

## **SHAKING THE FOUNDATIONS: THE CRITICAL TURN IN ADULT EDUCATION THEORY**

**Michael Welton**

University of Dalhousie

### **Abstract**

With the collapse of the dominant paradigm, the "andragogical consensus", the field of adult education is presently occupied by an array of competing discourses. In recent years adult education theorists have turned to Habermasian critical theory to reconstruct the discipline and provide direction for emancipatory practice. Building on the assumption that we are in the beginning stages of this reconstructive project, this article provides a brief history of the keyword, "critical", and demonstrates how the critical theoretical tradition from Marx to Habermas can be interpreted as a socially and historically grounded theory of adult learning.

### **Résumé**

Avec l'effondrement du «consensus andragogique» comme paradigme dominant, le champ de l'éducation des adultes présente actuellement un ensemble de discours concurrents. Ces dernières années, les théoriciens de l'éducation des adultes se sont tournés vers la théorie critique de Habermas pour procéder à une reconstruction de la discipline et fournir une nouvelle orientation à une pratique émancipatoire. Tout en postulant que nous en sommes aux premiers stades de ce projet de reconstruction, cet article fournit un bref historique du mot-clé «critique» et démontre que la tradition de la théorie critique, de Marx à Habermas, peut être considérée comme une théorie de l'apprentissage adulte qui possède des assises tant sociales qu'historiques.

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For more than a decade now there have been rumblings in the margins of the field that the university-based study of adult education

has been professionally colonized, that the dominant paradigm, the "andragogical consensus", has crumbled. The field of adult education theory is presently occupied by an array of competing discourses. Two of the most engaging theoretical developments to appear in the last couple of years have been (1) an anti-foundational contextualism (Usher and Bryant, 1989), which takes its cues from phenomenology and hermeneutics, and (2) the critical theory associated with Mezirow (1981, 1985, 1990) and his critics and commentators (Collard and Law 1989; Hart 1990; Clark and Wilson 1991), which takes its direction from Habermas. Some of us have turned to the latter, Habermasian critical theory, to create a conceptual frame comprehensive enough to provide theoretical unification to the field and ethical guidance for all practitioners across multiple settings.

But we are just in the struggling stages of reconstructing the study of adult education from a critical theoretical perspective. Therefore, I think it is urgent that we understand the genealogy of the keyword "critical" (its meaning within the Marxian tradition), and how to think through and with Habermasian critical theory towards the systematic articulation of a theory of adult learning and emancipatory educational practice. One is actually surprised by joy when ranging over contemporary critical theory and the as-yet partial theoretical work in the discipline of adult education. One discovers that Habermas and his colleagues as well as many non-Habermasian critical theorists increasingly place individual and social learning processes and outcomes at the centre of their conceptual work. This fact, in my view, has neither been fully understood nor adequately recognized.

In this article I would like to argue that the critical theoretical tradition from Marx to Habermas has much to teach us about adult learning, and can provide a "foundation" for an emancipatory educational practice. A theory of emancipatory learning has always been *implicitly* present within the Marxian tradition; it is only with Habermas that we begin to see the "learning theory" become *explicit* and self-conscious. This article attempts to accomplish two interrelated conceptual tasks: to provide a brief history of critical social theory and to show how the critical theoretical tradition itself can be interpreted as a socially and historically grounded theory of adult learning (how adults unlearn their adherence to unfreedom and learn to be enlightened, empowered and transformative actors in particular times, places and spaces).

Critical theory holds out the promise of enabling us to specify concretely with practical intent *how* we can think of all of society as a vast school and begin to understand how a global society ruled by predatory corporations and dominated by a “technocratic” or “instrumental” rationality, is consciously structured to block, constrain and contain societal wide and historically deep collective enlightenment, empowerment and transformative action. Without a critical theory of society we will never know how even the individualist ideals we posit—the fulfillment of the individual, our commitment to “autonomous” self-directed learning—are *systemically* blocked and constrained: in our homes, workplaces, the public sphere, cultural and intellectual life, associational and movement spaces. Nor will we know how our late capitalist society, with its class, gender, ethnic and bureaucratic divisions, generates in its “normal” working, dissatisfactions (needs that cannot be met adequately within society’s frame), contradictions and, periodically, massive crises, which create the potentiality for emancipatory practice. Critical theory ought to help radical adult educators ground their “untheorized” praxis.

And critical adult educators and critical theorists converge in affirming that the system reproduces itself in the subjectivity of men and women. Simply focusing upon and celebrating the learning taking place everywhere (particularly outside bad formal educational institutions) will blind us to the fact that in an unjust and unfree society, men, women and children will be “socialized” across the life-span to systematically misunderstand their identity, needs, what constitutes happiness, what is good and of value, and how one should act in one’s relations with others to achieve these things. Even informal and non-formal learning are pressured to conform to what Michael Ryan has called “the principle of non-contradiction: if the system is to retain legitimacy and survive, the consciousness of social agents must not contradict the presuppositions of the economy, the social network, and the state” (Ryan 1982, 56). Despite this conforming pressure, critical educators and theorists argue that people are victims of causal processes that have power over them because they are *not aware* of the precise ways they have been implicated in the processes that oppress them. Here we have the necessary theoretical opening for understanding how an educative process might enable people to give up their illusions—“abandoning one’s self-conception and the social practices that they engender and support, things people cling to because they provide [false] direction and [false] meaning in their live” (Fay 1987, 214).

Today, there can be no doubt, critique is a word in vogue. Educators, social scientists, literary critics and philosophers all use the word “critical”, and it is by no means clear that we are talking the same language. The prevalent tendency in contemporary educational discourse is to restrict the meaning of critical to processes of validating arguments. This approach (often labelled “critical thinking”) cannot be identified with critical theory as understood in the western philosophical and Marxist tradition. Simply put, critical thinking does not understand its project as providing an analysis of the “complex of interrelations out of which capitalist crises arise in order to make it possible, through philosophical critique giving guidance to action, to eliminate politically the causes of those crises” (Honneth and Joas 1988, 152). It is imperative, then, in order to understand the meaning of the critical turn in adult education theory, that we risk oversimplification and sketch the meaning of critique from Antiquity to Habermas. We will discover that contemporary critical theory has emerged through a dialectical engagement with German intellectual thought (Kant, Hegel and Marx) interplaying with the evolution of capitalism and modernity. Critical theory is a theory of history and society driven by a passionate commitment to understand how societal structures hinder and impede the fullest development of humankind’s collective potential to be self-reflective and self-determining historical actors.

### **Critique from Antiquity to the Renaissance**

Critique, like crisis, is derived from Greek *krinein* (making distinctions: separating, judging, deciding). Between Antiquity and the Renaissance, “crisis” was used solely in a medical context (through into the 17th century). During the Renaissance the term “critic” was applied to the grammarian or the philologist. Critique became the philological criticism of literary texts. Here the task was to reconstruct the authenticity of a particular source—to rescue a text from history’s decay. Reformers used philological critique to describe the art of informed judgement. This was thought to be appropriate to the study of ancient texts, whether the classics or the Bible. But critique of texts was a “double-edged weapon”. As the world became increasingly disenchanting (the dissolution of all-embracing systems of world-interpretation ascribing a unique and integral meaning to human existence with reference to the transcendental being [Markus 1986, xii]), the art of critique itself achieved a status independent of Church

and State. The concept of critique shifted from defending revelation to driving a wedge between reason and revelation.

This was one of the cardinal unmaskings in western thought (Sloterdijk 1988, 23ff). Peter Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, written in the late 17th century, posited "reason" and "critique" as indivisible. What Bayle accomplished was to shift critique as method (philological work *on* texts) to critique as principle: critique extends beyond philological criticism and becomes the essential activity of reason while acquiring negative and destructive connotations. All claims to authority, whether religious or other, become fair game for reason's scalpel. "La raison humaine...est un principe de destruction, non pas d'edification" says Bayle. Paul Connerton astutely comments (1976, 19):

Critique is certainly committed to the task of seeking truth; but to a truth which has yet to be established. Whence it follows that critical activity does not yield truth directly, but indirectly. Truth is to be reached, in the first instance, through the destruction of appearances and illusions. This notion of a republic of letters presupposes the equality of all participants in the process of critical activity..... It is now assumed that truth flourishes, not through the illumination of human understanding by inherited traditions, but rather through the medium of communicative struggle.

By the mid-18th century critique was becoming gradually politicized. In clubs, lodges, coffee houses, a new moral authority, the public, found its earliest institutions (Habermas 1974; Gouldner 1976).

### **The "Age of Critique": from Kant to Hegel**

In 1781 in his preface to *Critique of Pure Reason* (Smith 1929), Kant declared his age the "age of critique" in which neither religion nor the legislature was exempt. With Kant, the model of critique characteristic of Enlightenment underwent a basic structural change. The *philosophes* had understood critical activity as an external discussion with a partner. Reason focused on a particular object of critique, seeking in the process to discover *via negativa* the truth or falsity of text or institution. Now, for Kant, reason becomes both subject and object. Reason, once turned against acceptable authorities, turns on

itself. His great critiques (of theoretical reason, practical-moral insight and aesthetic judgement) are reflections on the conditions of possible knowledge, on the potential capacities of human beings possessing the faculties of knowing, speaking and acting. Dare to know! What are the conditions of our knowledge through which modern natural science is possible and how far does this knowledge extend? Kant wants to focus on the "rational reconstruction of the conditions which make language, cognition and action possible" (Connerton 1976, 23). The Kantian "copernican turn" will influence one direction of Habermas's thought. But Habermas, unlike Kant, will attempt to understand the fundamental forms of knowledge in the light of the problems humankind encounters in its efforts to produce its existence and reproduce its species being (Held 1980, 254). Habermas will place reason inside the historical process.

Kant's solution was to posit certain *a priori* categories or forms, embedded in the human subject, which allow us to constitute "things" in the factual world, now severed from the constituting subject. This idea that a "transcendental ego" *both* constitutes the world *and* leaves "room" for the possibility of moral freedom would precipitate endless debates about the relationship between activity and passivity, *a priori* and sense data, philosophy and psychology. In *Theory and Practice* (1973), Habermas argues that the philological criticism of the humanist understood itself as theoretical and practical critique. With the ascendancy of German idealism, critique "no longer understands itself in its correspondence to crisis" (213). Critique and crisis become uncoupled in Kant. But, Habermas maintains, the Hegelian project of the early 19th century attempted to reconstruct "philosophy of the world as crisis", even though philosophy was not subject to the crisis itself.

Hegel attempts to escape the embarrassment of Kant's ineffable "universal subject" by postulating the "absolute spirit" as the most real thing of all. Reason need not stand over against itself in *purely* critical fashion. In his classic essay, "Traditional and Critical Theory" (1937), Max Horkheimer states that in Hegel reason has become affirmative, even before reality itself is affirmed as rational. But, confronted with the persisting contradictions in human existence and with the impotence of individuals in face of situations they themselves have brought about, the Hegelian solution seems a purely private assertion, a "personal peace treaty between the philosopher and an inhuman world" (1976 [1937], 217). Whereas Kant had cast the "ought" into the

realm of the practical, out of reach of reason's paws, Hegel believed that the "ought" and the "is" would coincide in history.

This Hegelian move seems, on the surface, to dissolve the critical function of reason. What Hegel had accomplished is to place the "ought" (or the universal) within history (the realm of the particular). In his loving reclamation of Hegel, *Reason and Revolution* (1941), Herbert Marcuse argues that Hegel's insistence that the universal is pre-eminent over the particular, signifies in the concrete that the potentialities of men and things are not exhausted in the given forms in which they actually appear (1960 [1941], 113-114). This notion of potentiality is fundamental to critical theory and emancipatory educational practice in the broadest possible sense. Reality points to, and strives towards, its own overcoming.

### **Marx's Critical Project: From Springtime to Maturity**

Unlike Hegel, Marx locates his principle of negation within the dynamic social order itself. Accusing his "Young Hegelian" comrades of being "mere critics" who stood outside reality and nagged it to change, Marx asserts that mere criticism is ineffectual, like a lone foghorn calling to a ship lost in a fierce storm. He certainly does not believe that the "weapon of criticism" alone will burst asunder the chains and free the immiserated! In what way can critique become truly efficacious? By answering that, theory will only become a "material force" when it has "gripped the masses" (MECW 3: 183). Marx has asked himself a historically decisive question. In fact, we might even say that modern critical theory was born at this moment. The role of theory, says Marx in the springtime of his thinking, is not to "face the world in a doctrinaire fashion with a new principle, declaring 'Here is truth, kneel here!'" (Easton and Guddat 1967, 211-215). Rather, the task is to facilitate the "collective subject" to reach its own self-consciousness—the consciousness of its latent radical needs, induced by but unsatisfiable under the existing social conditions. Revolutionary potentiality seethes within a specific complex of material conditions. Theory only awakens the emergent proletariat to its historical mission and springs it into the daylight of historical praxis.

Critique reveals itself in Marx (and later critical theorists) as being tied to the "myth of Enlightenment." In 1784 Kant had asked himself the famous question, "What is Enlightenment?" and answered that, to

the extent that reason shapes human life, human history is assured of progress, of departing from a condition of servitude. Kant had declared his age the "Age of Enlightenment." If it were to be achieved, it would be in all spheres of life (religion, politics, science, philosophy). To be enlightened was to be autonomous, to question dogma and to take responsibility for historical unfolding. Kant's ideal was the critically reflective *individual*. Nonetheless, the way was now clear for the "philosophy of history" to identify a new subject, God having been relieved of responsibility for the world. Hegel thought that the world-spirit governed history and refused to identify a historical subject. Marx replaced the world-spirit with the proletariat—the embodiment of enlightened reason (Connerton 1980, 116-118).

In his third "Thesis on Feuerbach," Marx contrasted his revolutionary theory with that of his Enlightenment and utopian socialist predecessors.

The materialist doctrine of the modifying influence of the change in conditions and education forgets that the conditions are changed by men, and that the educator himself must be educated. It is thus forced to divide society into two parts, one of which rises above the society. The coincidence of the changing of conditions and of human activity or self-transformation can only be conceived and understood rationally as *revolutionary practice*.

The educator cannot stand outside of people's life-situation and proclaim the truth. Either his/her ideas will be so removed from reality as to be false, or, if derived from reality, would merely mirror it. What accounts for valid knowledge of the world? Revolutionary practice—"learning that arises from an activity which both changes the world and the person acting on the world" (Howard 1988, 32-33).

In *The German Ideology* (1845), Marx and Engels argue that the revolution is necessary "because the class *overthrowing* it [the dominating class] can only succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of the ages and become fitted to found society anew in revolution" (cited, Howard 1988, 33). Marx and Engels recognize that the oppressive society recreates itself (or, as Freire would say, houses itself) in its victims' hearts and minds in the form of behaviour patterns and attitudinal beliefs which are sustained by the normal functioning of

social intercourse itself. How men and women unlearn their adherence to unfreedom and learn emancipatory subjectivity is one of the central educational questions confronting critical theoretical work, past and present (Sherover-Marcuse 1986). There can be no "critique" without "politics", without understanding that "revolutionary praxis" is *educatively constituted* (cf. Allman and Wallis 1990).

Karl Korsch, who is responsible along with Georg Lukacs for the revitalization of Marxian humanism in the 1920s and 1930s (Vajda 1972; Arato 1972), argued that

Marx's book on capital, like Plato's book on the state, like Machiavelli's *Prince* and Rousseau's *Social Contract*, owes its tremendous and enduring impact to the fact that it grasps and articulates, at a turning point in history, the full implications of the new force breaking in upon the old form of life.... Karl Marx proved himself to posterity to be the great forward-looking thinker of his age, in as much as he comprehended early on how decisive these questions would be for the approaching world-historical crisis (Korsch 1972, 39).

In his *magnum opus*, *Das Kapital* (1867), subtitled "A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production," we see Marx's critical methodology playing itself out in his masterful analysis of the dynamics of industrial capitalism. It is important to grasp the *levels* and *complexity* of this method of critique because in contemporary discussions of critical thinking or critical educational practice the prevalent tendency has been to identify critique with a cognitive process of reflection upon an individual's taken-for-granted assumptions, values or roles and then to propose techniques for fostering individual reflectivity (Mezirow 1990). The consequences of forgetting Marx for the construction of a critical theory of adult learning and transformative education are enormous, inevitably binding us to an individualistic model of learning—even if we label it "transformative" and add "action" as outcome.

Marx's critical methodology works on three levels. On the first level, *categorical critique*, Marx does not counterpoise his conceptual structure to that of classical political economy. What he does is to show that the concepts of classical political economy are logically

inconsistent and self-contradictory. Marx demonstrates that acceptance of the classical definition of exchange value does not allow us to explain the actual increase in the value of capital. Rather, he argues, one must consider not the exchange process alone, but the process of the production of commodities (profits result from the exploitation of worker surplus labour power). This procedure, Benhabib observes, presents an *immanent* critique of political economy's scientific categories. "It is this discrepancy and inconsistency between categories and their objects, or concepts and their actual content, which reveals how these categories turn into their opposite" (1984, 287).

On a second level, Marx uses *normative critique*. Here we are on slightly more familiar ground. Marx will demonstrate that the posited norm of bourgeois society—the right of *all* to freedom, equality and property—is expressed in actual social relations of "exchange between individual property owners, who are equal in their abstract right to voluntarily dispose of what belongs to each" (*ibid.*, 287). Marx argues that "freedom" actually means that the worker is free to sell his or her labour-power in a relationship of unequal exchange. Thus, Marx juxtaposes the "*normative* self-understanding" of society to the "*actual* social relations prevailing in it" (*ibid.*) To be sure, in *Capital* Marx does not abandon his youthful philosophical critique of alienation; now, he provides a more precise account of the nature of human alienation in terms of how the exploitation process actually works under the conditions of capitalist production.

On the third level, Marx uses the method of *defetishizing critique*. Marx's concern is two-fold: to critique political economy as a specific mode of theoretical and social consciousness and as a specific mode of social production (*ibid.*, 288). Marx wants to reveal the fetishistic character of everyday life (social relations between humans appears as a relation between things). He believes that the categories of political economy conceal the actual "social process of production" (*ibid.*) which operate behind our backs and mystify our consciousness. Next Marx moves on to historical territory to open out future emancipatory possibilities. He argues, contrary to classical political economy, that the capitalist mode of production is not a natural, eternal system. It has both "*systemic* as well as *social* limits" (*ibid.*). The systemic limits of capital manifest themselves in economic crises (depressions, unemployment, bankruptcies) and the social limits of capital express themselves in antagonistic struggles of classes and

social groups against capitalist hegemony. It is in these "crisis moments" that exploited men and women are particularly open to unlearning their false self-understandings and acquiring an emancipatory consciousness about the system's transitoriness and irrationality. Marx thinks that these crises will catalyze deep insight into the gap between the potential wealth of society (including the possibilities of developing the many-sided individual) and the actual misery of individuals (in all spheres of human interaction).

In sum, Marx's critical method is rather complex. In *Capital* he tries to show that capitalist society "contains within itself an unrealized potential" (ibid., 290). In Benhabib's words:

Marx's normative vision is that of an active humanity, dynamic, enterprising, transforming nature and unfolding its potentialities in the process. The bourgeoisie, which can be named the first social class in history to derive its legitimation from an ideology of change and growth rather than one of order and stability, is, in Marx's view, not to be rejected but sublated (*aufgehoben*). For in bourgeois society the "true universality of individual needs, capacities and pleasures" is identified with a *limited* form, namely with wealth in the sense of the mere accumulation of material objects. What is required in the society of the future is to make this wealth not an end but rather a precondition for the development of *real human wealth*, i.e. true human universality and individuality (ibid., 291).

Nonetheless, there is an unresolved tension in Marx's critical methodology. Marx thought of class interests as objectively determined and targeted one collective actor, the proletariat, as revolutionary agent. But the determination of class interests requires a normative standpoint and there is always more than one potential collective subject.

As the 19th century played itself out into the terror and barbarism of the 20th, unresolved problems in the Marxian critical project would more fully reveal themselves. The facilitative, dialogic relationship between critical theorist and collective subject, so delicately balanced by the youthful Marx, dissolved as revolutionary theory became

increasingly the province of intellectuals. Critical theory, instrumentalized by communist and socialist parties, became, ironically, a standpoint outside the historical process. Moreover, Marx's "latent positivism" (Wellmer 1971, 67-119)—the egregious determinism—was turned into a mechanistic explanatory system by the Marxist theoreticians of the Second International (Kautsky and Bernstein) that spoke of capitalism's inevitable transformation into socialism and the necessity of reformist politics. By the second decade of the 20th century, Marxism was suffering from sclerosis of the will and fossilization of its theoretical categories.

### **Haunted House: The Frankfurt School of Critical Theory**

The "Frankfurt School" of Critical Theory (Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse are its main founding figures) emerged in the 1920s to conduct, for its time, a "searching reexamination of the very foundations of Marxist theory with the dual hope of explaining past errors and preparing for future action" (Jay 1972, 226). The searching reexamination occurred in an historical period that had seen the socialist centre of gravity shift eastward and the collapse of the European socialist movement. Although initially enthusiastic for the Russian Revolution, the Frankfurt School theorists were soon disenchanted with the Leninist derailment of socialism. Nor were they particularly enamoured with the remnants of moderate European socialism. Removing themselves from active political praxis, critical theory's "beautiful souls" (Hegel) set out to spotlight the emancipatory potential of a new and darker time. This would turn out to be a formidable task in a "century when every revolution has in some sense been betrayed, when virtually all attempts at cultural subversion have been neutralized, and when the threat of a nuclear *Aufhebung* of the dialectic of enlightenment continues unchecked" (Jay 1984a, 162). Critical theory had moved into a haunted and deeply troubled phase.

The Frankfurt critical theorists were thinking in changed conditions. Capitalism had entered its monopolist phase, the government was increasing its intervention in the economy, science and technology were imbricated in the productive apparatus, and glimmerings of the "culture industry" were appearing. Most important for the inheritors of Marx's ambiguous legacy, no longer were there stirrings of a new "negative" force in society. In the 1840's an optimistic Marx had triumphantly declared that "Philosophy cannot be made a reality without the abolition of the proletariat, the proletariat cannot be

abolished without philosophy being made a reality" (MECW 3:187). The resurrection of the proletariat would fling philosophy to its tomb.

Over a hundred years later, a wiser and sadder Adorno opened *Negative Dialectics* (1973, 1) with this riposte:

Philosophy which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed. The summary judgment that it had merely interpreted the world, that resignation in the face of reality had crippled it in itself, becomes a defeatism of reason after the attempt to change the world miscarries.

None of the Frankfurt theorists doubted that critique should promote the development of the immiserated. But they had lost confidence in the "revolutionary potential of the proletariat", and were "forced into a position of 'transcendence' by the withering away of the revolutionary working class" (Jay 1972, 230). This placed them in an ambivalent position. Critical theory's intended audience was unspecified. In his bleakest moments, Adorno could defend the importance of critical thinking as "bottles thrown into the sea" for future addressees, identity unknown (Jay 1984a, 54). It was almost as if defending reason (preserving negativity and hope) had become a form of revolutionary praxis itself.

Yet it was precisely their "loss of confidence" in the historical mission of the revolutionary subject that forced them to grapple with the reasons why emancipatory learning was blocked and constrained in particular social formations. The Frankfurt theorists reflected on the distorting pressures to which individuals and collectivities succumbed in the process of self-formation and collective identity construction. And they did so driven by a revulsion towards closed philosophical systems. All of their work (until Habermas) had an open-ended and provisional quality—most often expressed through dialogical critique of other thinkers (one thinks of Adorno's studies on Husserl and Kierkegaard, Marcuse on Heidegger, Fromm's engagement with Freud, Horkheimer with Schopenhauer and Habermas's mammoth dialogue with contemporary philosophy and social science). Horkheimer and Adorno were also wary of specifying the "concrete utopia", reflecting, perhaps, their Jewish fear of naming the absolute (Held 1980; Connerton 1980).

Max Horkheimer is widely recognized by historians of Frankfurt Critical Theory to be the dominant figure in the development of the Institute for Social Research. He became the institute's director in 1931 and developed a program of studies to demonstrate critical theory's potential for the reconstruction of philosophy, the social sciences and cultural studies. In his essays written in the 1930s, one can capture the contours of his thought. There are many important themes in this thought (his hostility to metaphysics and identity theory; his attempt to retrieve a liberatory movement from bourgeois individualism; his critique of vulgar materialism; his interest in Freud and recognition that critique has a fundamental practical interest). But the central theme that emerged was the increasing domination of science over men and women's lives—one of the fundamental "distorting pressures" that undermine the achievement of a rational society.

Conducting a "spirited defense" of reason, Horkheimer argued that positivism (or scientism) denied the traditional idea of reason (*vernunft*, the going beyond mere appearances to a deeper truth in contrast to *verstand*, or analytical, formal logic) by reifying the social order. Formal logic was disengaged from any substantive alternative; all "true knowledge" now aspired to the condition of "scientific, mathematical conceptualization" (Jay 1972, 243; cf. Wellmer 1971, 9-65). Reason had been transformed into "instrumental rationality" obscuring the link between theory in the positive sciences and the class dynamics of the social order. Science itself has become ideological, and critical theory had to unmask its absolutist claims in order to reveal how domination was socially organized through the medium of intersubjective, albeit distorted, communication.

By the 1940s, however, critical theory twisted in a very gloomy direction. Thoroughly freaked out by the catastrophes of the 1930s and the 1940s (failure of the working class movement to resist fascism; the unspeakable horrors of concentration camps) Horkheimer and Adorno grappled in the sombre pages of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972) with the question of why humankind was not becoming emancipated but was lapsing into tyranny and barbarism. Domination was no longer seen as rising from any *specific* social formation but as inherent in the logic of the Enlightenment itself. This vision of technological hopelessness resonated with another theme—that capitalism was evolving into an "administered world" of one-dimensional homogeneity, rather than a true community of fulfilled subjects in a socialist society

(Jay 1984b, 216). Critical theory had skidded off course into the "Grand Hotel Abyss".

Nonetheless, this critique of science and technology—later constructively elaborated in Habermas's theory of "knowledge-constitutive interests" (*Knowledge and Human Interests* [1972])—was an important initiative towards the building of emancipatory learning theory: positivism rules out *a priori* the possibility of critique and rejects the Hegelian-Marxian notion of potentiality. If a critical learning theory is to specify not only the "conditions of possibility" but also the "conditions of necessity" of radical transformation, it must develop a foundational theory of knowledge-constitutive interests to ground its normative claims. Contemporary philosophy of education, it seems, has not taken up this task, and there are only faint beginnings in adult education theorizing.

It was not only science and technology that constrained emancipatory learning forms and processes. In his stiletto-like critique of major Frankfurt figures, Paul Connerton (1980) finds the basis of comparability amongst these diverse thinkers in the "methods by which systems of social constraints became internalized" (134). Their studies of the family revealed how the inability to resist authority became sedimented in the human personality. In their analysis of the "culture industry", political propaganda and marketing psychology, they demonstrated how messages reached down into areas of individual life to exploit personal conflicts or to awaken artificial needs in support of a particular social system. Horkheimer and Adorno tried to link the exploitation of external nature to the repression of man's instinctual nature. Marcuse probed, more than the others, the social constraints operative in affluent capitalism, where man and women were legally free but addicted to the commodity-form. And Habermas would analyze the internalized constraints at work in the form of a new, technocratic ideology which repressed the explicitly moral sphere.

Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse—all left a dazzling legacy of writings covering an extremely vast area of human experience. Yet none really attempted a systematic critical theory of society or resolved satisfactorily the relation of critique to history (how can critical theory be a part of a movement of history *and* a means of enlightenment?) or the relationship of theory to practice (they offered a theory of the importance of fundamental social transformation which appeared to

have no anchor in social struggle [Held 1980, 398-399]). It was to Jürgen Habermas, born in 1929, that the Frankfurt mantle would pass, and he would have the task of addressing himself not only to the inherited problems of the Marxian legacy but also to the blindspots of the Frankfurt School itself.

### **Learning as Central Concept: The Critical Project of Jürgen Habermas**

Habermas, like his predecessors, was thinking in changed circumstances. His attempts to interpret Marx's theory for a new time were informed by a politically motivated updating of Marxism in the 1950s. The intellectual world was rather pathetic: Soviet Stalinism had hardened into a "dialectical universal science" gutted of ethical heart, and the most creative radical currents had transformed Marxism into a philosophy of alienation without connection to a practically oriented critique of capitalism. Habermas also had to confront the changed reality of West German capitalism (a deeper intrusion of the state "steering apparatus" into the economy and life-world). As his critical project gathered momentum in the 1960s and 1970s, rolling like a juggernaut through the intellectual and political landscape, his work would be profoundly influenced by the political activity of the new social movements and the proliferation of oppositional thinking that erupted inside and outside of formal education complexes. Habermas was unwilling to embrace uncritically any of these movements (New Left communitarianism, feminist, peace, ecology), or to name the new revolutionary subject(s). But his massive theoretical undertaking cannot be understood apart from the presence of oppositional fragment-movements and other critical standpoints in late capitalist society. His project, despite its labyrinthine passage ways, was consciously constructed *with* Marx, in contest with his attempt to construct a "natural history of society", *against* the pessimism of Adorno and Horkheimer and *towards* the development of critical theory with emancipatory practical intent. Not satisfied to throw his theory to audiences unknown, and knowing all too well that one could no longer address the proletariat as singular transformative agent, Habermas addressed a *multiple audience* of potential transformative agents working within the social movements and without in various institutional sectors of society. The crisis tendencies within late capitalism were once again linked, albeit tenuously, to its emancipatory potential.

Habermas places learning processes at the centre of his critical project. This signifies a major shift within western critical theory—shall we call this the “learning turn” and think of this development as a revolution in social theory? Perhaps! But there can be no doubt that critical theory’s missing link until Habermas was its inability to link crisis and potential to a theory of how adult learning *releases* this potential in particular times and places, resulting in new institutionalized forms of freedom and enhanced individual and collective competence enabling persons to be self-determining historical actors. His much debated theory of knowledge-constitutive interests, his recasting of historical materialism and his recent work on the theory of communicative action—all interrelate and probe in a rich and deep philosophic manner the *cognitive determinants* of historical evolution and contemporary social organization. It cannot be argued that Habermas’s revision of critical theory as a learning theory is in all ways satisfactory; indeed, this is not the case (see Benhabib 1981; Cohen 1987, 203-211). He has, however, placed crucial and complex questions on the agenda for adult educators and theoreticians struggling towards a critical theory of adult learning.

Habermas executes his revision of historical materialism in dialogue with Marx. He organizes his discussion of historical materialism around two basic concepts—“social labour” and the “history of the species”, and around two basic assumptions—the “theory of base and superstructure” and the “dialectic of forces and relations of production” (McCarthy 1985, 237). These concepts and assumptions are familiar enough within Marxian scholarship. But, says Habermas,

(W)hereas Marx localized the learning processes important for evolution in the dimension of the productive forces—there are in the meantime good reasons for assuming that learning processes also take place in the dimension of moral insight, practical knowledge, communicative action, and the consensual regulation of action conflict—learning processes that are deposited in more mature forms of social integration, in new productive relations, and that in turn make possible the introduction of new productive forms (cited, Held 1980, 270).

This citation capsulizes key Habermasian notions. One can still recognize the Marxian concepts of “productive forces” (the sphere of

labour power, technical and organizational knowledge oriented to instrumental action on nature) and "relations of production" (institutions and social mechanisms which determine how labour power can be combined with available means of production at a given level of productive forces). But Habermas is clearly emphasizing previously neglected aspects of historical evolution. Behind the objectivity of the productive forces there are certain mechanisms of cognition that reflect the deep structure of the labour process understood as instrumental action. And a "logic of growing insight" operates within social interactions and regulates the development of the relations of production as a special, and crucial, case of the latter.

Human learning, in the deepest sense, proceeds along a double axis—one fundamental knowledge—constitutive interest, is guided by the interest in the instrumental disposition over nature; another by the interest in the preservation and expansion of intersubjective communication and agreement, an interest which became a necessity for the survival of the species with its dependence on language (Honneth and Joas 1988, 154). The third interest, Habermas will argue, is grounded in the human capacity to "reflectively appropriate human life." Historical materialism aims, by means of theoretically guided interpretation of the history of the species, at "collective emancipation from a history of domination that heretofore has come into being and proceeded spontaneously, that is, a history that hitherto resembled a natural process in that it has not been guided by human reflection" (Honneth and Joas 1988, 155).

Habermas believes that the learning process of the human species takes place through the accumulation of both technical and moral-practical knowledge. Both forms obey a "logic of growing insight" whose successive steps consist in rules of possible problem solutions. Habermas insists, however, that the "learning mechanism" within the sphere of work does not explain how these problems can be resolved. New forms of social production require knowledge of a moral-practical kind, not simply technically useful knowledge. And these two fundamental learning processes are both subsumed under a common denominator and combined in a synthetic structure, the "principle of organization" (market, global economy, administration). This principle determines the overall level of learning processes possible in a given social formation. Habermas also insists that this "principle of organization" must guarantee "social integration"—the "legitimizing normative structures and principles in terms of which needs are

interpreted and motivations generated within the symbolically structured life world" (Cohen 1987, 203). A crisis will exist, then, if a specific steering mechanism of a society threatens social integration, or damages the consensual foundations of normative structures.

Over and over again Habermas will return to this theme: the concern for "technical control" over nature has been transferred to "those areas of society that had become independent in the course of the industrialization of labour..." (1979, 56), viz. the family, the public sphere, community life and cultural expressions. The very foundation of democracy—"institutionally secured forms of general and public communication that deal with the practical question of how men [sic] can and want to live" (ibid., 57)—is eroding under constant battering from technical reason. How, he asks can the "force of technical control" be "made subject to the consensus of acting and transacting citizens?" (ibid., 60). Our hope for the "rationalization of the power structure", Habermas maintains, lies in creating "conditions that favor political power for thought developing through dialogue. The redeeming power of reflection cannot be supplanted by extension of technically exploitable knowledge" (ibid., 61). Habermas believes that the systemic crisis of late capitalist society results from the illegitimate intrusion of state and corporate steering mechanisms into the lifeworld; the social crisis manifests itself in a plethora of new social movement struggles to defend the threatened lifeworld and its ecological substructure.

Any adequate critical social theory of adult learning, Habermas teaches us, must be able to encompass processes of systemic learning (the organization of learning around the reproduction of the social order) and social revolutionary learning (the genesis and collective development of socially-critical, system-bursting orientations of action which are tied to everyday lived pain and crises). The blocked learning capacity of the system, directed by the state and corporate steering mechanisms, precipitates a multiplicity of oppositional forms of learning within civil society. Are the new social struggles (ecology, peace, women, local and personal autonomy movements) particularly privileged sites for the organization of enlightenment and emancipatory praxis? In our time, do they hold the potential for creating a freer and more just social order? Habermas and his associates encourage us to ask these questions. To what extent are the new social movements *defensive* responses to the colonization of the lifeworld, that is, do they "seek to stem or block the formal,

organized spheres of action in favour of communicative structures?" (Habermas 1981, 34). To what extent are they *offensive* global projects, impelled by commitment to universalist values towards the radical transformation of economy, state and civil society?

A critical social theory of adult learning would argue that collective protest is best understood as a collective learning process. What are the external and internal conditions that enable critically reflective learning to occur within the movement site? What role does formal adult education play in movement formation and development? This latter question is especially salient: the historical record of the University's role in supporting social movements is not very encouraging (Welton 1991). We conclude with this question: Are we witnessing in our deeply troubled times, not the "workers' movement at the high-point of his historical action," but the emergence of new conflicts, new actors, new stakes, new social struggles—the "spring beneath the cement"? (Touraine 1981, 55).

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