Work and Emancipation in the Age of Precarious: Engaging Habermas and His Critics

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ABSTRACT

The domain and status of work or purposive-rational action in the writings of Jurgen Habermas is highly controversial. Some of his critics accuse him of abandoning the emancipatory potential of non-alienated labor, a central axiom of classic Marxism. This article analyzes his critics’ arguments before taking up the influential commentary of Axel Honneth. His arguments are of significance for adult educators: he reinstates, modestly, the emancipatory potential of the organization of production by discovering a philosophical and moral grounding of this provocative proposal.

Keywords: Axiom, Jurgen Habermas, Marxism, Philosophical, Purposive-Rational Action

THE PROBLEM ANNOUNCED

In one of his most influential early texts, “Technology and science as ‘ideology,’” Habermas (1970) sought to define deftly what he understood by “work.” “By ‘work’ or purposive-rational action I understand either instrumental action or rational choice or their conjunction. Instrumental action is governed by technical rules based on experimental knowledge. In every case they imply conditional predictions about observable events, physical or social: these predictions can prove correct or incorrect....
But while instrumental action organizes means that are appropriate or inappropriate according to criteria of an effective control of reality, strategic action depends only on the correct evaluation of possible alternative choices, which result from calculation supplemented by values and maxims” (pp. 91-92). These seemingly straight-forward words capsulized a view of “work” (and its emancipatory potential) that released a storm of criticism and objections. In this article, we will consider some of the criticisms raised by Habermas’ critics along with his responses and examine at length Axel Honneth’s (2012) most recent attempt to locate moral norms as immanent in the organization of capitalist production itself. My goal is to pry open the production process and re-assert the necessity of systematically non-distorted work as an integral part of the striving for a just learning society.

In his “A reply to my critics,” Habermas (1982) addresses the concerns of Agnes Heller, a leading member of the Praxis group and the Budapest School (which included luminaries such as Georg Lukacs), who argued that Habermas had abandoned the emancipatory potential of non-alienated labour. Habermas observes that Heller took up the task of recovering the “emancipatory content of Marxian theory” by “way of rehabilitating the anthropological concept of non-alienated labour” (p. 224). In a brilliantly incisive manner, Habermas uncovers the romantic features of the young Marx flowing through his writings and Heller’s sensibility. Habermas (1982) argues that Marx “borrowed from Romanticism (through Hegel) the expressivist ideal of self-formation, transferred aesthetic productivity to the practical working life of the species, conceived social labour as the collective self-regulation of the producers, and, against this background, represented the activity of the modern wage-labourer at once as alienated and as the modern emancipatory force, he found himself faced with a series of difficulties” (p. 224). Habermas offers the telling critique that the paradigm of “simultaneously creative and self-formative productivity” is not as “universal as purposive activity and communication (p. 225). In fact, as we see below, contemporary globalized, neo-liberal capitalist work forms are anything but self-formative or creative. If one wanted to make the case for the Marxian expressivist paradigm, one would have to show how the “normative content of the expanded concept of production is built into the very structure of social reproduction as a claim to reason” (ibid.). That is, we would have to locate the moral norms governing work organization in the capitalist mode of production itself. We could not use external ideals (such as that of craftsman [Sennett, 2008]) as norms governing the organization of production. These universal norms must be immanent.

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