Marxism and Andragogy: A Problematic Relationship

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ABSTRACT

This article concerns the problematic connection between Marxism and Andragogy. The former is generally regarded as an unpopular, discredited and, in some political circles, a dangerously revolutionary political doctrine, mainly of historical interest. The latter is a conventional, contemporary, and pragmatic approach to adult education that distinguishes between teaching methods appropriate for children and adults. What follows in a discussion of whether the two can be connected and, if so, for what purpose?

KEYWORDS

Andragogy, Critical Theory, Higher Education, Late Capitalism, Marxism

There is today no ‘marxist social science’ of any intellectual consequence… [but] no one who does not come to grips with the ideas of Marxism can be an academic social scientist. C. Wright Mills, 1962, p. 11.

For Marx, the agency of historic change—the proletariat—is a built-in feature of capitalism… There is now no substantial reason to believe that Marxist revolutions will come about in the foreseeable future. C. Wright Mills, 1962, p. 468

INTRODUCTION

Shortly before his premature death at age 45, C. Wright Mills (1962, p. 96), identified three intellectual types of Marxism—“vulgar Marxism, sophisticated Marxism, and plain Marxism.” Overly broad but heuristically useful, they remain salient.

Vulgar Marxists, Mills declared, “seize upon certain ideological features of Marx’s political philosophy and identify these parts as the whole.” They reduce social life to simplistic cause-and-effect relationships between the economic “base” and the ideational/institutional “superstructure” of social life. Today, vulgar Marxists exist mainly in the geriatric reminiscences of superannuated Stalinists
and the fever-dreams of right-wing social media outlets anxious to discredit beliefs and behaviors that displease them, usually near the center or tilted to the left of the American political spectrum.

Marx’s writing partner, Engels (1890b), however, famously put paid to the vulgar distortion in a letter to Bloch. He rebuked those who “twist” Marxist materialism into mechanistic determinism. He insisted that, although the economic element “ultimately” determines the direction of historical evolution, other factors including legal, philosophical, political, religious, and social concepts and customs have significant effects. Whatever support this faction might have enjoyed from true believers, the implosion of the USSR (1989-1991) and the deviation of contemporary China’s revolutionary track from anything Marx had in mind, “vulgar” might better be called “zombie” Marxism—more in need of taxidermy than tactics over the 200 years since Marx’s birth and almost a century after Lenin’s death.

More importantly, Mills also distinguished between “sophisticated” and “plain” Marxism. Just as the last hold-outs for Ptolemy’s geocentric theory of the universe fabricated increasingly complex “epicycles” to account for discrepancies between geocentric theory’s predictions of planetary orbits and seventeenth-century scientific observations, so also have creative Marxist theorists invented excuses to disguise, deny, or distract from major problems with Marxism, among which are: the chronic failure of the proletariat to fulfill its revolutionary mission; the reorganization of the class structure in late capitalism; the legacy of authoritarianism/totalitarianism in what was called “actually existing socialism”; and the deindustrialization of the late capitalist economy.

These scholastic neo-sophists are not “vulgar” simplifiers, but clever complicators desperate to salvage and restore some part of the Marxist canon as holy writ. In so doing, they have betrayed Marx the scientist who, for all his misplaced confidence in the objective verifiability of his predictions, nonetheless saw his inquiries as an ongoing work in progress, an empirical enterprise constantly adjusting and self-correcting as circumstances changed and contrary evidence accumulated.

That leaves the “plain Marxists” with whom Mills felt an affinity. Mills championed open, critical inquiry as essential if Marxian insights were to contribute their potential value—both in theory and practice—to understanding education and any other social structure or function. Their concerns inform this article.

Critical theory and Marxism are by no means synonymous. Critical theory is an eclectic body of thought that began with the establishment of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research in Germany in 1923. It was critical not only of fascism and capitalism, but also of Marxism-Leninism. It sought a practical political philosophy based on Marxist analysis but open to Freudian psychoanalysis and Hegelian idealism in the effort better to apply Marxism to the twentieth-century problems that Marxist orthodoxy seemed unable to solve. Critical theory today retains much of that original impulse, but must cope with a very different world.

**MARX’S METHOD**

In his incisive “Preface” to the *Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Marx explained “the guiding principle” of his voluminous studies:

*In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations... of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations constitutes the economic forces of society [and] the mode of production of material conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life...*

All societies must meet minimal material needs for basic survival and they must maintain and improve their methods if they are to maintain or move beyond whatever level of development they have achieved. Meanwhile, the pertinent *means* (natural resources, technologies) and *social relations*
(master/slave, capitalist/worker) of production establish recognizable patterns of life. Within these broad parameters, specific societies create diverse cultural forms. They require the reproduction of necessary skills and moral legitimations; hence, the role of the educator and Marxism’s interest in education must be both reflective and practical. From a Marxist perspective, all serious social inquiry is purposive. As his aphorism (Marx, 1845) asserts: “Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.” Marxist educational theory must therefore generate an accurate analysis or shape appropriate strategies if it is to guide transformative change.

Marx’s method gives primary attention to the prevailing mode of production. Thereafter, it offers only a “quasi-causal” approach in which scientifically determined “laws” of evolution are always and everywhere mediated by human consciousness and purposive action (Bottomore, 1975, p. 67). Korsch, a progenitor of “Western Marxism” and a participant in the early Frankfurt discussions, summarized Marx’s method in four “principles” corresponding to its intellectual and political purposes—both understanding the world and changing it (Korsch, 1937):

- historical specification (with an emphasis on the economic sphere and especially on labor);
- concrete application (requiring empirical evidence, not just theoretical consistency);
- revolutionary change (convulsive rather than slow, cumulative modification); and
- revolutionary action (conscious, active participation in the revolutionary process).

These principles suggest that, at base (so to speak), Marxists were and remain children of the European Enlightenment. Rosa Luxemburg, the martyred leader of another Marxist faction, spoke plainly of the “Marxist doctrine.” It was to guide “the forward march of the proletariat, on a world-historic scale, to its final victory.” That march was, she acknowledged: “not, indeed, so simple a thing” (Luxemburg, 1900).

If naught else, Marx was a humanist and an optimist. He believed in progress and contemplated decisive, transformative social change—ostensibly in the interest of human liberation from natural want, economic exploitation, and political tyranny. In the declining number of countries with putatively Marxist governments, while material “progress” may have been intermittently achieved (often in spite of the combined hostility of the capitalist world), freedom from “tyranny” has been less evident. So, the former USSR and its European “satellites” have officially forsaken “communism”—some for illiberal, undemocratic, oligarchic capitalism; China’s “communist party” has adopted a unique form of party/state capitalism; and the few remaining small-nation experiments in revolution remain fragile.

If, therefore, Marxism is to be rejuvenated as a matter of practical politics, it may have to be retheorized where Marx originally predicted it would first succeed. His dictum that “no social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed” (Marx, 1859) was a bit of an embarrassment when Lenin took over a “backward” Russia in 1918 and Mao did likewise in the arguably more “backward” China in 1949. Perhaps the time has come—pace Lenin’s (1916) and Trotsky’s (1930) views on disorderly economic development—to revisit the matter.

The project of turning pre-capitalist societies into socialist societies without an intervening period of capitalism may have been doomed from the start. In the light of evolutionary biology’s truism, natura non facit saltus (nature does not make leaps), hope for a revolution that substantially skips capitalism may be futile. Likewise, the reluctance of advanced capitalist societies to take the next leap is also something for Marxists to ponder.

The research agenda for future inquiries into the applicability of Marxist analysis includes such questions as: How much room is there for advanced capitalism to develop, yet remain recognizably capitalist? When, if not now, and if ever, will the “conditions” be right? And what evidence is there that the next stage in social evolution will count, by Enlightenment or “humane” standards as “progress”? Utopian futures may be hard to realize, but are dystopian futures equally unlikely?
CRITICAL THEORY

By “critical theory,” I do not mean what is often called “critical thinking.” When most educators discuss critical thinking, they usually mean the kind favored by the authorities—politicians, bureaucrats, employers, curriculum consultants, and educational administrators. Like Marxism, it derives from the European Enlightenment. It embraces formal logic, scientific empiricism, and positivism. It is “progressive” in claiming that good habits of thought can solve practical problems and produce happier lives. It emphasizes conceptual clarity, scientific method, and evidence-based research. It rejects ideology, metaphysics, historicism, romanticism, authoritarianism, demagoguery, and personal, political and professional “biases.” It is touted as a “soft” employability skill much in demand in the innovative, information, digital economy.

Critical theory and its application as critical pedagogy is more skeptical. It alleges that critical analysis is merely a sanitized apology for currently dominant “values” in the interest of maintaining the social, political and economic status quo. Critical pedagogy also criticizes ideology, but differently. It interrogates power and authority in the interest of human emancipation. Eclectically inspired by traditional critics of technology (e.g., Jacques Ellul, George Grant, and Neil Postman), classical liberals (e.g., John Stuart Mill, William James, and John Dewey), gentle anarchists (Paul Goodman, Ivan Illich and George Woodcock), and Marxists of the far-famed Frankfurt School (T. W. Adorno, Erich Fromm, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse and, later, Jürgen Habermas), it offers a compelling critique of critical thinking (Doughty, 2017):

Regarding education as both a moral and a political project, [critical pedagogy] decries the naïve positivism of critical [analysts] whom it accuses of hiding an unacknowledged neoliberal ideology in a fog of instrumentalism. The result plays out in a conflicted [postmodern] world that faces overpopulation, ecological degradation, socio-economic inequity, technological domination, a democratic deficit, and a state of seemingly permanent war. The debate between critical [analysis] and critical pedagogy is ultimately about what education is for.

Critical pedagogy aims to expand the “commons” and subject hegemonic power to scrutiny. It is a moral project which helps students to distinguish right and wrong and a political project that shows how to enhance what is right and inhibit what is wrong. It is moral because it teaches “how not only to think but to come to grips with a sense of individual and social responsibility...to be an engaged citizen,” and political because it helps “expand and deepen the possibilities of a democratic life [and] draws attention to...control over the conditions for the production of knowledge, values and skills” (Giroux, 2013). While rooted in Marx’s concept of criticism (which began with the criticism of religion (Marx, 1843), it is eclectic in its methods and heterodox in its mixture of reformist and revolutionary ambitions.

THE EXCEPTIONAL AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

“Progressive” historians now acknowledge that, from the beginning, American culture has maintained an internal ideological contradiction (Foner, 1998; Richardson, 2020). Affirming liberty and equality on the one hand, the United States has sustained racism and hierarchy on the other. As a settler society with an (almost) open frontier, tremendous natural resources, abundant slave labor, opportunities to subjugate Indigenous peoples and occupy their homelands, and abundant slave labor, colonial America embodied both patterns of dominance/submission regarding racialized peoples, and a rights-based ideology of possessive individualism (Macpherson (1962) and the work ethic for free white males.

Inequality within the dominant population could be explained by individual intellectual, moral, and psychological traits—what Jefferson called a “natural” aristocracy—and justified and legitimizied especially when superiority was earned as much as inherited. The American creed
celebrated the “pursuit of happiness” (code for property) based on talent, ambition, and hard work. Lacking an entrenched, hereditary aristocracy, the American myth-dream stressed personal character, perseverance, practical learning, and the approval of divine providence as necessary for advancement.

Marx’s explanation, of course, relied less on Benjamin Franklin’s early homilies about personal virtues promoting wealth accumulation (Lawrence, 1971, pp. 15-27) than upon the social dynamics of commercial-financial-industrial capitalism. Occasional individuals might climb up (or fall down), but it was social classes that reproduced themselves, regardless of the fate of the individuals within them.

In education, that meant that early elite colleges replenished the professional classes. Then, nineteenth-century economic development required basic literacy and numeracy for “blue-collar” workers; hence, public schools were organized and funded. Next, twentieth-century “white-collar” work demanded broad scientific-technological and socio-cultural skills for complex manufacturing, commercial, and bureaucratic enterprises. So, mass education, with increased accessibility of high schools, land-grant colleges, and universities expanded in size and reach. Now, constant updating and retraining in an age of high-tech, digital innovation, and an endemically disruptive economy invites universal education and lifelong learning. Higher education, once a privilege, became a right, and is now a seeming necessity for full participation in the American political economy. Personal attributes are important to determine who takes the best advantage of opportunities, but the provision of opportunities is a systemic decision—one that can be, but is not easily reversed.

The current trend, notably including the incorporation in higher education of the business models of market capitalism, now services both “traditional” learners directly from high schools and waves of adult learners seeking to enter, keep up, and catch up with changing labor markets. This most recent reorganization of higher education with innovative, entrepreneurial changes to traditional educational practices and purposes anticipates potential technological/andragogical futurescapes—some possibly containing stagnant swamps of derelicts permanently automated out of useful employment and deemed unfit for any retraining.

Ostensibly to meet the market demand, public and private institutions of all kinds have erupted to provide “value-added” education for adults. Some have failed to deliver on their promises—precipitating concerns about educational quality and integrity, and creating debilitating student debt. Others raise questions about adult education’s capacity to produce “deliverables” in terms of individual upward mobility and broad social improvement. The apparent test for adult education—the alleged great leveler in American society—is wholly transactional.

The research agenda for future inquiries into the applicability of Marxist analysis includes such questions as: Does the investment of time, energy, and money “pay off” for the student in terms of better wages, working conditions, and social status? Does it produce detectible improvements in socio-economic mobility or merely make more obvious a rigid class society? Is material comfort and access to consumer goods what education is for?

INEQUALITY IN AMERICA

No one, of course, denies the fact of inequality; indeed, some revel in it. With the ultimate Lockean “right” rooted in a primitive version of Marx’s “labor theory of value,” inequality is all but assumed in America’s foundational liberalism. Right in property and neither equality nor equity is the foundational American freedom. Determining who belongs in the category of “men” whom the “Creator” chose to create equally was a secondary matter. First stands the principle; second comes its applicability.

American history reveals endemic, structural inequalities among Indigenous, Black, ethno-religious, immigrant, and dominant white racial groups. Enduring questions of women’s rights remain unresolved and are now complicated by non-binary gender identity. Recent “culture wars” add new dimensions by including revanchist complaints about privileged, urban, bi-coastal elites allegedly stealing the country and passing American birthrights to unworthy interlopers and traitors who “hate America.”
The noisy divisiveness now fragmenting American society is not without precedent; however, it seems credible to contrast it with, for example, the professedly halcyon Eisenhower years (the nuclear arms race, anti-communist hysteria, and Jim Crow notwithstanding) and the hopeful, if short-lived, “Camelot” of the Kennedy presidency. America was then at the apex of its self-congratulatory complacency. Ronald Reagan repeated the General Electric Corporation’s slogan, “Progress is our most important product” weekly on television (Weisberg, 2016). Walt Disney and ex-Nazi rocket scientist Wernher von Braun popularized space exploration. President Kennedy (1961) promised the moon.

America celebrated the “end of ideology” (Bell, 1960), declared itself “the good society in operation” (Lipset, 1960, p. 403), and rejected conflict-ridden class politics. Max Lerner (1957: 398, 406) comfortably explained: “Power… is plural and fluid… many-faceted rather than uniform… dispersed among a number of groups.” So, while huge concentrations of wealth, power, and influence could be identified (Mills, 1956), it was agreed that “no one of these is monolithic: each of them, in turn, is a tangle of conflicting forces, and each, in turn, has had to achieve an equilibrium within itself. Thus,” Lerner concluded without irony: “The American system of power has become like a system of nebulae held together by reciprocal tensions in the inter-galactic space.” Marx was declared obsolete.

With roots in Roosevelt’s “New Deal” and Keynesian tools for a well-regulated, mixed economy with a serviceable “social safety net,” advances in civil rights, and a functioning representative democracy, post-war America exemplified a bourgeois society that boasted reform without violent revolution, much less a “dictatorship of the proletariat.” The US enjoyed compassionate capitalism with negotiated guards against penury and a liberal democratic government to aggregate interests and allocate rewards. The arrangement was ratified by sociologists and political scientists who purloined the engineering language of “systems theory” to create models of social “inputs,” authoritative decision-making, and policy “outputs” to provide “feedback” in a self-correcting cybernetic polity. With regular monitoring of voting records, opinion polls, and issue-specific studies of beliefs and behavior, epistemic individualism dominated social research. Income levels were treated as socio-economic variables, not as actionable concepts of social class. Marxist analysis was largely precluded.

Even at the depth of McCarthyism and throughout the Cold War, Marx was not universally excluded. Mills, for instance, stood as a tower of radical integrity over the social sciences. His books, White Collar (1952) and The Power Elite (1956) examined aspects of social class in the United States. Each was critical of the American social structure and each contributed to the claim that Mills was a “closet Marxist.” Mills was certainly influenced by Marx, but he was also highly critical of many of Marx’s formulations (Mills, 1962, pp. 9-40). To Mills, writes Miller (2018, p. 12), “Marx was one of the most astute interpreters of modern society, and he believed that any adequately trained social scientist needed to be knowledgeable about his work,” yet he was also indebted to American pragmatism, the works of Max Weber, Karl Mannheim, and his own endemic distaste for “grand theory” to fully embrace Marxism or any other approach that strayed too far from “real life” (Mills, 2000, pp. 25-49), however broadly defined, and openly scoffed at the American Communist Party.

Domhoff also provides an account of social class divisions in American society in his perennial undergraduate best-seller, Who Rules America (1967). As with Mills, however, the emphasis is on a set of “elites” rather than the more powerful notion of “social class.” Moreover, Domhoff (2023) also provides an explicit (and reasonably persuasive) critique of Marxism among the numerous teaching aids that normalize his book (e.g., Tenenbaum & Ross, 2006). Mills, Domhoff, and legions of less prominent educators have, with considerable effect, more or less “bootlegged” Marxist insights into American education over the past seventy-five years. Only rarely and mostly in the arcane domains of post-graduate studies and scholarly journals, however, have rigorous studies or applications of Marxist thought penetrated academia.

At stake today is the question of whether these late capitalist concepts and institutions can adequately manage inequality and provide the necessary prosperity, stability, and freedom for Americans to achieve or approximate their aspirations. After all, from elementary computerization to “artificial intelligence,” the technological means of production are transforming work in ways that
rival the transition to industrial capitalism. Artificial unintelligence (Broussard, 2018), algorithmic administration, automation, and the “gig economy” are altering the social relations of production, universalizing economic insecurity, and turning the proletariat into a precariat—including the education sector with over three-quarters of postsecondary instruction and student assessment now being done by precarious contract labor. A crisis of Marxian proportion is no longer unthinkable and may be unavoidable in late capitalism.

Pointing out persistent problems of structural inequity and injustice is insufficient to condemn an entire system, provided it can be persuasively argued that society is a “work in process” and that process is working. The question for Marxists now is whether the circumstances are right for Marxism to sufficiently influence the critique of the neoliberal political economy and the corporatizing of adult education to activate a class-based movement for change.

PREVIOUS NOVELTIES OF LATE CAPITALISM

The New Left

Perhaps the last notable effort of official communism in America came with the organizing of industrial workers before and after World War II. The “aristocracy of labor,” the craft unions initially expelled factory and resource workers from the American Federation of Labor in the mid-1930s. With the help of the Communist Party, however, the outlier Congress of Industrial Organizations including auto workers, electrical workers, steel workers, and miners were successful in winning contracts and were welcomed back in the mid-1950s, providing that they purged their leadership of supposedly subversive influence. Most did, and most of the rest were driven into oblivion by fair means and foul.

Meanwhile, within the academy, changes in the demographics of faculty and students in post-war higher education led to calls for change in what was compulsively called the “turbulent” 1960s. With the “old left” largely moribund, the “new left” (actually begun in England where the high-quality academic publication, The New Left Review is now in its sixty-third year of continuous publication, caught the temper of the times).

In June 1962, the Students for a Democratic Society released its manifesto, the “Port Huron Statement” (SDS, 1964). It distanced itself from the “old left” of Marx-centric intellectuals, the Communist Party, industrial unions, and the like to coalesce in a heterodox disorganization of youthful radicals, civil rights workers, and activists. It disdained the Cold War binary, was repulsed by Stalinism, briefly intrigued by Maoism, and spontaneously embraced new causes, methods, manners, and morals.

Eager to “inject controversy into a stagnant educational system,” SDS boasted that it had organized national support for free speech at Berkeley, pioneered peace courses in colleges, and supported prompted direct action on civil rights in the American South. It urged participation in peace research, education, and community organizations. It had tired of the Talmudic study of the “sacred texts” and rejected submission to any “party lines.” A yeasty rebelliousness was encouraged in music, art, conventional social mores, and what would soon become the “counter-culture.” For almost a decade, it held the attention of authorities and progressive elders alike—arguably terrifying both. How much it democratized education, empowered the civil rights movement, or helped end the Vietnam conflict is debatable.

What is clear is that deliberative, organized Marxism was superseded by a kaleidoscope of competing radicalisms that tended to the needs of the intersectionally oppressed, repressed, suppressed, and depressed (economically and psychologically). While an intellectual Marxist presence remained, the rise and fall of SDS foreshadowed brief outbursts of anger punctuating a narrative of domesticated dissent.

Despite some softening among younger people’s attitudes toward a vaguely defined “socialism” (PEW, 2022), full-throated Marxist analysis is disavowed by the purportedly hardest-left members of the House of Representatives—Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley, and Rashida Tlaib—the founders of the so-called “squad.” Even these few, however, are smaller than the sum of
the sum of their parts. According to Lewis (2022), these dissident Democrats rank between 28th and 41st among all Democratic Party members of the House in terms of their voting records on “liberal” issues. So, claims that they are Marxists should elicit merely chortles or exasperated sighs. From an orthodox/paleo-Marxist perspective, they are well-meaning bourgeois idealists—nothing more.

The New Right

Whether the “sixties” symbolically ended on December 6, 1969, at the Altamont Free Concert, on May 4, 1970, at Kent State University, or in the transition of popular music from the Beatles to the Bee Gees is a question for future antiquarians of pop cultural epiphenomena. Meanwhile, a robust right-wing backlash grew. A fitting symbol is a “confidential” letter from future Supreme Court Justice Powell (1971) to a Chamber of Commerce official. In it, Powell complained of ideological assaults on “the enterprise system.” He identified a disparate range of social critics including communists, socialists, anarchists, and the new left. He insisted that they had an inordinate influence in higher education and constituted an existential threat to capitalism. He lamented the “apathy” and the “business default” on the matter of mind control. He urged a vigorous counter-offensive. Powell’s concerns were overstated, but effective. Within a decade, Ronald Reagan was president and the attack on leftism in higher education had begun.

With what one wag called “Margaret Thatcher as ‘patient zero’ and Ronald Reagan as ‘main spreader,’” the backlash against Keynesian economics, the interventionist state, and the perceived primacy of equity over liberty permeated American society. Triumphant neoliberalism—a blanket term covering preferences for deregulating private corporations, privatizing public assets, and undermining trade unions—an inaugural remark by President Reagan (1981), “government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem” became a slogan for the age of neoliberal triumphalism that echoes today.

More important than Reagan’s clever quip was the business of postsecondary education—the commercialization of research, the commodification of curricula, the mass marking of the college/university “experience,” the “grade inflation” accompanying the urgency of “customer satisfaction,” the apparent decline in academic standards, the deskilling of teaching through technologically mediated learning, and the degradation of academic work through dependence on overworked, underpaid, and intimidated contract teachers. For their part, even attentive full professors are becoming uneasy with the talk of state legislatures abolishing tenure. To buttress the reorientation of higher education, there has been a conscious, systemic denigration and devaluing of the liberal arts—the principal remaining source of social criticism, and avocational education. Instead, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) courses plus adventures in innovation, entrepreneurship, and business administration—all deemed immediately marketable employability skills—now dominate the campus and online curricula of most institutions.

In sum, the political economy of late capitalism resupplied the store of expertise, warehoused otherwise unemployable, normalized a culture of subservience by precept and example, and dampened, where it did not extinguish, critical consciousness in higher education.

ANDRAGOGY AS CLASS OPPRESSION

Andragogy, the neologism created to distinguish teaching adults from teaching children, was coined in the 1830s. Its originator, Alexander Kapp (1799-1869) took note of the impending industrial revolution and decided it was important to reinforce the lessons of childhood deference to superiors as well as strong values to immunize workers against the temptation of revolutionary demagogues (Leong, 2017). His European successors also saw the need for schooling not only to acquire useful knowledge for a new economy, but also to take part in movements for social reform, equality, and political freedom. In neither case—the reactionary or the proto-revolutionary—was the demand for further education greeted warmly by the ancient universities or governments which feared a literate,
intellectually competent working class—the sort of people Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) would later try to turn into revolutionary “worker-intellectuals” (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 3-43).

Whether in progressive Mechanics Institutes or in informal Bible studies that taught obedience to one’s “betters,” school promoters did not succeed immensely until workers could be defined as a valuable market for dispensers of practical certifications of job-enhancing skill sets. Some, of course, had seen adult education as an opportunity for labor activism and political mobilization. Eric Lindeman (1885-1953), sometimes called the godfather of American adult education, held such views. In a disarmingly subversive moment, he offered this (Lindeman, 1926, p. 165):

Orthodox education may be a preparation for life but adult education is an agitated instrumentality for changing life … [It] will become an agency of progress if its short-term goal of self-improvement can be made compatible with a long-term experimental but resolute policy of changing the social order.

The great formalization and professionalization of adult education, however, has taken place since the time of the GI Bill and the opening up of the campus to non-traditional learners. Once deemed a secondary market at best, they are now seen as a lucrative source of income. As described in the prevailing andragogical theories of Malcolm Knowles (1913-1997), the adult learner is defined as a Human Resources Department’s dream. According to Knowles (1984; Caruso, 2021), modern adult learners are no-nonsense clients with practical aspirations:

- they need to know something specific and need have reasons to learn;
- they have a foundation for their learning in past experience;
- they have a well-developed self-concept and are responsible for their decisions;
- they are ready to learn what is of immediate relevance to their work and/or lives;
- they are problem-centered and problem solvers, not “content-oriented;
- they are internally motivated.

Andragogy advocates, of course, provide slim evidence for any of these claims. Hanson (1996) concluded her decidedly unfriendly assessment by arguing that “andragogy is nothing else but a ‘normative utopia’ based on the facts that Knowles’ assumptions either have not substantiated backing or are ill-informed” and two decades later several critics (Doughty, 2023, pp. 45-46) have compiled counter-lists saying that Knowles’ followers’ “theory”:

- treats education as a neutral, nonpolitical activity;
- is based on a “generic” learner who tends to be white, male, and middle class;
- appears to value only one way of knowing and ignores what does not fit its theory;
- is almost entirely individualistic, ignoring the importance of context;
- does not challenge the prevailing social structure, even if that social structure promotes inequality.

Plainly, customary andragogical claims and apposite Marxist rejoinders allow little room for accommodation. This is important because late capitalism, fuzzy edges, and internal ambiguities aside, is facing intense, disruptive, and accelerating change. Education is reinventing itself as unabashedly transactional teaching and learning, a geographer of multiple “paths to success” for students in a chronically ill-defined atmosphere of degrees, diplomas, certificates, portfolios, micro-credentials, minicourses, badges, and unconfirmed assertions of “mastery” over inventories of generic learning outcomes. What any of them mean is becoming increasingly perplexing.

There is a declining interest in education as personal intellectual development or the disinterested pursuit of truth. The elitist ideal of higher education as an idyllic opportunity for reflection and maturation before undertaking a satisfying professional career has diminished beyond irrelevance.
for contemporary students (and most of their professors). The abandonment of liberal education in exchange for fungible job-training assets is a well-acknowledged and well-advertised consequence of late capitalism’s preoccupation with employability in fiercely competitive global economy.

Regardless of one’s attitude toward it, Marxism provides a coherent, historical critique of capitalism. Whether examining the work of its originators in the mid-to-late nineteenth century or their diverse followers 175 years after Marx (1844) published his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts and Marx and Engels produced The Communist Manifesto (1848), Marxists offered comprehensive, if not always cogent, ways to comprehend human history. They had firm ideas of what drives and obstructs or diverts change. They advanced theories and made practical suggestions about how to transition away from capitalism. They entertained great hopes about what would follow capitalism’s collapse, but they were remarkably modest about making predictions about its successor. They knew this much: human history is a record of systemic change; nothing lasts forever; capitalism will be transcended. Capitalism—pace Fukuyama (1992)—is not the end of history. History is not—pace Huntington—the “clash of civilizations”; it is the clash of modes of production, with variations.

Marx thought that imagining the future in detail was an indulgence in “Utopian” thinking. He, of course, never used the phrase, “late capitalism,” but he was convinced that capitalism’s end was at hand. He was wrong. Capitalism was resilient. It was by no means finished. Writes critical educator, Henry Giroux (2023):

capitalism has always been constructed on the basis of organized violence. Wedded to a political and economic system that consolidates power in the hands of a financial, cultural, and social elite, it construes profit-making as the essence of democracy and consumption as the only obligation of citizenship.

Giroux calls this gangster capitalism. Is it finally the late, late show of capitalism? Or may we expect further consolidation, perhaps fulfilling Mussolini’s dream of corporatism—the economic power of private wealth and the political authority of the state?

A POLYCRISIS IS A TERRIBLE THING TO WASTE

Like “Heinz 57,” the synecdoche of the H. J. Heinz Company since 1896, Marxism comes in a multitude of shapes, sizes, colors, and flavors—heresies, revisions, factions, orthodoxies, unorthodoxies, and “tendencies.” It has traveled on a Mobius strip with Hegelianism and technological determinism. It has blended with Neo-Freudian psychology, radical feminism, existential phenomenology, and American pragmatism. It has been prefixed with abundant “neo-” and “post-” deviations. Even “the Moor” (as Marx was known to intimate friends and family) was aware of the diversity and was sometimes sufficiently annoyed by what others were saying in his name that he protested in a letter to C. Schmidt (Engels, 1890a): “If anything is certain, it is that I myself am not a Marxist!”

Since then, the conflicting whorls and eddies within the grand flow of Marxist ideas diverged into a delta where the power of his work lost strength and dispersed into multiple marshes, each with its own deposits of intellectual silt and species of ideological weeds—still moist and capable of sustaining complex wetlands, and curious ecologies of thought, but also draining slowly into morally stagnant and politically dissipated bogs of cynical, partisan political struggle.

In the current global polycrisis (Morin & Kern, 1999, p. 74), it remains to be determined how to make the best of our awful prospects. The term, polycrisis, was introduced by the French sociologist, Edgar Morin in Homeland Earth. It identified a set of “interwoven and overlapping crises [involving a] complex inner solidarity of problems, antagonisms, crises, uncontrollable processes, and the general crisis of the planet.” It involves environmental sustainability and technological chauvinism, work and wealth, productivity and equity, military-industrial complexities, degraded democracies,
injustices and human rights abuses, multiple illiteracies, physical and mental diseases and disorders, education… and adult education. There is a pattern that connects them all. Like the periodical table of chemical elements, Linnaeus’ biological taxonomy, and sets of Russian dolls, there is implicit order in the chaos. To avoid catastrophe, it is essential to detect intolerable toxicities and avoid systemic collapse. Marxists must answer the questions: What is the pattern that connects and how can we at least arithmetically ameliorate the worst our species has to offer? What are the social determinants of social health?

Marx (1852) looked at historical circumstances and human agency. He fixed on this axiom: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please.” From that, everything follows more or less logically and observably. Changes at the bottom can rise to the top but within established parameters. No Anthropocene has given birth to a Homo sapiens. Evolutionary processes start somewhere other than with the finished product.

According to Marx, class conflict is the “engine” of social change. Marx saw class conflict in stark and imminent terms, but social classes in late capitalism are not as tidily divided as Marx witnessed and forecast in the nineteenth century, nor are they reducing to a final, binary death match between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Lines are blurred. Skilled workers may enjoy relatively comfortable “middle-class” incomes while ostensibly professional college faculty live below official poverty lines; meantime, mere millionaires cannot approximate the wealth of the .001% identified by the once-popular “Occupy Movement” (Nathanson, 2021) as constituting the ruling class.

Exploitation, too, has changed. Wealth no longer derives disproportionately from the surplus value created by proletarians in factories as much as through the financialization of the economy. There is “a pattern of accumulation in which profits accrue primarily through financial channels rather than through trade and commodity production” (Krippner (2005). Financialization involves buying and selling stocks, packaging risk assets, manipulating currencies, and conducting digitized transactions to make money with money. Pixel-swapping is replacing primary extraction (e.g., mining), secondary production (e.g., manufacturing), and much of the tertiary (retail/service) sector as a source of wealth. Creating and managing personal, corporate, and public debt is becoming a preferred source of profit. This is not good news for workers; it also unsettles Marx’s theories of class, class conflict, and revolution.

Most of us work in the tertiary sector creating or exchanging information. We teach college courses, welcome customers to Walmart, write code for computers, and ask customers if they’d like fries with their hamburgers. The contemporary economy deskills and degrades industrial, clerical, and professional occupations amidst the ominous presence of “artificial intelligence.” A half-century on, is there not a pressing necessity for a newer update on Braverman’s Monopoly Capital (1999)?

If information is becoming a major source of wealth and profit, how is productive work to be understood in the absence of observable unit sales? Marxist economic theory is on the defensive. Marxists have failed to “capture the complex and concrete forms of knowledge and its expanding role” (Jeon, 2012, p. 186). What is the proletariat in the absence of productive workers? What, if any, are the sources of “class consciousness,” “solidarity,” and the political potential of the people Marx once declared to be the enemy of and ultimate victor over capitalism? And, if we are truly entering a postindustrial mode of production, is it not time for an addendum projected forward as Wood (1999), for example, reflected backward on Das Kapital (Marx: 1867, 1885, 1894), only one-third of which was completed for publication.

**SIGNS OF LIFE**

While not discounting the importance and the consequences of the bizarre aberration that has dominated American politics over the past few years, it is important not to obsess over the presence of the 45th American president. However abjectly unfit for the office he was, is, and may be again
and however dire future violent insurrections and constitutional crises may be, the underlying features of the American political economy will surely remain after the “cult of personality” dissolves.

The problems of the Russian doll of adult education are also ongoing. So, we must understand, according to Russell’s theory of logical types, the proper arrangement of parts and wholes, classes and members in order to realistically assess how much or how little correcting individual changes can improve conditions in a dysfunctional institution. At what point does displaying “grace under pressure” become complicity in our own oppression?

Welton’s thirty-year-old criticism (1995, p. 5) has not abated. Adult education, he wrote, has “abandoned its once vital role in fostering democratic social action” and is “governed by an instrumental rationality that works to the advantage of business, industry, and large-scale organizations.” The parameters are plain. In addition to the aforementioned corporate colonization of the academy by methods and for purposes remote from traditional teaching and learning, the main requirements of education under capitalism are to:

- legitimize existing social class relations;
- reproduce class inequalities;
- prepares people of the capitalist ruling class for positions of power;
- prepares people of the working classes for subservience.

In the case of adult education (apart from indulgences in learning as leisure and as tightly controlled “professional development” activities), adult education is mainly a matter of cultural assimilation, adaptation to economic change, or achieving non-structural upgrades in personal employment prospects. Accordingly, a class analysis of adult education is essential for anyone seriously seeking social change. Stephen Brookfield (2001, p. 20) advises that:

> critical theory of adult learning should have at its core an understanding of how adults learn to recognize the predominance of ideology in their everyday thoughts and actions and in the institutions of civil society. It should also illuminate how adults learn to challenge the ideology that serves the interests of the few against the well-being of the many.

That means that a fulsome critique of Knowles’ definitive work must be done, both in terms of the alleged nature of the adult “learner,” but also the intentions and expectations of the “teacher” and the institutional sponsor. Brookfield (p. 21) adds:

> 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 well-being and adult development.

This, alas, may be a case of hysteron-proteron (putting the horse behind the cart). Few public colleges and fewer large private universities are apt to enthuse over promulgating “democratic socialist values.” Instead, they gravitate toward Knowles’ “popular, banal, but superficially benign theories of human nature, human knowledge, and human thought.” Critical theorists—both Marxist and non-Marxist—have characterized them as “conceptually confused, theoretically incoherent, and empirically unsustainable,” with some going so far as to accusing them of being “Eurocentric, misogynistic, and racist” (Doughty, 2017, p. 47). Whence, then, is the desire to extricate adult learning from the corporate ideological hegemony to come?
MARXIST CRITICISM: A BASE

Zombie Bolsheviks, unreconstructed Stalinists, and remaining admirers of Enver Hoxha may be forgiven for wondering about Marxist criticism arising in bourgeois schools. Their skepticism, however, may disregard events since Brookfield presented his manifesto. So, for example, at about the same time as Brookfield was marking his territory, Cary Nelson, a former president of the American Association of University Professors, joined in delivering two notable books on the precarious state of higher education (Bérubé, M. & Nelson, 1995; Nelson & Watt, 2004). The first outlined the familiar “crisis in the Humanities,” but it went beyond the characteristically elitist concerns with cultural literacy and maintaining the literary canon to locate troubles in the political economy. The second, wholly within the liberal tradition, went on to consider such issues as the perils of political correctness and identity politics as well as the promise of collective action, collective agency, and collective bargaining.

On their face, such commentaries might be as easily dismissed as the previous Port Huron Statement. However, while words alone may only share ways to interpret the world, concrete events allow for change. The rarity of effective state-wide (let alone national) coordinating organizations, the enduring mythologies of professionalism, the understandable timidity of faculty, and the elitist distaste for “unions” have limited anything close to “class awareness,” to say nothing of solidarity. Yet, if the history of the past few decades reveals anything deeper than the right-wing-inspired anxieties/hypocrisies over “free speech on campus” and the cries of derision against “wokeness,” it would be that wages and working conditions for faculty, adjuncts, teaching and research assistants—always chronic, now acute—have precipitated union organization and proliferation of strikes that are truly unprecedented in American education.

Meanwhile, community organizations and labor groups are gaining the confidence to self-organize socio-economic and political education on their own and in league with a few progressive colleges or departments within universities. The future of adult education will depend on both internal and external factors. Workers will have to hive themselves off from quiet acceptance of the managerial agenda and demand practical political education. Faculty will have to break free of the Human Resource agenda. The division between the gown and the town will have to become more porous.

And, even so, adult education may not achieve, never mind move beyond, basic “laborism” in the beliefs and behavior of adult students and adult educators alike: but that alone would be a realizable target unthinkable when Nelson (or Hayden) was taking stock of affairs.

The key to the practical relevance of Marxism in the critical theory and, crucially, critical practice in higher education has been inserted in the lock of the doors of power in colleges and universities. The illusion of professionalism among faculty who neither control entry into (hiring), discipline within, or exist from (firing) or “fees for service” (the hallmark of genuine professions from accountants and architects to doctors, dentists, and lawyers) is finally being dissolved for educators. Pace Marx, it seems now to be dawning on academic workers that their venerable traditions are melting into air, their ancient privileges are being profaned, and they are at last being compelled to face with sober senses their real conditions in life. They no longer do do noble work (albeit often in genteel poverty), but are deskilled, degraded, stripped of their halos and turned into wage laborers, but without benefit of union-protected seniority as tenure comes increasingly under attack.

The increasing realization of the proletarianization of the professoriat has grown with unionization of teaching and research assistants, adjunct and other classifications of contract faculty, and the lower, more vulnerable ranks of the academy. To date, unfortunately, solidarity among college and university employees has far to go and, even if it were somehow to be achieved, there is little evidence that it would grow beyond “unionism” to “socialism”—especially when the identification with capitalism and the dependence on corporate funding takes over from public funding of the academy (Doughty, 2006; Doughty, 2008; Doughty, 2014; Doughty, 2017, Doughty, 2018a; Doughty, 2018b; Doughty, 2019; Doughty 2020a; Doughty, 2020b; Doughty 2021). Nonetheless, even as industrial unions are
squeezed out of the labor market, the growth of working class consciousness and pressure for union organization from Starbucks to Walmart, and the rise in public sector worker militancy may provide the kind of spark needed to demonstrate the necessity of a Marxian conceptual framework to reveal the relationship in the research lab, the classroom, and a waiting adult student “market” in need not just not just of employability skills, but of the old Marxist understanding of the true nature of the social relations of the production and reproduction of knowledge.

CONCLUSION

The value of Marx lies not in the failed experiments in “actually existing socialism,” or in intellectual pathologists’ reports before academic coroner’s juries to determine its cause of death. For Marx, the abolition of capitalism would mark the end of the “prehistory of human society”; but, as Saad-Filho (2002, p. 109) remarked:

*The transition towards another mode of production… is neither inexorable nor unavoidable. The social relations at the core of capitalism will change only if overwhelming pressure is applied by the majority. Failing that, capitalism may persist indefinitely, in spite of its human and environmental costs.*

Every revolution intended to abolish capitalism has failed or, at best, reached a stalemate. Abolition of capitalism is not imminent—or, if it is, then it may be a prelude to an even more tyrannical form of technological capitalism, a dystopia without neither the appearance nor pretense of equity and democracy.

Marx offered a conceptual apparatus to guide analysis. It is partly wrong, partly flawed, certainly incomplete, and unfortunately open to abuse. For anyone interested in at least the arithmetic reduction of human misery and the possible transformation of human society to a better future, however, it must be robustly debated with some parts jettisoned and others incorporated in a social philosophy of reclamation and redemption. For anyone interested in more, worse advice could be given than this: bide your time; things could be otherwise. (Eagleton, 2011).
REFERENCES


