Chapter  8
From Critical Theory
to Critical Practice:
The Case of a Singular College Strike

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ABSTRACT

The failure of Marxism to account for the rise of fascism and Nazism; the establishment of authoritarian regimes where “communist” revolutions had occurred, largely in pre-industrial societies; and the incapacity of the proletariat to develop class consciousness and foment class conflict in advanced industrial societies led the members of the Frankfurt School to revise and adapt Marxism to twentieth century realities. While relentlessly critical of capitalism, they tended to be pessimistic about the possibility of revolution. The leader of the “second generation” of the critical theorists, Jürgen Habermas, moved on from the Marxist foundation to develop a more comprehensive, pragmatic, communications-based model of modern life, which gained support among left-leaning intellectuals. This chapter relates some of Habermas’ insights to the practical problems of faculty in community colleges in Ontario, Canada as they confront neoliberal ideology and practice and work to challenge power relations and pedagogy in the workplace.

INTRODUCTION

If there is enduring merit to Karl Marx’s comprehensive historical, economic and political theories of social evolution, it has largely been buried in the calamities of the twentieth century. Contrary to his expectations, industrial capitalism did not collapse of its internal contradictions, but has survived, thrived and expanded its grip not only over Europe, the United States and the growing number of nations seeking to modernize and integrate their political economies with the international corporate mode of production. Also devastating to Marxist theory and practice was the fate of those chiefly backward countries such as Russia, China and a variety of “third world” which underwent “communist” revolutions only to discover that the path to socialism almost inevitably took a detour into tyranny without providing the benefit of prosperity for the masses.

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Meanwhile, Marx’s followers grew disillusioned with the idea that progress would come from the collapse of capitalism in its most advanced forms. Where it had arisen—Great Britain, Germany and the United States of America—they believed it would also fulfill its historical role and lay the foundation for its own transcendence and the emergence of authentic democracy, economic equity and the inevitable next stages of human progress. Where capitalism had flourished, they theorized, it would also succumb to inevitable class conflict and lead the rest of the world into a boundless future of genuinely human history. They were wrong or, as the most patient among them may still believe, they have been wrong so far. For most people, however, the Marxist promise has been broken. Society is not ordered in the way that Marx believed, and historical evolution is not proceeding as expected. Indeed, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the emergence of “state capitalism” in China and the lack of obvious success in places such as Cuba and Vietnam, contemporary capitalism, for all its many problems, is nonetheless held to be triumphant. It is made to seem not only successful, but unavoidable and inescapable. The modern mantra is not always celebratory: evidence of deep and growing inequality, a pervasive “democratic deficit,” technological tyranny, social alienation and ecological degradation leading to imminent environmental catastrophes is everywhere. Yet, there is also a feeling that “there is no alternative” (TINA). This TINA principle, writes Harry Glasbeek (2017, p. 239), “is horribly wrong. Today, our tyrants are not so much the governments … but human capitalists who control wealth and its uses by means of corporations.” Yet what Linda McQuaig (1998) once called “the cult of impotence” leads not to insurrection but to apathy, anomie and, more recently, xenophobic, racist, misogynistic, reactionary “populism.”

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; 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. Eventual outliers Erich Fromm (1900-1980) and Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979) continued to explore possibilities for socialist humanism (Fromm, 1955) and even revolution (Marcuse 1964) in North America; but, in the hands of the principal critical theorists—T. W. Adorno (1903-1969) and Max Horkheimer (1895-1973)—the prognosis was pessimistic. Jürgen Habermas (b. 1929), the acknowledged leader of the “second generation” of critical theorists in Germany, 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.

Using the specific context of contemporary community colleges, this chapter seeks to build bridges between Habermas’ eclectic thought and the prospect of educators usefully reflecting upon their professional lifeworlds in order to better comprehend the neoliberal ideology and power relations that envelope them, and to find new inspiration and advice should they wish to confront and to interrogate the corporate world in which they ply their trade.

The term “community colleges,” it must be quickly said, is used more or less interchangeably with the more accurate designation, Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAAT). The CAATs are a particular type of community college, but the latter term is more familiar and is interspersed in the hope that it will not unduly damage the feelings of those who are sensitive to special identities. In any case, the narrative culminates in the story of an extraordinary strike of college professors, librarians and counsellors in Ontario, Canada, in the autumn of 2017—an event that may be the first case of a full-time
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