REPOSITIONING IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE IN A CRITICAL THEORY OF ADULT LEARNING

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Contemporary adult educational readings of the Frankfurt School of critical theory, as interpreted via Habermas, risk sliding into an exclusive engagement with the pragmatic dimensions of his thought to the exclusion of its Marxist underpinnings and its concern with ideology critique. Building on Max Horkheimer's recently republished essay on "Traditional and Critical Theory," this article attempts to reposition ideology critique as a learning process crucial to the realization of adulthood. It discusses critical theory as a response to Marx and argues that a critical theory of adult learning should focus on how adults learn to recognize and challenge ideological domination and manipulation. Such learning is necessary if adults are to counteract the continuous reproduction of blatantly unequal structures and create more inclusive democratic arrangements. The article concludes with a warning for critical theory to be on guard against its own ossification and entombment by engaging with the pragmatist spirit.

In terms of intellectual traditions that have had a significant impact on adult education research and theorizing in the past two decades, it is critical theory (particularly that associated with the Frankfurt School) that is arguably the most influential. Critical theory, as diverted via Habermas, undergirds important aspects of the transformative learning theory of Mezirow (1991), particularly his highly influential formulation 20 years ago of a critical theory of adult learning and education (1981). Mezirow's explication of communicative and emancipatory domains of learning at first challenged, then overturned, the andragogical emphasis of the time. It inspired numerous commentaries, refutations, and empirical studies and gave the contemporary field of adult education a theoretical dimension it had sorely lacked. Recently, the more politicized work of Welton (1995) has interpreted Habermas's more current work for a theory of learning and consistently drawn attention to the Marxist influences in his thought. Indeed, Habermas, somewhat in the manner of Cornel West (1989), moves back and forth between neo-Marxist and pragmatic perspectives. In Shalin's (1992) words, Habermas's theory of communicative action is

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"an attempt to invigorate critical theory by merging the Continental and Anglo-Saxon traditions and bringing the pragmatist perspective to bear on the project of emancipation through reason" (p. 244).

Habermas and West have both been criticized for their blending of neo-Marxism and pragmatism, although I believe that their position of critical pragmatism is defensible. In adult education, however, it is easy to focus on the pragmatist elements of Habermas's thought—particularly the much invoked concept of the ideal speech situation—and interpret these in ways that ignore the Marxist underpinnings, and hence the political power, of his critique. Expressions of support for the ideal speech situation as a model for democratic discussion, or exhortations to engage in dialogue across differences without linking this to radical political change, are easy to make and not that far from the Great Books "living room learning" experiments of the liberal adult education tradition. In this discourse, it is liberalism, not socialism, that frames the analysis of what democracy looks like.

In this article, I wish to refocus a critical theory of adult learning on the politicized notion of criticality—particularly on how adults learn to engage in ideology critique—that is at the heart of the Frankfurt School tradition. In a sense, this is putting the "critical" back into critical thinking and reflection. I propose doing this in three ways: by briefly positioning critical theory as a response to Marx, by returning to an early adumbration of critical theory (that of Max Horkheimer) that focuses on abolishing the exchange economy of capitalism, and by making some preliminary observations on how a critical theory of adult learning might reframe itself as ideology critique.

POSITIONING CRITICAL THEORY AS A RESPONSE TO MARX

Marx is the towering intellectual figure—simultaneously foundation and fulcrum—for the writers who fall into the category of what most people now call *critical theory.* As such, any adult educator interested in how adults learn critical consciousness needs to engage his ideas. Many of the critical tradition's most important analytical categories—false consciousness, commodification, alienation, praxis, emancipation—are derived from Marx's interpretations of enlightenment thought and his dialogue with Hegel. Major figures in the Frankfurt School of critical theory such as Horkheimer, Marcuse, Fromm, and Habermas drew particularly on the "early" Marx's critique of the alienation and diminution of humanity produced by capitalism. Habermas's (1987) work, which has been so influential on Mezirow's (1991) development of transformative adult learning theory, is in many ways a talking back to Marx. Yet, although Marx's ideas undergird much transformative learning theory, he is rarely mentioned in American adult education. Perhaps, this is because some American adult educators are fearful of being branded as subversive, communistic, overtly political, or concerned only with sectional class interests if they invoke his name. In other countries, adult educators are

more ready to engage with him (Allman, 2000; Mayo, 1998; Welton, 1995). Welton (1995) in particular argued that "the consequences of forgetting Marx for the construction of a critical theory of adult learning are enormous, inevitably binding us to an individualistic model of learning" (p. 19).

It seems that American adult education suffers from the "knee-jerk 'marxophobia'" (McLaren, 1997, p. 172) that prevents practitioners and theorists from drawing, however critically or circumspectly, on his work. Marxophobia holds that even to mention Marx is to engage in un-American behavior and, by implication, to support the genocide and repression exhibited by totalitarian communist regimes throughout history. Despite repeated attempts by the Frankfurt School theorists to dissociate Marxist analysis from the rigidity of state socialism, popular opinion equates Marx with repression, standardization, bureaucratization, and denial of creativity or liberty. That one of the most consistent elements in critical theory is the denunciation of the distortions of Marx's ideas that allowed atrocities to be committed in his name is conveniently ignored. It is also forgotten that important figures in the tradition unequivocally condemned the totalitarianism, secret police, and thought control manifest in the Soviet Union and Communist China. Fromm, for example, was stinging in his criticism of the manner in which rigidly totalitarian states perverted ideals of socialism, thereby preventing the non-communist world from considering the links between democracy and socialism. To Fromm (1976), "Socialism is incompatible with a bureaucratic, thing-centered, consumption-oriented social system, that is incompatible with the materialism and cerebralization that characterize the Soviet, like the capitalist, system" (p. 157). So in the critical theory tradition, it is perfectly possible to find a Marxist analysis useful without in any way endorsing the Gulag or Chinese cultural revolution.

If critical theory can be understood as a critical engagement with Marx, then a critical theory of adult learning must begin by acknowledging the centrality of Marxist concepts. This is not the stretch it might first appear. As an example, think of the criticisms made by many continuing educators to the effect that accelerated learning programs for adult learners are used as cash cows to prop up institutions faced by sagging enrollments of traditional aged students. By processing as many adult students as quickly as possible through such programs, these institutions are commodifying learning and education and selling these as products in the exchange economy. Commodification—the process by which a human quality or relationship becomes regarded as a product, good, or commodity to be bought and sold on the open market—is a Marxist notion, connected to his other ideas of fetishization and exchange value. This is the key concept used by Shumar (1997) in his book *College for Sale*, the subtitle of which is *A Critique of the Commodification of Higher Education*. So a criticism that many mainstream American adult educators would feel very comfortable making can quite quickly be linked to Marxist analysis.

As well as providing critical theory with many of its central concepts, Marx also influenced its forms of discourse. His alternation between polemic and scientism, between philosophizing about the need to create the conditions under which people

can realize their creativity and humanity and demonstrating the supposedly immutable laws of history focused on the predictable crises of capitalism, has framed the style in which much subsequent critical theory is written. His grounding of social and political analysis in the realization of an explicit social ideal has also meant that critical theory after Marx springs from a normative vision of the good society. In his often quoted 11th thesis on Feuerbach in which he argued that the point of philosophy was to change the world (not just interpret it), Marx underpinned the intent of critical theory to act as a catalyst for revolutionary social change. Such activism is central to those parts of the field that draw on community development or social action traditions in their conceptualization of adult education practice (say Highlander) or research (the participatory research movement).

SO EXACTLY WHAT IS CRITICAL ABOUT CRITICAL THEORY?

How does a critical theory, particularly a critical theory of adult learning, differ from other kinds of theories? This is the key question addressed by Horkheimer (1995) (director of the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt, Germany—the Frankfurt School, as it became known) in his classic 1937 essay on "Traditional and Critical Theory." Reissued in 1995, the essay's analysis remains pertinent. 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, Horkheimer (1995) stated, "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: 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. Horkheimer was pessimistic with regard to the possibility for emancipation, believing that this would finally be suppressed and humanity driven into "a new barbarism" (p. 227). However, his pessimism did not mean that people should fall into quietism or conformism. Instead, he contended that critical theory itself assumed that those who subscribed to it would fight against this creeping barbarism: "Every part of the theory presupposes the critique of the existing order and the struggle against it along the lines determined by the theory itself" (p. 229). So the starting point of Horkheimer's analysis is that the commodity exchange economy that dominates social relations must be reconfigured so that people can realize their humanity and freedom.

In the commodity exchange economy, it is not only products and goods that seem to acquire an apparently innate worth (which is really determined by market

forces). Labor—including the intellectual labor of learning and teaching—also becomes an object thought to have some intrinsic value. Labor is exchanged for money and money for goods, and in the process, labor becomes a thing, a commodity just like the goods for which we exchange money. 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, become open to new perspectives on the world, and develop the capacity to imagine more congenial, humane ways of living together on the planet). Although it is the use value of learning that adult learners and adult educators keep in mind, it is the exchange value that policy makers and purse holders consult when determining whether programs should be funded and how they should be evaluated. A transformative adult learning experience such as going to college and finding one's worldview radically altered becomes converted into a qualification that can be exchanged for higher salary and status.

In the process of commodification, it is not only our labor that is turned into an abstract object. Our relationships too become fetishized, assuming in our eyes "the phantastic form of a relationship between things" (Marx, 1973, p. 72). 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 toward children is exchanged for the promise of being looked after in old age. Habermas (1987) described this invasion of our personal lives by capitalist processes of exchange as the colonization of the lifeworld.

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 argued, 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. It has as its explicit intent 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). Critical theory's "goal is man's [*sic*] emancipation from slavery" (Horkheimer, 1995, p. 246). The research tradition most strongly identified with adult 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.

Horkheimer argued that a third crucial difference of critical theory from other kinds is that it breaks down the separation of subject and object, 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) observed, 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 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.

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. 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. The vision of critical theory holds individual identity to be socially and culturally formed. Adult development is viewed as a collective process because 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 brings us to the fifth and final intriguing and distinctive element of critical theory, that verification of the theory is impossible until the social vision it inspires is realized. In other words, we will not 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) put 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. This is definitely not the case with critical theory. The struggle to create the conditions under which the

vision of critical theory can be realized (and therefore tested) is a long, sometimes violent, often revolutionary struggle.

How does Horkheimer's analysis connect to adult learning? 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 implicit in its propositions. Welton (1991, 1993, 1995) is perhaps the most forceful expositor of how critical theory threads a theory of adult learning through its analysis. Subsumed within the general desire of critical theory to understand and then challenge the continuous reproduction of social, political, and economic domination is a question at the heart of a critical theory of adult learning: How is it that adults learn to detect, critique, and then challenge ideological manipulation?

IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE AS AN ADULT LEARNING PROCESS

In his analysis of critical theory, Guess (1981) wrote that "the very heart of the critical theory of society is its criticism of ideology. Their ideology is what prevents the agents in the society from correctly perceiving their true situation and real interests; if they are to free themselves from social repression, the agents must rid themselves of ideological illusion" (pp. 2-3). Clearly then, a critical theory of adult learning must begin by exploring how adults learn to resist ideological manipulation. Yet, the concept of ideology is complex and contested, in McLellan's (1986) judgment, "the most elusive concept in the whole of social science" (p. 1). However, although the term is used in multiple ways, it has a distinctive meaning within the critical tradition. This tradition builds on Marx's view that the relations of production and material conditions of society determine people's consciousness. Ideology "signifies ideas and beliefs which help to legitimate the interests of a ruling group or class specifically by distortion and dissimulation" (Eagleton, 1991, p. 30). Critical theory sees ideology as inherently duplicitous, as a system of false beliefs that justify practices and structures that keep people unknowingly in servitude. Contemporary theorists such as Eagleton (1991) have taken issue with this view, arguing that ideologies are not, by definition, false and that a condition of their gaining continued acceptance is that they contain elements that are broadly seen as true (a point also made by Gramsci). He also unmasks the condescension underlying the ideology as false consciousness position: "To believe that immense numbers of people would live and sometimes die in the name of ideas which were absolutely vacuous and absurd is to take up an unpleasantly demeaning attitude towards ordinary men and women" (p. 12).

Yet, the fact remains that within the critical theory tradition, the predominant understanding of ideology has very distinct connotations of oppression and domination, of its being used to subjugate and hoodwink people into accepting as normal and justifiable a permanent state of inequity. To quote Eagleton (1991) again, "The study of ideology is among other things an inquiry into the ways in which people

may come to invest in their own unhappiness" (p. xiii). Critical theory views ideologies as broadly accepted sets of values, beliefs, myths, explanations, and justifications that appear self-evidently true, empirically accurate, personally relevant, and morally desirable to a majority of the populace, but that actually work to maintain an unjust social and political order. Ideology does this by convincing people that existing social arrangements are naturally ordained and obviously work for the good of all. As Marx and Engels (1970) wrote, the ruling class aims "to represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of society. . . . It has to give its ideas the form of universality and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones" (p. 66).

Ideologies are hard to detect being embedded in language, social habits, and cultural forms that combine to shape the way we think about the world. They appear as commonsense, as givens, rather than as beliefs that are deliberately skewed to support the interests of a powerful minority. Understanding this process—how ideology works to support the power of a minority—is the central idea in the often quoted sentence from Marx and Engels's (1970) *The German Ideology*: "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. . . . The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production" (p. 64). The individuals comprising this ruling class exercise dominion not just over the production and distribution of material goods. They "rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age" (p. 64). In recent years, poststructuralists such as Foucault have clarified how knowledge and power entwine to create regimes of truth: dominant ideas, frameworks of analysis, and forms of discourse that shape how we think about the world.

Strongly influenced by Gramsci's notion of hegemony, the French philosopher Louis Althusser (1971) deepened the understanding of ideology in his influential essay on "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." For Althusser, ideology was a systematic form of thought control that ensured that people at all levels of the economic and social system accepted the system's basic reasonableness. Ideology intentionally obscured the fact that the system was based on certain values that furthered some interests over others. If ever the possibility of alternative values was seriously countenanced, then the system could be challenged. But if the system was accepted as a natural phenomenon needing no explanation or justification (because its essential rightness was so obvious), then the possibility of resistance evaporated.

Althusser (1971) believed that people lived naturally and spontaneously in ideology without realizing that fact. He wrote that "those who are ideological believe themselves by definition outside ideology: one of the effects of ideology is the practical denigration of the ideological character of ideology by ideology: ideology never says, 'I am ideological.'" (p. 175). In Althusser's view, we can claim in all sincerity to be neutral, objective, and free of ideological distortion when this is really an impossibility. This conviction of their own nonideological nature extends

even to those who "manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they, too, will provide for the domination of the ruling class 'in words'" (p. 133). For ideological domination to endure, "All the agents of production, exploitation and repression, not to speak of the 'professionals of ideology' (Marx) must in one way or another be 'steeped' in this ideology in order to perform their tasks 'conscientiously'" (p. 133). To Althusser, it was obvious that ideological managers (including adult educators) would sincerely and strenuously deny the ideological character of their work ("I'm just here to teach basic skills"). Being immersed in ideology prevented them from stepping outside it and perceiving its social functioning.

How can people be so steeped in ideology without being aware of that? Althusser (1971) argued that this was made possible because "an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices" (p. 166) and because "the 'ideas' of a human subject exist in his actions" (p. 168). These actions are then "inserted into practices governed by rituals of dominant ideology" (p. 182). In other words, ideology lives and breathes in our daily decisions, routine behaviors, and small-scale interactions. This takes into the world of Goffman and the framing of everyday rituals and also to Foucault's emphasis on the inscription of disciplinary power in the practices of daily life. Intimate gestures, routinized professional conduct, and conversational conventions all reflect a wider ordering of power relations that is unconsciously confirmed in these practices. As Giddens (1991) argued 20 years after Althusser's essay, "The most subtle forms of ideology are buried in the modes in which concrete, day to day practices are organized" (p. 23). Ideology thus becomes less a clearly identifiable system of ideas and more a participation in actions, social games, and rituals that are themselves ideologically determined. People participate in these practices through what Althusser called *ideological state apparatuses*.

Althusser (1971) posited two types of socialization agencies that ensured the predominance of the ruling ideology: repressive state apparatuses (such as the legal system, police, and armed forces) and ideological state apparatuses (such as the church, mass media, and community associations) of which education is the most important. Ideological state apparatuses (his shorthand for them was ISAs) exist mostly within civil society but ensure that the state reaches into and controls that part of life. His thesis was that "no class can hold state power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the state ideological apparatuses" (p. 146). Education as an ideological state apparatus works to ensure the perpetuation of dominant ideology not so much by teaching values that support that ideology but more by immersing learners in ideologically determined practices. These practices (such as chopping up the curriculum into discrete chunks to be absorbed, measuring learning and the quality of teaching by percentage improvement scores on standardized tests, and moving people in streams and age-based grades through a system at a pace and in a manner over which they have

no control) are perceived as rational and obvious but actually support certain ways of understanding and ordering the world.

By participating in the kinds of practices mentioned above, people learn "know how" "in forms which ensure subjection to the ruling ideology or the mastery of its 'practice'" (Althusser, 1971, p. 133). Educational institutions become analogs of capitalism in which "the relations of production in a capitalist social formation i.e., the relations of exploited to exploiters and exploiters to exploited, are largely reproduced" (p. 156). The rules of good behavior, of morality, and of civic and professional conscience learned in school by students "actually means rules of respect for the socio-technical division of labor and ultimately the rules of order established by class domination" (p. 132). Of course, ideology requires that this learning appear neutral so that education is falsely perceived as purged of, or sidestepping, ideology. Teachers believe that they are imparting values of self-determination to students who are making a free choice to accept or reject these. Neither group can see the ideological web in which it is caught.

In critical theory, understanding and challenging the workings of ideology has been a dominant concern, one often expressed as *ideology critique*. Ideology critique is an activity springing from the Enlightenment conviction that living fully as an adult means acting on the basis of instincts, impulses, and desires that are truly our own, rather than implanted in us. Because capitalism will do its utmost to convince us that we should live in ways that support its workings, we cannot be fully adult unless we attempt to unearth and challenge the ideology that justifies this system. In doing this, we come to see that the inclinations, biases, hunches, and apparently intuitive ways of experiencing reality that we regard as unique to us are socially learned. What we consider to be our idiosyncratic perspectives and dispositions are now realized to be, in Marcuse's (1964) terms, ideologically sedimented. Ideology critique helps us understand how we learn political ideals, morality, and social philosophy within the institutions of civil society such as schools, associations, clubs, family, and friendship networks. It also shows us that the constructs and categories we use to understand our daily experiences are ideologically framed. What Williams (1977) called our "structures of feeling" are seen in ideology critique as socially induced, learned from the cultural group and social class to which we belong. So doing ideology critique involves adults learning to become aware of how ideology lives within them as well as understanding how it buttresses the structures of the outside world that works against them. What strikes us as the normal order of things is suddenly revealed through ideology critique as a constructed reality that protects the interests of the powerful.

One of the most important extensions to the understanding of ideological control, particularly emphasizing this as a process of adult learning, is Gramsci's (1995) analysis of hegemony. Hegemony describes the way that people learn to accept as natural and in their own best interest an unjust social order. In one of Gramsci's most invoked phrases, "Every relationship of hegemony is necessarily an educational relationship" (p. 157). People learn to embrace as commonsense

wisdom certain beliefs and political conditions that work against their interests and serve those of the powerful. If hegemony works as it should, then there is no need for the state to employ coercive forms of control—heavy policing, curfews, torture, assassination squads—to maintain social order. Instead of people opposing and fighting unjust structures and dominant beliefs, they learn to regard them as preordained, part of the cultural air they breathe. In many ways, hegemony is the conceptual bridge between the Marxist notion of dominant ideology and Habermas's idea of the colonization of the lifeworld by capitalism and technical rationality. It emphasizes how the logic of capitalism, especially the logic of commodification discussed earlier, seeps and soaks itself into all aspects of everyday life—culture, health care, recreation, even intimate relationships.

The subtle tenacity and adaptability of hegemony lies in the fact that it is very difficult to peel away layers of oppression to uncover a small cabal clearly conspiring to keep the majority silent and disenfranchised. If there is any conspiracy at work here, it is the conspiracy of the normal. The ideas and practices of hegemony—the stock opinions, conventional wisdom, and commonsense ways of behaving in particular situations that we take for granted—are part and parcel of everyday life. It is not as if these are being forced on us against our will. The dark irony, the cruelty of hegemony, is that adults take pride in learning and then acting on the beliefs and assumptions that work to enslave them. In learning diligently to live by these assumptions, people become their own jailers. By incorporating the concept of hegemony into the analysis of ideology, Gramsci widens our understanding of how ideology contributes to the maintenance of social control. The emphasis shifts from understanding how the state or sovereign imposes a view of the world on a neutral, skeptical, or resentful populace to understanding how people are willing partners with the ruling group actively colluding in their own oppression. Indeed, getting adults to learn oppression is the central educational task of hegemony.

The concept of hegemony also extends our understanding of power, in some ways anticipating Foucault's (1980) much later work in this area. Foucault argued that in contemporary society power worked in much more subtle ways than previously acknowledged and that it should be understood as a circulation or flow around society rather than as something statically imposed from above. In his view, we have moved from the exercise of sovereign power (power clearly exercised by a recognizable central controlling force) to the exercise of disciplinary power (power exercised on ourselves by ourselves). Because we learn self-discipline, undertake self-surveillance, and exercise self-censorship, there is little need for dominant groups to force ideas or behaviors on us. The parallel here is with hegemony's emphasis on getting people to learn and love their place. Gramsci and Foucault both see adults as colluding in their own servitude, thereby removing the state's need to enforce this.

Gramsci's concept of hegemony is chilling stuff. Hegemony is powerful yet adaptable, able to reconfigure itself, skillfully incorporate resistance, and give just enough away to its opponents while remaining more or less intact. Yet, Gramsci

also opened up the possibility of opposition. Indeed, for him, the point of political action was to establish a new hegemony, that of the working class. Just as Foucault believed power was an inescapable and ever present force in human affairs, so Gramsci believed there would always be hegemonic domination. The question to ask was on whose behalf this domination was being exercised. For him, the point was to replace capitalist hegemony with working class hegemony, with a hegemony that represented the interests of the majority.

Gramsci's work represents an unequivocal siting of adult critical reflection in political struggle. Given the centrality of hegemony to ideological analysis, a critical theory of adult learning should help us understand how adults learn to recognize hegemony in the beliefs and assumptions they live by, and the structures they live within. It should also examine how adults learn to contest hegemony individually and collectively by striving to replace it with a system of beliefs and practices that represents the interests of the majority.

Critiquing Critical Theory: Reengaging Ideology Critique With Pragmatism

Just as critical theory illuminates the way that positivism and Enlightenment rationality are cultural artifacts (rather than universal truths), forms of understanding created in a particular time and place, so we must understand critical theory itself as the product of a particular social, political, and intellectual milieu. In Marcuse's (1968) words, "Critical theory is, last but not least, critical of itself and of the social forces that make up its own basis" (p. 72). So for critical theory to be critical, it must be on guard against its own ossification as a "grand theory" meant to explain all social interaction, for all people and for all time. A critical stance toward critical theory entails a productive skepticism with regard to its universality and accuracy. It means that those engaged in critical theory building must apply the same standards of critical analysis to their own theory as they do to that theory developed by those energetically pursuing capitalism and subscribing to bureaucratic rationality. Predictably, those within critical theory who ask uncomfortable questions and point out the theory's negative consequences risk being ostracized as intellectually unsound pariahs. Critical theory has its share of Stalinists who will not tolerate deviation from the party line.

Howard Zinn (1990), a prominent American historian, pointed out that those who challenge the social order are just as capable of creating their own orthodoxies as are dominant groups. He wrote that "the experience of our century tells us that the old orthodoxies, the traditional ideologies, the neatly tied bundles of ideas—capitalism, socialism, democracy—need to be untied, so that we can play and experiment with all the ingredients, add others, and create new combinations in looser bundles" (p. 8). Zinn urged us to make declarations of independence from rigid dogmas, and it is precisely this self-critical posture toward its own proposi-

tions that a critical theory of adult learning must display. This self-critical stance is familiar within critical theory because the theory itself began as an attempt to reformulate Marxist thought in conditions Marx had not foreseen. Gramsci (1971) observed that Marxism "tends to become an ideology in the worst sense of the word, that is to say a dogmatic system of eternal and absolute truths" (p. 407). In a 1918 article in *Il Grido del Popolo* (*The People's Cry*), Gramsci (1988) wrote that Marx "is not a Messiah who left a string of parables laden with categorical imperatives, with absolute unquestionable norms beyond the categories of time and space" (p. 36). He believed that the value of Marxist ideas was always a provisional value.

In Gramsci's stance toward Marx we can see how critical theory stands consistently for a rejection of unchanging dogma and is watchful for its own reification. In the holy trinity of contemporary ideology critique—race, gender, and class—it is race and gender that have assumed greater prominence and class that has been displaced. Feminism, Afrocentrism, queer studies, postcolonialism, and critical race theory are just a sampling of critical positions that point to omissions in the Frankfurt School analysis. In addition, as a helpful anonymous reviewer of this article pointed out, the binary Marxist framework of ruling and working class (the few and the many) is too parsimonious to address the multiplicity of social and ideological formulations that warrant inclusion in a critical theory of adult learning. Space does not permit a consideration of these critiques, each of which warrants several volumes. But a reunification of ideology critique and pragmatism—in which the latter does not overshadow the former—goes some way to ensure that critical theory remains on guard against its own entombment. Pragmatism's emphasis on unanticipated contingency and its openness to continuous reformulation means it strives for ever greater degrees of inclusiveness. Engaging ideology critique with pragmatism means that the former is constantly alert to addressing the sorts of omissions identified above. It also opens the insights of critical theory to those who do not consider themselves Marxist. If, as McLaren (1997) argued, "many if not most critical educators work outside the orthodox Marxian tradition and do not consider capitalism an irrevocable evil" (p. 172), then a critically pragmatic stance toward Marxism brings useful non-Marxist analyses into the discourse.

Not all agree that such a fusion is either possible or desirable. Indeed, several of those associated with the critical tradition reject entirely the idea that pragmatism has any liberatory dimension. In his introduction to a reissued volume of Horkheimer's (1995) essays, Aronowitz condemns pragmatism as subversive of, and antithetical to, social and political critique, describing it as "the theory of nontheory" and claiming that "it leaves no room for critical theory" (pp. xv-xvi). In *Eclipse of Reason*, originally published in 1947, Horkheimer (1947/1974) himself denounced pragmatism as a form of scientism that put all its faith in improvement through systematic experimentation and therefore represented the intellectual "counterpart of modern industrialism" (p. 50). The result of pragmatism's focus on the experimental improvement of contemporary conditions meant that "speculative

thought is altogether liquidated" (p. 103). Gramsci (1971) too regarded pragmatism's focus on practice as undertheorized and inherently conservative, leading "to the justification of conservative and reactionary movements" (p. 373).

However, if we conceive of pragmatism as the flexible pursuit of beautiful consequences, it is reasonable to argue that the most beautiful social consequences of all are those of freedom and justice presupposed by Horkheimer (1995) as the defining necessities of critical theory (pp. 230, 242). Taking a pragmatic slant on critical theory argues for a defensible flexibility with regard to ways these values might be realized and encourages a self-critical, self-referential stance. It also reaffirms the creation of democratic forms of life as the central project of theory. The concern to democratize production to serve the whole community, and the desire to reconfigure the workplace as a site for the exercise of human creativity, are the meeting points for critical theory and pragmatism. Habermas (1987) himself acknowledged this connection, admitting that "I have for a long time identified myself with that radical democratic mentality which is present in the best American traditions and articulated in American pragmatism" (p. 198).

Perhaps, the most sustained attempt to reinvent pragmatism as a critical philosophy is West's (1999) passionate enunciation of prophetic pragmatism. The prophetic element in this philosophy "harks back to the Jewish and Christian traditions of prophets who brought urgent and compassionate critique to bear on the evils of their day" (p. 171). The pragmatic element "understands pragmatism as a political form of cultural criticism and locates politics in the everyday experience of ordinary people" (p. 151). West argued that "the emancipatory social experimentation that sits at the center of prophetic pragmatist politics closely resembles the radical democratic elements of Marxist theory, yet its flexibility shuns any dogmatic, a priori or monistic pronouncements" (pp. 151-152). For him, the twin pillars of prophetic pragmatism are "critical temper as a way of struggle and democratic faith as a way of life" (p. 186), with the pragmatist spirit ensuring that the certitudes of critical theory never become reified and are never placed beyond healthy criticism. Despite Gramsci's rejection of pragmatism, West contends that "Gramsci exemplifies the critical spirit and oppositional sentiments of prophetic pragmatism" (p. 169), and he goes so far as to invoke Gramsci's concept of organic intellectuals in describing prophetic pragmatists as those who "relate ideas to action by means of creating, constituting or consolidating constituencies for moral aims and political purposes" (p. 146).

CONCLUSION

A 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 ideology that serves the interests of the few against the well-being of the many. Such a theory is inevitably 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, and unmask power. Such a theory must therefore 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 well-being and adult development. A critical theory of adult learning will always come back to the ways in which adults learn to do this.

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