draw any implications from this. Fundamentally, *he misses the categorically crucial aspect of Leonard's drive: it was a drive organized under the banner of communism.*

Subjectifying the gap of the present isn't enough. Once inhabited, the gap must be organized and wielded. This is what Harney and Moten (2013) miss in their writings on study. They romanticize the indebted studier who dwells within the crevices of capitalism: "They study in the university and the university forces them under, relegates them to the state of those without interests, without credit, without debt that bears interest, that earns credits" (p. 67). The opposite is the case. The capital-learning-debt triumvirate compels the student to take up interests, to graduate, and to actualize their potential. The credit-debt rhythm disciplines our capacities and potentialities, and it is not enough to flee, to refuse to pay our debt. Rather, the construction of an entirely new social order is necessary.

If *sinthomostudying* is to be deployed as part of a strategy against the capital-debt-learning triumvirate, it must not play an ancillary role. The educational rhythm of this triumvirate structures our subjectivity and world so deeply, it so profoundly impacts our sense of self, other, and social. If we are to stand a chance, we need to theorize and practice alternative pedagogical

styles that seize on the gap in the order of things, on the jouissance that stands against the Law of Capital and the Law of the Child, which consign us to a life of indebted learning. The educational logic of queerness has to be mobilized not just as something that can effect a disturbance of identity, but as a way of being and relating that can effect an entirely new order. Queer communist study is a pedagogical formulation for generating such effects.

### **References:**

- Agamben, G. (1995). *The idea of prose*. New York: SUNY Albany.
- Backer, D.I., & Lewis, T.E. (2015). The studious university: A marxist-psychoanalytic groundwork. *Cultural Politics*, 11(3), 329-345).
- Berlant, L., & Edelman, E. (2014). *Sex, or the unbearable*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Biesta, G.J.J. (2014). *The beautiful risk of education*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.
- Caserio, R.L. (2006). The antisocial thesis in queer theory. *PMLA*, 121(3), 819-821.
- Dean, J. (2009). *Democracy and other neoliberal fantasies: Communicative capitalism and left politics*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Dean, J. (2010). *Blog theory: Feedback and capture in the circuits of drive*. Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press.
- Dean, J. (2012). *The communist horizon*. New York: Verso.
- Dean, T. (2006). The antisocial homosexual. *PMLA*, 121(3), 826-828.
- Edelman, L. (2004). *No future: Queer theory and the death drive*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Ford, D.R. (2015). A figural education with Lyotard. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 34(1), 89-100.



- Ford, D.R. (2016a). A pedagogy *for* space: Teaching, learning, and studying in the Baltimore Rebellion. *Policy Futures in Education*, 14(2), 176-193.
- Ford, D.R. (2016b). *Communist study: Education for the commons*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Ford, D.R. (2017a). Making marxist pedagogy magical: From critique to imagination, or, how bookkeepers set us free. *Critical Education* 8(9), 1-13.
- Ford, D.R. (2017b). Studying like a communist: Affect, the party, and the educational limits to capitalism. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 49(5), 452-461.
- Gilbert, J. (2006). Imagining sex. *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, 3(2), 38-42.
- Greteman, A. J., & Wojcikiewicz, S. K. (2014). The problems with the future: Educational futurism and the figural child. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 48(4), 559-573.
- Halberstam, J. (2006). The politics of negativity in recent queer theory. *PMLA*, 121(3), 823-825.
- Halberstam, J. (2011). *The queer art of failure*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Harney, S., & Moten, F. (2013). *The undercommons: Black planning and fugitive study*. New York: Autonomedia.
- Lewis, T. E. (2013). *On study: Giorgio Agamben and educational potentiality*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Malott, C. S. (2017). In defense of communism against critical pedagogy, capitalism, and Trump. *Critical Education*, 8(1), 1-24.
- Marx, K. (1892/1972). *Capital: A critique of political economy (vol. 2)* (trans. D. Fernbach). New York: Penguin Books and New Left Review.
- Marx, K. (1963). *The eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. International Publishers: New York.

- Masschelein, J. (2001). The discourse of the learning society and the loss of childhood. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 35(1), 1-19.
- Meiners, E. R. (2015). Trouble with the *Child* in the carceral state. *Social Justice*, 41(3), 120-144.
- Muñoz, J. E. (2009). *Cruising utopia: The then and there of queer futurity*. New York: New York University Press.
- Ransom, S. (1992). Towards the learning society. *Educational Management and Administration*, 20(2), 68-79.
- Stockton, K.B. (2009). *The queer child, or growing sideways in the twentieth century*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Wozniak, J. (2015). The rhythm and blues of indebted life: Notes on schools and the formation of the indebted man. In E. Duarte (Ed.), *Philosophy of Education 2015* (pp. 71-80). Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society.