

Critical Theory

Critical theory has as its starting point the illumination and resolution of a difficult conundrum. How is it that the majority of people who are limited and constrained by a grossly iniquitous society come to accept this state of affairs as not only normal, but actually desirable? Its central hypothesis is that dominant ideology is organized to convince people this is an acceptable state of affairs and that people learn this ideology throughout their lives. As a body of work then, critical theory is grounded in three core assumptions regarding the way the world is organized; (1) that apparently open, western democracies are actually highly unequal societies in which economic inequity, racism and class discrimination are empirical realities, (2) that the way this state of affairs is reproduced as seeming to be normal, natural and inevitable (thereby heading off potential challenges to the system) is through the dissemination of dominant ideology, and (3) that critical theory attempts to understand this state of affairs as a prelude to changing it.

Dominant ideology comprises the set of broadly accepted beliefs and practices that frame how people make sense of their experiences and live their lives. When it works effectively it ensures that an unequal, racist and sexist society is able to reproduce itself with minimal opposition. Its chief function is to convince people that the world is organized the way it is for the best of all reasons and that society works in the best interests of all. Critical theory regards dominant ideology as inherently manipulative and duplicitous. From the perspective of critical theory, a critical adult is one who can discern how the ethic of capitalism, and the logic of bureaucratic rationality, push people into ways of living that perpetuate economic, racial and gender oppression. Additionally, and crucially, critical theory views a critical adult as one who takes action to create more democratic, collectivist, economic and social forms. Some in the tradition (for example, Cornel West) link social change to democratic socialism, others (for example, Erich Fromm) to socialist humanism.

Critical theory is usually not written in terms immediately recognizable to those of us primarily interested in adult learning. Yet, an analysis of adult learning is usually implicit in its propositions, particularly in that strand of theorizing (initiated by Mezirow, 1981) that draws its inspiration from Jurgen Habermas (Welton, 1991). Subsumed within the general desire of critical theory to understand and then challenge the continuous reproduction of social, political and economic domination are a number of related concerns. One of these is to investigate how dominant ideologies educate people to believe certain ways of organizing society are in their own best interests when the opposite is true. Another is to illuminate how the spirit of capitalism, and of technical and bureaucratic rationality, enters into and distorts everyday relationships; what Habermas calls the colonolization of the lifeworld by the system (Welton, 1995). A third (and this is particularly important to a theory of adult learning) is to understand how people learn to identify and then oppose the ideological forces and social processes that oppress them.

A theory of adult learning originating in these general concerns of critical theory would attempt to answer a series of more specific questions focused on the way people learn to awaken and then act on their human agency. These questions would ask how people

learn to challenge beliefs and structures that serve the interests of the few against the well being of the many, and how they then learn to build structures, systems and processes that are co-operative and collective, rather than individual and competitive; in other words, how they learn to build democratic socialism.

Understood this way a critical theory of adult learning is clearly a theory of social and political learning. It studies the systems and forces that shape adults' lives and oppose adults' attempts to challenge ideology, recognize hegemony, unmask power, defend the lifeworld, and develop agency. Such a theory must recognize its explicitly political character. It must focus consistently on political matters such as the way formal learning is structured and limited by the unequal exercise of power. It must not shy away from connecting adult learning efforts to the creation of political forms, particularly the extension of economic democracy across barriers of race, class and gender. It must understand adult education as a political process in which certain interests and agendas are always pursued at the expense of others, in which curriculum inevitably promotes some content as 'better' than some other, and in which evaluation is an exercise of the power by some to judge the efforts of others. Critical theory springs from the desire to extend democratic socialist values and processes, to create a world in which a commitment to the common good is the foundation of individual wellbeing and development. A critical theory of adult learning will always come back to the ways in which adults learn to do this.

What is Distinctive About Critical Theory?

How does a critical theory differ from other kinds of theories? This is the key question addressed by Max Horkheimer in his classic 1937 essay on "Traditional and Critical Theory" (1995) and his analysis remains pertinent today. Although Horkheimer acknowledges that critical theory contains elements of what he calls traditional (i.e. positivist) theory, there are important differences. The first of these is that critical theory is firmly grounded in a particular political analysis. Hence "critical theory does not have one doctrinal substance today, another tomorrow" (p. 234). This is because its primary unit of analysis – the conflicting relationship between social classes within an economy based on the exchange of commodities – remains stable, at least until society has been radically transformed. A "single existential judgment" (p. 227) is at the heart of critical theory. This is that the commodity exchange economy comprising capitalism will inevitably generate a series of tensions created by the desire of some of the people for emancipation and the wish of others to prevent this desire being realized.

A commodity exchange economy (an idea borrowed from Marx) marks a turning point in the history of humanity. Commodity production implies that we enter an era when we no longer produce for our own immediate needs but rather for exchange. Since most of us work for a living, this means we spend most of our time producing things for owners of companies with the expectation of a salary with which we can buy what we want or need. Gone are the days of more self-sufficient production when we worked mainly for ourselves and to meet our own needs or wants. In society as a whole, the dynamic of

exchange – I give you this, you give me that in return – begins to determine all human relationships.

Humans have always worked to produce things, but when we work in the employ of others to produce commodities for exchange our labor takes on an abstract character that provides the basis upon which different commodities can be exchanged. In broad terms, our labor is less and less like the complex and specific skill set of artisans, but more and more like the generic labor of increasingly deskilled, interchangeable, and replaceable workers; Marx referred to this differentiation as useful labor and abstract labor. When we worked to produce what was immediately useful for us, we engaged in useful labor. When we work for exchange, we create commodities that are bought and sold based on the amount of abstract labor that is expended in their production. Our wages or salaries are also based on the expenditure of abstract labor.

In our commodity exchange economy, the exchange value of a thing (based on abstract labor) overshadows its use value (how it helps satisfy a human need or desire). For example, the exchange value of gold (what people will pay to own a gold necklace) is a socially determined phenomenon that has little to do with its use value (which would be determined by the functions it could be used for, such as producing reliable teeth fillings). The exchange value of learning to read in adulthood (how such learning will help the adult become more successful in the job market) overshadows its use value (how it helps the adult develop self-confidence, draw new meanings from life, and be opened to new perspectives on the world). Although the use value of learning is important to adult learners and adult educators, it is primarily the exchange value that policy makers and purse holders consult when determining whether or not programs should be funded and how they should be evaluated.

In the exchange economy goods and products are primarily produced for the profit their exchange value will bring their manufacturers. One important dimension of the exchange economy is the way that inanimate objects and goods become ‘fetishized’, to use Marx’s term. With the growing complexity of production coupled with the fact that we produce not for ourselves but abstractly for others and for exchange, we lose track of the fact that exchange of commodities is actually a social relation mediated by things. In other words, when we take our hard earned dollars to the Walmart to buy clothes we focus on the fact that we are exchanging one thing (money) for another thing (clothes). At a more profound and human level, however, we are actually engaging in a social relation between ourselves and our labor which brought us money and the workers and their labor in say Bangladesh who made the clothes we are buying. We are all increasingly interconnected and interdependent on each other’s labor in a commodity exchange economy but this human interdependence and cooperation is distorted and obscured by the relations between the commodities we are all engaged in producing. All our relations become increasingly “thingified” or commodified. Rather than social relations mediated by things, we have relations between things in which we merely play a mediating role.

In the exchange economy we exchange labor for money and money for goods, and in the process our labor becomes a thing, a commodity just like the goods we exchange money

for. Hence we come to regard our labor power – our ability to work – as if it were a thing existing outside of us, no different in kind from other goods and products. When the objects or commodities we exchange become abstract entities or things to us, divorced from the labor we all put in to create them, this is called commodity fetishism. Because of commodity fetishism we sell our labor power – our learning - as if it were a commodity just like any other artifact. A transformative adult learning experience - such as going to college and finding one's worldview radically altered - becomes viewed as a qualification that can be exchanged for higher salary and status.

In this process a major source of our identity and sense of self-worth – our labor – is turned into an abstract object, commodified. Hence in adult education we talk of the teaching-learning relationship, and the development of adult educational procedures or curricula, as if these existed as objects in a world located outside our emotions or being. The role of the adult educator engaged in good practices becomes detached from who we are as people, our histories and experiences. The exchange dynamic of capitalism even invades our emotional lives. We talk of making emotional investments, as if emotions were things we could float on the stock market of significant personal relationships. Attention and tenderness are exchanged for sex, affection for support. Parental concern towards children is exchanged for the promise of being looked after in old age. Habermas describes this invasion of our personal lives by capitalist processes of exchange as the colonization of the lifeworld (Welton, 1995).

A second distinctive characteristic of critical theory is its concern to provide people with knowledge and understandings intended to free them from oppression. The point of theory is to generate knowledge that will change, not just interpret, the world. In this way, Horkheimer argues, critical theory truly qualifies for that most overused of adjectives, 'transformative'. There is no presupposition of theory being distanced from social intervention or political action. On the contrary, the converse is true. Critical theory requires such intervention. Its explicit intent is to galvanize people into replacing capitalism with truly democratic social arrangements. One important measure of the theory's validity, therefore, is its capacity to inspire action. The knowledge the theory produces can be considered useful to the extent that it helps change the behavior of its unit of analysis (people acting in society).

To Horkheimer (1995) critical theory's goal "is man's emancipation from slavery" (p. 246) though he warned against a simplistic translation of the theory's tenets into schemes for emancipatory action. In his view "philosophy must not be turned into propaganda, even for the best possible purposes philosophy is not interested in issuing commands" (1974, p. 184). In terms echoing Freire's later warnings regarding unreflective activism, Horkheimer declared "action for action's sake is in no way superior to thought for thought's sake, and is perhaps even inferior to it" (1974, p. vi). But the fact remains that critical theory is clearly transformative and exists to bring about social change. The research tradition most strongly identified with adult and community education – participatory research – is very much an exemplification of this idea. Participatory researchers make no pretense to detached observation. Their purpose is to help adults

research their communities with a view to changing them in directions they (the adult citizens concerned) determine.

Horkheimer goes on to argue that a third crucial difference of critical theory from other kinds is that it breaks down the separation of subject and object, of researcher and focus of research, found in traditional theories. The validity of critical theory derives partly from the fact that its subjects – human beings, specifically those diminished by the workings of capitalism – support the philosophical vision of society inherent within the theory. The theory's utility depends partly on people recognizing that it expresses accurately the yearnings they have for a better, more authentic way to live. As Guess (1981) observes, this is clearly not the case with positivist approaches to studying the physical, chemical and biological world. Traditional scientific theory has no requirement to secure the agreement of its objects of study. Asking atomic particles or types of flora whether or not they give free assent to the accuracy of the way they are described is nonsensical. An important indicator of the validity of a critical theory of adult learning, therefore, is the extent to which adults believe that the theory captures their hopes and dreams.

The fact that it is normatively grounded is critical theory's fourth defining feature. Not only does the theory criticize current society, it also envisages a fairer, less alienated, more democratic world. Empirical investigation and Utopian speculation are intimately connected. The critique undertaken of existing social, political and economic conditions springs from, and depends on, the form of the alternative society envisioned. Unlike traditional theories that are empirically grounded in an attempt to generate increasingly accurate descriptions of the world as it exists, critical theory tries to generate a specific vision of the world as it might be. It springs from a distinct philosophical vision of what it means to live as a developed person, as a mature adult struggling to realize one's humanity through the creation of a society that is just, fair and compassionate. This vision holds individual identity to be socially and culturally formed. Adult development is viewed as a collective process since one person's humanity cannot be realized at the expense of others' interests. Given critical theory's insistence that opportunities for development do not remain the preserve of the privileged few, the theory inevitably links adult development to the extension of economic democracy.

This grounding of critical theory in a preconfigured vision and set of values opens it to the criticism that it is not a genuine theory at all but a set of preferences, prescriptions and platitudes – 'Marxist flower power' as a one time colleague of mine once characterized it. Horkheimer (1995) himself acknowledges this criticism commenting that "although critical theory at no point proceeds arbitrarily and in chance fashion, it appears, to prevailing modes of thought, to be speculative, one-sided and useless ... biased and unjust"(p. 218). He notes that this leads critics of the theory to portray it as "an aimless intellectual game, half conceptual poetry, half impotent expression of states of mind" (p. 209). After all, basing a theory on the "single existential judgment" of critiquing and transforming the commodity exchange economy does predetermine the focus of study. Yet it is not that simple.

In fact, trying to realize the philosophical and social vision of critical theory is enormously complicated. The industrial proletariat that figures so centrally in Marx's analysis has undergone significant transformations since Horkheimer outlined critical theory in the 1930s. . The seductive promise of a life full of more and better consumer goods has managed to blunt revolutionary impulses among those working class adults who might be regarded as the engine of social change. Indeed, in western capitalist societies the twenty first century has seen a decline in nineteenth and twentieth century political institutions, such as trade and labor unions, organized to serve working class interests.

The analytical terrain on which critical theory is fought out has also grown more complicated. Race and gender have attained an equal prominence with social class as the units of analysis. Post-structuralism has challenged our simple understanding of the exercise of sovereign or state power so that we are more aware of how we exercise censorship, surveillance and discipline on ourselves. And postmodernism's emphasis on the idiosyncratic and uncontrollable nature of experience seems to undercut the possibility of critical awareness, freedom and emancipation so central to critical theory's project. As our understanding of of race, culture and gender expands, so too the possible configurations of what freedom looks like have expanded. In and out of cyber space the ways human agency and social preferences are exercised are, at least potentially, infinitely diverse. This contemporary emphasis on difference and diversity challenges critical theory to consider the different ways people think about realizing their humanity.

This brings us to the fifth and final intriguing and distinctive element of critical theory, the fact that verification of the theory is impossible until the social vision it inspires is realized. In other words, we won't know whether critical theory is true or false until the world it envisages is created and we can judge its relative humanity and compassion. Horkheimer (1995) puts it this way; "in regard to the essential kind of change at which the critical theory aims, there can be no corresponding concrete perception of it until it actually comes about. If the proof of the pudding is in the eating, the eating here is still in the future" (p. 220). Traditional theories can usually be assessed by reference to the world as it is now, or in the near future. Alternatively, the physical world can be manipulated where possible to create conditions under which the predictions of the theory can be tested for accuracy. By way of contrast, Horkheimer warns that the struggle to create the conditions under which the vision of critical theory can be tested is a long, sometimes violent, often revolutionary struggle.