ABSTRACT

The historical failures of Marxism in the twentieth-century came in three forms: the inability to account for the rise of fascism and Nazism; the establishment of authoritarian regimes where “communist” revolutions had occurred, largely in pre-industrial societies from barely post-feudal Russia to peasant-based China and “developing” nations such as Vietnam; and the incapacity of the proletariat to develop class consciousness and foment class conflict in advanced industrial societies, where Marx and his followers knew capitalism to have arisen and where they assumed it would first be transcended. Seeking to understand these failures, yet to preserve and apply foundational elements of Marx’s thought, the “critical theorists” of the Frankfurt Institute—at home and in exile—drew on additional sources including Hegel and Freud to diagnose the pathologies of modernity, though rarely to offer restorative treatments for Enlightenment values or Marxian transformation. Jürgen Habermas, the acknowledged leader of the “second generation” of critical theorists refused to succumb to the pessimism of his elders and reached out to increasingly diverse scholars in an effort to redeem the goals of reason, democracy and equity in modern life. His theoretical work—often abstract and dense—remains almost as marginal to mainstream thought as that of Adorno and Horkheimer before him; yet, it has influenced a minority of philosophers and social scientists still interested in education as an emancipatory human project. Using the specific context of contemporary community colleges, this contribution seeks to build bridges between Habermas’ combination of basically Marxian, often Kantian, and always eclectic thought to show how educators could profitably reflect upon their professional lifeworlds, better comprehend the neoliberal ideology and power relations that entrap them, and find new inspiration and advice should they wish to interrogate and confront the corporate world in which they ply their trade.

Keywords: Communist, Kantian, Lifeworlds, Marxism, Pre-Industrial

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INTRODUCTION

“Jürgen Habermas,” writes one of his severe critics, “provides us with “the reductio ad absurdum of academic political theory.” According to John G. Gunnell, Habermas’ work represents “the last whimper of metatheory and its enslavement to philosophical faddism in search of the transcendental foundations of social and political judgment.” In sum, he says, “the last thing we need is another summary of Habermas” (Gunnell, 1986, pp. 193-194).

This harsh assessment is typical of the host of scholars and educators who consider Habermas to be abstract, abstruse and of no immediate use to people engaged as teachers and learners in twenty-first-century educational practices. Though seldom as rigorous as political thinkers like Gunnell, they surely equal the number of people for whom Habermas is among the most compelling sociological and philosophical thinkers of our age and who look to him for insight and guidance on a vast range of intellectual and political issues. I want to suggest how criticisms may be muted by linking Habermas’ cogent ideas to a largely ignored and frequently underestimated educational field—North American community colleges.

An immediate problem arises. Community colleges are common in the United States and Canada, but they have an uncertain relationship to the academic world. Some colleges provide basic employment skills. Some take the place of apprenticeship programs and help certify artisanal competence. A number connect with accredited universities, acting as “feeder” facilities that allow students to complete the first two years of degree programs in their local communities. American colleges have a long history of offering “Associate” degrees that are considered academically superior to vocational training, but inferior to university degrees. More recently, colleges in Ontario, Canada have begun to offer their own Bachelor’s degrees—the academic and economic values of which are currently being tested in the marketplace.

In short, the phrase “community college” applies to a variety of institutions with diverse standards, objectives and practices in education and training. This essay applies some of the Habermas’ ideas to one sub-system as a template for making Habermas meaningful to educators who might be estranged from his work.

TRANSCENDING MARXISM: THE PROBLEMATICS OF SOCIAL CLASS

Habermas and his intellectual forebears in the Frankfurt School are regularly accused of seeking solutions in abstract philosophical transcendentalism for problems that arise in concrete social relations. Arising out of the Hegelian/ Marxist tradition but distressed by multiple twentieth-century atrocities and discomfited by a proletariat reluctant to fulfill its designated revolutionary role as an agent of change, the founders of “critical theory” lapsed into disappoint-
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