

# **Exploring the Meaning of Critical Theory for Adult Learning**

Theory is a dangerous word, one that should not be used lightly. Acting on what they believe are accurate theories of human nature or political development, people have started wars, committed murder, and sanctioned torture. As Zinn (1990) observes, “How we think is . . . a matter of life and death” (p. 2). Sometimes those who use the word *theory* give off a whiff of self-importance, as if telling the reader “look out, here comes something truly profound.” Monty Python’s Flying Circus hilariously parodied the theorist’s tendency to portentousness in a skit involving John Cleese as Miss Anne Elk, the proud possessor of a new theory concerning the brontosaurus. After archly and repeatedly declaring to a TV interviewer that she has her very own theory, Miss Elk reveals (after considerable coaxing by Graham Chapman the interviewer) the substance of the theory: the brontosaurus was thin at one end, much, much thicker in the middle, and then thin at the other end. The sketch ends with Miss Elk trying in vain to disclose her second theory.

It is not only the Monty Python team that mocks the pretensions of theorists. Given what theorists see as the contextual, splintered nature of reality, postmodern analysis views large-scale theory generation as a naïve and self-deluding modernist project, as so much wasted effort. Postmodernism contends that the world is essentially fragmented and that what passes for theoretical generalizations are really only context-specific insights produced by particular discourse communities. Academics aware of this critique who are leery about

appearing out of date are tempted to abandon any attempt even to speak or write the word *theory*. After all, if everything is local, particular, idiosyncratic, then isn't trying to build generalizable theories a waste of time? That I wrote this book means, obviously, that I believe the answer to this question is "not really" and that any abandonment of theory is premature. But a book with a focus on theoretical expectation must begin by outlining how the author understands this activity and by justifying why this is still a worthwhile effort rather than a comedic diversion. That is this chapter's intent.

### **What Is Theory?**

If you have the temerity to title a book *The Power of Critical Theory For Adult Learning and Teaching*, you may create in some readers the expectation that a comprehensive explanatory framework accounting for all aspects of adult learning will spring forth. I want to counter this expectation at the outset. What I am trying to do is review one particular theoretical framework—critical theory—and explore the implications this work has for our understanding of adult learning and the practice of adult education. Inevitably, in focusing on one tradition, others are discounted. The critical theory tradition draws on Marxist scholarship to illuminate the ways in which people accept as normal a world characterized by massive inequities and the systemic exploitation of the many by the few. For adult educators the tradition helps us understand how people learn to perceive and challenge this situation. A critical approach to understanding adult learning sees it as comprising a number of crucial tasks such as learning how to perceive and challenge dominant ideology, unmask power, contest hegemony, overcome alienation, pursue liberation, reclaim reason, and practice democracy. A theoretical tradition concerned primarily with learning critical consciousness will obviously neglect some kinds of instrumental or technical learning. A critical theory of adult learning may strive to be as comprehensive as possible in describing and explaining the development of social and political awareness, but it should not be expected to account for the full range of learning activities evident in adults.

I also want to warn against the unjustified valorization or reification of theory, against the idea that theorizing is a high-status

intellectual process restricted to a talented few. Theorizing should not be thought of as a process restricted to the academy and the preserve of the intelligentsia, but rather as an inevitability of sentient existence. A theory is nothing more (or less) than a set of explanatory understandings that help us make sense of some aspect of the world. To the extent that making sense of existence is a natural human activity, it is accurate to say that we are all theorists and that we all theorize; in Gramsci's (1971, p. 9) terms, "all men are intellectuals" (he would surely say "all people" were he writing today). Interpreting, predicting, explaining, and making meaning are acts we engage in whether or not we set out deliberately to do so, or whether or not we use these terms to describe what we're doing.

So theory is not the preserve of university professors who disseminate it in refereed journals and scholarly monographs. It is produced and abandoned, refined and discarded, through everyday conversations, whether these are spoken or written, live or asynchronous. To quote Gramsci (1971) again, each person is a theorist because she or he "participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is to bring into being new modes of thought" (p. 9). Thinking this way challenges the idea of theory as a restrictive professional discourse, the understanding of which requires specialist training in the philosophy and methodology of science. Although theorizing in the natural and social sciences can be richly elaborate and sophisticated requiring the development of specialized terminology, its difference from the quotidian theorizing of everyday action is one of degree, not of kind.

Theory can be more or less formal, wider or deeper in scope, and expressed in a range of ways, but its basic thrust—to make sense of the world, communicate that understanding to others, and thereby enable us to take informed action—stays constant. Theory is eminently practical. Our actions as people, and as educators, are often based on understandings we hold about how the world works. The more deliberate and intentional an action is, the more likely it is to be theoretical. To this extent theory is inherently teleological; that is, it imbues human actions with purpose. We act in certain ways because we believe this will lead to predictable consequences. Of course, our theory can be bad or wrong—inaccurate and assimilated

uncritically from authority figures. We can act on understandings that consistently lead us into harmful situations yet remain committed to our theory because we are convinced we haven't understood it or its implications properly. But always in the midst of practice, of action, of judgment and decision, is theory.

### **The Utility of Theory**

In an eloquent passage in *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), bell hooks testifies to the way theory saved her life. In describing her need to make sense of her own family's dynamics, she writes, "I came to theory because I was hurting—the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing" (p. 59). In his review of critical theory and poststructuralism, Poster (1989) too notes that "critical theory springs from an assumption that we live amidst a world of pain, that much can be done to alleviate that pain, and that theory has a crucial role to play in that process" (p. 3). Both hooks and Poster demonstrate the utilitarian base to much theorizing, in this case the alleviation of pain. Theorizing—generating provisional explanations that help us understand and act in the world—helps us breathe clearly when we feel stifled by the smog of confusion. We theorize so we can understand what's happening to us and so that we can take informed actions. Our hope is that we can justify the time spent theorizing by developing insights that will be useful to us. The everyday theories of action that frame our practice as adult educators are highly functional. They are not usually developed for their intellectual elegance or enduring conceptual beauty; indeed, they are brutally abandoned when they cease to be helpful to us. If they're useful we keep them, if they're not we dump them.

How exactly might we judge the utility of a critical theory of adult learning? In other words, what leads us to keep it or dump it? Three considerations suggest themselves. First, a theory is useful if it helps explain a piece of the world to us. This explanation will probably be provisional and replaced at a later date by one that seems even more accurate, that accounts for unresolved contra-

dictions and complexities, and that covers a greater range of instances. From this point of view, theorizing is a form of meaning making, born of a desire to create explanations that impose conceptual order on reality, however artificial this order might later turn out to be. There is a direct connection here to Mezirow's (1991a) work on transformative learning which posits a developmental trajectory of adult meaning making as people develop meaning perspectives (broad frames of reference that shape how we see the world) that are increasingly comprehensive and discriminating. So a theory is useful to the extent that it provides us with understandings that illuminate what we observe and experience.

Clearly, just getting a better sense of why things are the way they are is often helpful. Even if we realize that our problems are reflections of structural contradictions that we can do little about individually, knowing that we are not their cause is crucial to our well-being. One of the earliest myths educators, including adult educators, learn is the myth that, in Britzman's (1991) words, "everything depends on the teacher." If we embrace this myth, then we are quick to believe that every time things go wrong (for example, when students are hostile to, or apathetic about, curriculum and learning activities that we feel should animate their enthusiasm), it is because we are somehow at fault for not being sufficiently sensitive to students' experiences and learning styles or being less than fully charismatic. When a theoretical insight concerning hegemony (the process by which we embrace ideas and practices that keep us enslaved) helps us understand our practice in a new way, it often takes a great weight of potential guilt off our shoulders. There is no shame in admitting that we need theoretical insights to help us understand how the same destructive scenarios keep emerging in our lives, despite our best efforts to prevent these. Without theoretical help it is easy to fall prey to the danger of unjustified self-laceration as we fail to see how many of our private troubles are produced by systemic constraints and contradictions.

So reading theory helps us name or rename aspects of our experience that elude or puzzle us. When we read an explanation that interprets a paradoxical experience in a new or more revealing way, the experience often becomes more comprehensible. As a result we feel the world is more accessible, more open to our influence. When someone else's words illuminate or confirm a privately realized

insight, we feel affirmed and recognized. Seeing a personal insight stated as a theoretical proposition makes us more likely to take seriously our own reasoning and judgments. Theory can also prevent us from falling victim to the traps of relativism and isolationism that bedevil adult educational practice. Through studying theory that has sprung from situations and concerns outside our circle of practice, we gain insight into those features of our work that are context-specific and those that are more generic. Embedded as we are in our cultures, histories, and contexts, it is easy for us to slip into the habit of generalizing from the particular. By offering unfamiliar interpretations of familiar events, theory can jar us in a productive way and suggest other ways of working.

Without attention to theory, we can easily remain fixated on the particular puzzles of our own practice. Critical theory helps us understand that these puzzles are not necessarily procedural kinks or pedagogic tangles of our own making that we need to take responsibility for unraveling. Instead they are sometimes politically sculpted situations illustrating the internal contradictions of the capitalist system in which we work. We come to see that these situations are the predictable consequence of trying to do something highly complex (help adults learn) within a system that is organized according to bureaucratic rationality and modes of factory production. Such a system ignores complexity and assumes, for example, that learning takes place at predictable times each week, in the same location, and follows the rationale of a curriculum divided into discrete and manageable units. We come to realize, too, how the inequities of race, class, and gender play themselves out in front of our eyes, reflecting dynamics that seem beyond our influence.

This first criterion of theoretical utility is basically representational. It springs from modernist epistemology that holds that our minds can construct increasingly accurate pictures of the world. As Bagnall (1999) puts it, modernist epistemology is “open to an infinite progression of ever more perfect representations of the material world, each one more general and more powerful than that or those it replaced, but always carrying with it the presupposition of further fallibility” (p. 23). This epistemology has come under increasing attack to the extent that postmodernism scorns any attempts to theorize beyond the individual case as hopeless acts of

self-deception. Nonetheless, despite postmodernist skepticism adult educators display a remarkable tenacity in their desire to theorize and to use this theorizing to improve their practice. Indeed, one of the most frequently voiced complaints about critical deconstructions of adult educational practice is that these demonstrate practitioners' shortcomings, particularly their oppressive behaviors, without offering any suggestions as to how these failings might be addressed. Reading critiques that only leave us feeling foolish, misguided, or guilty, and that contain no hope for remaking our practice in more democratic ways, condemns us to nihilism or cynicism. In rejecting such demoralization throughout his life, it is no accident that Paulo Freire titled one of his last texts *Pedagogy of Hope* (1994).

A second way a theory can be judged as useful is the extent that it helps us understand not just how the world is but also how it might be changed for the better. (Of course, how one defines *better* is framed by one's class, culture, race, sexual preference, and ideology, among other things.) One of the strongest hopes of critical theory is that consideration of its understandings will prompt social and political change, often of a revolutionary nature. As Fay (1987) puts it, "A critical theory wants to explain a social order in such a way that it becomes itself the catalyst which leads to the transformation of this social order" (p. 27). So as well as providing different and helpful images of our practice that help us place what we do in wider social and political contexts, we can also ask of theory that it assist us in doing good work. Given that we all have only so much passion and commitment to draw on (we are not inexhaustible wells of energy), we need to be as sure as we can that such energy as we have is being deployed to greatest effect. This is what public intellectual and social critic Cornel West argues in his dialogue with bell hooks (hooks and West, 1991). For West, theory is "an indispensable weapon in struggle because it provides certain kinds of understanding, certain kinds of illumination, certain kinds of insights that are requisite if we are to act effectively" (hooks and West, 1991, p. 34).

So it is reasonable to expect a critical theory of adult learning to suggest ways that adult education can contribute to building a society organized according to democratic values of fairness,

justice, and compassion. In Horkheimer's (1995) terms, "the issue . . . is not just the theory of emancipation; it is the practice of it as well" (p. 233). In the critical tradition, theoretical utility is judged by criteria that are normatively based in a philosophical vision of the good, fully emancipated society. As we shall see in the next section, this emphasis on normative values is central to critical theory. Critical theory aims to help bring about a society of freedom and justice, a set of "beautiful consequences" as pragmatists might say. Consequently, we can assess critical theory's usefulness by judging how well it offers us guidance on the very practical matters of naming and fighting those enemies that are opposed to these consequences (Newman, 1994).

Third, a theory can offer us a form of radical hope that helps us stand against the danger of energy-sapping, radical pessimism. When we start to analyze the power and persistence of dominant ideologies, we can quickly reach the conclusion that there is little anyone can do to stand against the massive twin pillars of capitalism and bureaucratic rationality or against the monolith of the military-industrial complex. Knowing about the strength and persistence of the forces that use education to transmit dominant cultural values can leave us feeling puny and alone. Knowing that challenging dominant ideology risks bringing punishment down on our heads is depressing and frightening. It is easy to become demoralized when one realizes the strength of the opposition. As capitalism becomes truly global and exerts its influence through multinational corporations across state boundaries, it becomes harder and harder to envisage how citizens can stand against capitalism's encroachment into civil society.

This is where a critical theory of adult learning can help outline a pedagogy of hope, one where the possibility of democratic transformation of education and society is still alive. The fact that critical theory and the Frankfurt School's work exists at all, and that it has galvanized the energies of people across the world, is evidence that the dominant ideology of capitalism is not as pervasively stifling as we sometimes believe. If part of critical theory's purpose is to help adults realize the ways dominant ideology limits and circumscribes what people feel is possible in life, then raising awareness of how this happens provides "the necessary theoretical opening for understanding how an educative process might enable people to give up their illusions" (Welton, 1995, p. 13). Hence, crit-



ical theory can be deemed effective to the extent that it keeps alive the hope that the world can be changed to make it fairer and more compassionate.

I don't want to suggest, however, that for a theory to be useful it must generate neatly encapsulated formulations and implications for practice—standardized models, techniques, and approaches that can be easily applied across adult educational contexts. As Shalin (1992) wryly observes, “Things themselves do not suffer theory gladly and are sure to spoil our best faith efforts” (p. 268). Perhaps the most we can reasonably hope for is that those who understand their work through the lens of critical theory might document publicly the ways this understanding shapes, or at least influences, that work. An exemplar in this regard is Ira Shor, who has consistently outlined how his own practice of critical pedagogy is built upon the critical theory tradition in general and the thought of Paulo Freire in particular.

In a series of finely written books (1987a, 1992, 1996), Shor offers compelling yet highly practical images of educational practice that have inspired many to experiment with different approaches in their own work (Shor, 1987b; Shor and Pari, 1999, 2000). His vignettes of apathetic students, rundown premises, learners' hostility to participatory approaches, and teachers' depression in the face of these factors are immediately recognizable to any educator who has tried to act on the insights of critical theory. In describing his responses to these vignettes, Shor provides numerous helpful suggestions that are rich in context-specific, illustrative detail, with no implication that these should be copied or reproduced. Yet the creativity he displays probably encourages many readers to break with their own tried and tested ways of doing things and serves as a point of departure for some useful experimentation. One concrete example of this in graduate adult education is the attempt by students and faculty at National Louis University in Chicago to create a democratic doctorate in adult education, drawing explicitly on some of Shor's suggestions (Avila and others, 2000).

In a review of several adult educational texts on teaching practices, Hayes (1993) opines that “it has always seemed to me somewhat unreasonable to expect teachers to tackle the formidable task of empowerment with few concrete tools” (p. 183). I agree with

her sentiments. Whilst I support theorists' reluctance to prescribe standardized responses to complex, contradictory, and politically sculpted situations, I don't believe that those who write about theory can just throw up their hands and say, "Sorry, don't look to us for help in responding to these problems. Our job is done once we've analyzed them." To turn one's back on matters of practice and separate these from theoretical analysis is a denial of the idea of praxis—the constant intersection of opposites such as analysis and action—that is so central to the critical theory tradition.

I have always felt it is a cop-out to refuse to discuss adult educational practice, particularly when one's analysis derives from an intellectual tradition that says the point of understanding the world is to be able to change it. After all, critical theory and its contemporary educational applications such as critical pedagogy are grounded in an activist desire to fight oppression, injustice, and bigotry and create a fairer, more compassionate world. Central to this tradition is a concern with highly practical projects—the practice of penetrating ideology, countering hegemony, and working democratically. Given that luminaries in the critical canon such as Gramsci were more than ready to describe in great detail the specifics of revolutionary strategy (for example, the creation and functioning of the factory council organization), it is surprising that such a deep suspicion of documenting practice (while not reifying it) has crept into adult educational interpretations of critical theory.

A refusal by theorists to dirty their hands with the specifics of practice is epistemologically untenable. Like it or not, we are all theorists and our formal and informal theories of practice inevitably frame how we approach helping adults learn. Conversely, our theoretical quests are usually initiated by our desires to explain and resolve the practical contradictions and tangles that consume our energies. The formal theory that appears in books and journals may be a more codified, regulated, and abstracted form of thinking about general problems, but it is not different in kind from the understandings embedded in our own local decisions and actions.

## **The Meaning of Criticality in Critical Theory**

This is a book not just about theory but about a particular type of theory—critical theory. This takes us into deep waters indeed, since

the term *critical* is deeply perverse in the plurality of connotations and interpretations (some of them contradictory) it provokes. Nonetheless, what this book is trying to do is explore a theory of adult learning that could be described as critical. Obviously, then, I need to explain exactly what this term means.

Criticality is a contested idea, one with a variety of meanings each claimed by different groups for very different purposes. How the term *critical* is used inevitably reflects the ideology and worldview of the user. As an example, consider the different ways people understand what it means to learn in a critical way at the workplace. Following the work of Argyris (1982), critical learning, thinking, and reflection are represented by executives' use of lateral, divergent thinking strategies and double loop learning methods. Here adult workers are deemed to learn critically when they examine the assumptions that govern business decisions by checking whether or not these decisions are grounded in an accurately assessed view of market realities. Inferential ladders are scrutinized for the false rungs that lead business teams into, for example, a disastrous choice regarding the way in which a brand image upsets a certain group of potential customers. The consequence of this exercise in critical thought is an increase in profits and productivity, and a decrease in industrial sabotage and worker absenteeism. Capitalism is left unchallenged as more creative or humanistic ways are found to organize production or sell services. The free market is infused with a social democratic warmth that curtails its worst excesses. The ideological and structural premises of the capitalist workplace remain intact.

For others, critical learning in a business setting cannot occur without an explicit critique of capitalism (Collins, 1991; Simon, Dippo, and Schenke, 1991; Mojab and Gorman, 2003). This kind of critical learning at the workplace involves workers fighting the immoral practice of relocating plants to countries where pollution controls are much looser, unions are banned, and labor is much cheaper. It challenges the demonizing of union members as corrupt Stalinist obstructionists engaged in a consistent misuse of power and explores the conditions under which successful organizing takes place. It investigates the ways in which profits are distributed and the conditions under which those profits are generated. It points out and queries the legitimation of capitalist ideology through changes

in language; for example, the creeping and ever more widespread use of phrases such as “buying into” or “creating ownership” of an idea, the description of students as “customers,” or the use of euphemisms such as “downsizing” or worse, “rightsizing” (with its implication that firing people restores some sort of natural ecological balance to the market) to soften and make palatable the reality of people losing their livelihoods, homes, marriages, self-respect, and hope.

In critical theory terms, the workplace is transformed when cooperative democracy and worker control replace the distribution of profits among shareholders and when workplace learning focuses on the worker’s exercise of her creative capacities in terms she herself defines. In Horkheimer’s (1995) words, “Critical thinking . . . is motivated today by the effort to abolish the opposition between the individual’s purposefulness, spontaneity, and rationality, and those work-process relationships on which society is built” (p. 210). The factory councils in Turin, the Clydeside Shipbuilding (Scotland) sit-in, the 1968 occupation of the Renault factory outside Paris—these would be examples of workplace learning in this perspective.

How is it that the same term can be used to refer to such different activities? To understand the concept of criticality properly we need to disentangle the different, and often conflicting, intellectual traditions informing its use. Four predominant traditions inform criticality: ideology critique as seen in neo-Marxism and the work of the Frankfurt School of Critical Social Theory (the primary tradition examined in this book), psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, analytic philosophy and logic, and pragmatist constructivism.

### **Four Traditions of Criticality**

In a provocative essay, “Making Critical Thinking Critical,” Kincheloe (2000) argues that the political and ethical dimensions integral to criticality have been forgotten in contemporary programs of critical thinking. To him, criticality is grounded in the work of the Frankfurt School of Critical Social Theory and the ideas of Adorno (1973), Horkheimer (1974, 1995), and Marcuse (1964). Critical thinking is really “the ability of individuals to disengage themselves from the tacit assumptions of discursive practices and

power relations in order to exert more conscious control over their everyday lives” (p. 24). This kind of critical distancing from, and then oppositional reengagement with, the dominant culture is the central learning task of adulthood, according to the Frankfurt School, who used the term *ideology critique* to describe this activity. When I talk of criticality and critical theory in this book, it is the ideology critique tradition I am chiefly invoking. As a learning process, ideology critique describes the ways in which people learn to recognize how uncritically accepted and unjust dominant ideologies are embedded in everyday situations and practices. As an educational activity, ideology critique focuses on helping people come to an awareness of how capitalism shapes social relations and imposes—often without our knowledge—belief systems and assumptions (that is, ideologies) that justify and maintain economic and political inequity.

An important element in the ideology critique tradition is the concept of hegemony which explains the way in which people are convinced to embrace dominant ideologies as always being in their own best interests. One of the theorists of hegemony, Antonio Gramsci, points out that because people learn hegemonic values, ideas, and practices, and because schools and other cultural institutions play a major role in presenting these ideas as the natural order of things, hegemony must always be understood as an educational phenomenon. For Jack Mezirow—probably the most influential contemporary theorist of adult learning—doing ideology critique is equivalent to what he calls “systemic” critical reflection that focuses on probing sociocultural distortions (Mezirow, 1991b). Mezirow argues that ideology critique is appropriate for critical reflection on external ideologies such as communism, capitalism, or fascism or for reflection on our own “economic, ecological, educational, linguistic, political, religious, bureaucratic, or other taken-for-granted cultural systems” (Mezirow, 1998, p. 193). Ideology critique contains within it the promise of social transformation and frames the work of influential activist adult educators such as Freire, Tawney, Williams, Horton, Coady, and Tomkins.

A second more psychoanalytically and psychotherapeutically inclined tradition emphasizes criticality in adulthood as the identification and reappraisal of inhibitions acquired in childhood as a result of various traumas. Mezirow (1981) writes of “the emancipa-

tory process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships” (p. 6). Using the framework of transformative learning, theorists like Gould (1990) emphasize the process whereby adults come to realize how childhood inhibitions serve to frustrate them from realizing their full development as persons. This realization is the first step to slaying these inhibiting demons, laying them to rest, and living in a more integrated, authentic manner.

Different theorists emphasize variously the extent to which the development of new social structures is a precondition of a newly constituted, integrated personality. Carl Rogers (1961), for example, sees significant personal learning and personal development as occurring through individual and group therapy and does not address wider political factors—an omission he regretted in his last book, *A Way of Being* (Rogers, 1980). Others, such as Erich Fromm (1941) and Ronald Laing (1960), argue that personality is socially and politically sculpted. These theorists view schizophrenia and mental illness as socially produced phenomena representing the internal contradictions of capitalism. To them the rise of totalitarian and fascist regimes is made possible by the way ideologies structure personality types that yearn for order, predictability, and externally imposed controls. This tradition is also clearly present in Mezirow’s (1991a) groundbreaking theoretical work. To radical psychologists such as Laing and neo-Marxists like Fromm, individual and social transformation cannot be separated. For the personality to be reconstituted, insane and inhumane social forms need to be replaced by congenial social and economic structures, and the contradictions of capitalism need to be reconciled. In *Marx’s Concept of Man* (1961), Fromm argues that the young Marx was convinced that the chief benefit of socialist revolution would be the transformation of the personality, the creation of a new kind of humanitarian citizen.

A third tradition shaping how criticality is thought and spoken about is that of analytic philosophy and logic. Here learning to be critical describes the process by which we become more skillful in argument analysis. In this tradition we act critically when we recognize logical fallacies, when we distinguish between bias and fact,

opinion and evidence, uninformed judgment and valid inference, and when we become skilled at using different forms of reasoning (inductive, deductive, analogical, and so on). This tradition is often very much in evidence in texts on critical thinking (Stice, 1987; Norris and Ennis, 1989) the intent of which is to improve skills of analysis and argument disconnected from any particular ideological critique. In Wittgenstein's (1953) terms, social relations are understood as word games, and social understanding involves unpacking the multiple meanings and uses of language. Social action in this tradition is akin to participating in speech acts (Searle, 1969). Two British adult educators working in this tradition—Kenneth Lawson (1975) and Ralph Patterson (1979)—have produced provocative deconstructions of the concepts of adult learning, adulthood, and adult education. This tradition's concern for linguistic analysis as the defining characteristic of critical thinking seems, on the surface, far removed from Horkheimer's (1995) contention that "the critical attitude . . . is wholly distrustful of the rules of conduct with which society as presently constituted provides each of its members" (p. 207).

Finally, a fourth tradition that many invoke when defining criticality is that of pragmatist constructivism. This tradition emphasizes the way people learn how to construct and deconstruct their own experiences and meanings. Constructivism rejects universals and generalizable truths and focuses instead on the variability of how people make interpretations of their experience. This strand of thought maintains that events happen to us but that experiences are constructed by us. Pragmatism emphasizes the importance of continuous experimentation to bring about better (in pragmatist terms, more beautiful) social forms. It argues that in building a democratic society we experiment, change, and discover our own and others' fallibility.

Democracy is the political form embraced by pragmatism since it fosters experimentation with diversity. Cherryholmes (1999) writes that "pragmatism requires democracy" since "social openness, inclusiveness, tolerance, and experimentation generate more outcomes than closed, exclusive, and intolerant deliberations" (p. 39). Elements of these two traditions are evident in parts of John Dewey's (1938) work and they have filtered, via the work of Eduard Lindeman

([1926] 1961), into adult education's concern with helping people understand their experience and with the field's preference for experiential methods. In Myles Horton's (1990) renowned work at Highlander Folk School, a largely constructivist approach was allied with a tradition of ideology critique to help activists realize that their own experience—properly analyzed in a collaborative but critical way—could be an invaluable resource in their fight for social justice.

My own understanding of criticality draws on all these traditions, but the first of these—ideology critique—is undoubtedly the most prominent. However, I also believe that it is possible to argue a concept of criticality that blends elements of pragmatism into the critical theory traditions. This stance, which might be called critical pragmatism, is one that accepts the essential accuracy and usefulness of the reading of society embedded within ideology critique. It also allies itself with the struggle to create a world in which one's race, class, and gender do not frame the limits within which one can experience life. However, it is also skeptical of any claims to foundationalism or essentialism; that is, to the belief that there is one, and only one, way to conceive of and create such a society.

This fusion of critical theory and pragmatism is not to everyone's taste. 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, Stanley 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* ([1947] 1974), Horkheimer 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).



I believe, however, that the pragmatic tradition is not as destructive to criticality as Horkheimer, Aronowitz, and Gramsci argue. 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 himself as the defining necessities of critical theory (1995, pp. 230, 242). Taking a pragmatic slant on critical theory argues for a defensible flexibility regarding ways these values might be realized and encourages a self-critical, self-referential stance (claimed by some as integral to the critical tradition). 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. The contemporary critical theorist Jürgen Habermas himself acknowledged this, arguing that his work could be interpreted as building on American pragmatism. In a 1985 interview he declared 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). Shalin (1992) too argues that Habermas’ theory of communicative action is “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).

Perhaps the most sustained attempt to reinvent pragmatism as a critical philosophy is Cornel West’s (1999a) 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 argues 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, 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).

## **Marxism and Critical Theory**

In this section I want to position critical theory as part of a wider intellectual debate concerning the correct response to and updating of Marxist analysis in the centuries following his death. 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. In several ways his work shapes much of the work in this tradition. Many of its most important analytical categories—false consciousness, commodification, objectification, alienation—are derived from Marx’s interpretations of Enlightenment thought and his dialogue with Hegel. Wiggerhaus’ (1994) massive survey of the Frankfurt School makes clear that Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Fromm drew particularly on the “early” Marx’s critique of the alienation and diminution of humanity produced by capitalism. In adult education, Habermas’ work (which has been so influential on Mezirow’s development of transformative learning theory) is in many ways a talking back to Marx.

Yet, although Marx’s ideas undergird one strand of transformative learning theory (that drawing on critical theory’s concern with personal liberation), he is rarely mentioned in American adult education. Other than Holst’s (2002) analysis, no major American text in the field takes Marxism as its conceptual center. Perhaps this is because 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

English-speaking countries, adult educators are more ready to engage with Marx as writers such as Law (1992), Mayo (1998), Welton (1995), Allman (2000, 2001), and Youngman (2000), amongst others, demonstrate. Welton (1995) argues 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).

One of the difficulties with remembering Marx is the “knee-jerk ‘marxophobia’” (McLaren, 1997, p. 172) faced by those who draw, 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 all the Frankfurt School theorists to disassociate Marxist analysis from the rigidity of state totalitarianism, popular opinion equates Marx with repression, standardization, bureaucratization, and denial of creativity or liberty. One reason for this, as West (1982) points out, is the immediate association of Marxism with Stalinist centralization in particular and Soviet society in general. West remarks that “it is no accident that in American lingo Marxism is synonymous with Sovietism. It is as if the only Christianity that Americans were ever exposed to was that of Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority” (p. 139).

Yet, though critical theory can be conceived as a constant conversation with Marx, it is not a simple replication of Marxism. As McLaren points out, “Many if not most critical educators work outside the orthodox Marxian tradition and do not consider capitalism an irrevocable evil” (McLaren, 1997, p. 172). Erich Fromm, amongst other critical theorists, pointed out that it is also possible to find cracks and crevices in a capitalist system: “One must admit that ‘capitalism’ is in itself a complex and constantly changing structure which still permits of a good deal of non-conformity and of personal latitude” (1956b, p. 132). In the critical theory tradition, it is perfectly possible to find a Marxist analysis useful without by implication endorsing the Gulag or Chinese cultural revolution. Indeed, Marcuse, West, Davis, and others draw attention to the democratic impulse in Marx, while Fromm sees Marx as concerned chiefly with spiritual liberation.

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 to those nervously suffering Marxophobia. As an example, think of the criticisms made by many continuing educators in higher education to the effect that accelerated learning programs are used as cash cows to prop up colleges faced by sagging enrollments of traditional-aged students. By processing as many adult students as quickly as possible through the institution, such institutions are displaying a commodification of learning. 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 objectification, fetishization, and exchange value. It is the key concept used by Shumar in his book *College for Sale* (1997), the subtitle of which is *A Critique of the Commodification of Higher Education*. So a criticism that many mainstream adult educators would feel very comfortable making can be traced back to Marxist analysis.

Youngman's (2000) analysis of adult education and development also illustrates the enduring relevance of Marxist modes of analysis for illuminating specific adult teaching and learning situations. Early in his book he argues that "Marxist social theory . . . provides a coherent foundation for comprehending adult education and development at both the micro and macro levels of analysis" (p. 9) and supports this by demonstrating how a computing class at a private commercial college in Harare can be analyzed using tools of class analysis, colonialism, and the development of capitalism in Africa. The class is organized to produce the skilled labor Zimbabwe needs to compete in the global economy. The location is partly a result of pressure from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to create more private adult education organizations. The curricular materials are provided by an American transnational corporation, and participation in the class is determined by the economic situation of the learners. Relations between students in the class and between students and the teacher are structured by patterns of class, race, gender, and ethnicity, which themselves reflect Zimbabwe's colonial heritage. Hence, to Youngman "the everyday activity and experience of the adult educator and adult learners in

this class are shaped by the wider economic and political realities of Zimbabwe and its place in world economy” (p. 10).

As well as providing critical theory with many of its central concepts, Marx also influences 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 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 explicitly from a normative vision of the good society. In his often quoted eleventh thesis on Feuerbach in which he argued that the point of philosophy was to change the world (not just interpret it), Marx underpins the intent of critical theory to act as a catalyst for revolutionary social change. Youngman (2000) argues that this activism is clearly evident in “the long-standing heritage within radical adult education in capitalist societies that has been based explicitly on Marxist theory” (p. 33) and further maintains that “since the early days of Marxism there has been a close connection between Marxist theory and the practice of adult education” (p. 32). As evidence of this, he cites Marx’s involvement with the German Workers’ Education Association, Gramsci’s role in organizing workers’ factory councils of Turin, and the creation by American Marxist socialists of the Working People’s College in 1907.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, many came to believe that Marxism had been intellectually discredited. Yet Marx’s ideas refuse to disappear. In asking *Why Read Marx Today?* Wolff (2002) notes that the lectures his book is based on consistently attract standing-room-only audiences. Any time someone acknowledges that society is structured economically to favor a fortunate few, or any time someone observes that the rich get richer while the poor get poorer, they are implicitly drawing on a Marxist framework. When the debate about the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) rages, and critics point out how free trade across national boundaries chiefly allows corporations to get richer by exploiting new markets while reducing costs through the exploitation of cheap, non-unionized labor, Marx’s influence is present. An inter-

esting example of his enduring influence is seen in the fact that one of the most prominent contemporary African American thinkers, Cornel West, continues to engage with Marxist ideas (West, 1991).

Certainly, Marx's influence hovers over the field of critical theory as elaborated by the Frankfurt School. Thinkers identified with this school (such as Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Fromm) believed Marx's ideas could indeed breathe vigorously on the shores of the twentieth century, and they tried to restate and reinterpret the meaning of those ideas for a world Marx could not foresee. This reframing was done in a characteristically critical way. As Jay (1973) observes, "One of the essential characteristics of critical theory from its inception had been a refusal to consider Marxism a closed body of received truths" (p. 254).

This was just as well since the twentieth century was mounting many challenges to Marxism. The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 had occurred in a predominantly rural (rather than urban) society and been a political coup d'état engineered by intellectual émigrés rather than a mass uprising springing from the urban proletariat as expected. Furthermore, the Russian Revolution had not led to a domino effect. Despite the working class being used as cannon fodder in World War I, there had been no revolutionary flame spontaneously combusting throughout the rest of Europe and beyond. Those societies that purported to operate according to Marxist principles were transmogrifying into ones characterized by totalitarian repression and the kind of worker alienation ascribed to capitalism. In the most advanced capitalist societies such as the United States, large sections of the working class seemed eager to enjoy the fruits of the capitalist system rather than destroy it. And on top of this there was the rise of fascism and Nazism. Faced with these and other realities, the Frankfurt School theorists took Marx's analytical categories and tried both to critique and use them as the departure point for the creation of entirely new categories. These categories would comprise a critical theory of social, political, and human development for the modern era.

The Frankfurt School is the shorthand descriptor for the Institute of Social Research established in 1923 in Frankfurt, Germany. It attracted and sponsored work done by, amongst others, Max Horkheimer (the Institute's director from 1930), Erich Fromm,

Herbert Marcuse, and Theodor Adorno (who became codirector in 1955). As Nazism took over German life, the Institute moved to Geneva (in 1933) and then New York (in 1935). In 1953 it returned to Frankfurt, but after Adorno and Horkheimer's deaths (in 1969 and 1973, respectively) the Institute's distinctive intellectual project—to interpret, critique, and reframe the relevance of Marxist thought for contemporary industrial society—declined. Amongst contemporary thinkers Jürgen Habermas (who was once Adorno's assistant) is the most well known intellectual heir of the school's legacy. The Frankfurt School's work branched into two complementary lines of inquiry—ideology critique and psychoanalysis—both of which were identified in the previous section as important contributors to the critical tradition. The first of these—ideology critique—is the dominant tradition invoked in this book.

### **What Is So Critical About Critical Theory? Five Distinctive Characteristics**

How does a critical theory differ from other kinds of theories? This is the key question addressed by Max Horkheimer in his classic 1937 essay, “Traditional and Critical Theory” (1995), and his analysis remains pertinent today. Although Horkheimer acknowledges that critical theory contains elements of what he calls traditional (that is, positivist) theory, there are important differences. The first of these is that critical theory is firmly grounded in a particular political analysis. Hence “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. This is that 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 regarding 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 the 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 (an idea borrowed from Marx), the dynamic of exchange—I give you this, you give me that in return—determines all human relationships. The exchange value of a thing (what it’s worth in monetary terms) overshadows its use value (its value assessed by how it helps satisfy a human need or desire). For example, the exchange value of gold (what people will pay to own a gold necklace) is a socially determined phenomenon that has little to do with its use value (which would be determined by the functions it could be used for, such as producing reliable teeth fillings). 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, and be opened to new perspectives on the world). Although the use value of learning is important to adult learners and adult educators, it is primarily the exchange value that policy makers and purse holders consider when determining whether or not programs should be funded and how they should be evaluated.

In the exchange economy, goods and products are primarily produced for the profit their exchange value will bring their manufacturers. One important dimension of the exchange economy is the way that inanimate objects and goods become “fetishized,” to use Marx’s term. We start to think that these objects and goods contain some innate financial value or monetary worth that has been magically determined by forces beyond our recognition. Of course, this worth does not exist independently inside the product. In reality it is an expression of how much someone is willing to pay for it (in exchange economy terms, what goods or money we will exchange to own the product).

In the exchange economy it is not only products and goods that seem to acquire an apparently innate worth (which is really deter-



mined by market forces). Our labor—including our intellectual labor of learning and teaching—also becomes an object thought to have some intrinsic value. We exchange labor for money and money for goods, and in the process our labor becomes a thing, a commodity just like the goods we exchange money for. Hence we come to regard our labor power—our ability to work—as if it were a thing existing outside of us, no different in kind from other goods and products. When the objects or commodities we exchange become abstract entities or things to us, existing in an apparently separate universe in which their worth is determined by mysterious outside forces, this is called commodity fetishism. Because of commodity fetishism we sell our labor power—our learning—as if it were a commodity just like any other artifact. A transformative adult learning experience, such as going to college and finding one’s worldview radically altered, becomes viewed by us as the pursuit of a qualification that can be exchanged for higher salary and status.

In this process a major source of our identity and sense of self-worth—our labor—is turned into an abstract object, commodified. 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 (1987a) describes 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 argues, 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. Its explicit intent is 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. In the evaluation literature, this is referred to as *consequential validity*; that is, validity that “asks for assessments of who benefits and who is harmed by an inquiry, measurement or method” (Patton, 2002, p. 548). 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).

Geuss (1981) summarizes this view by describing critical theory as a “reflective theory which gives agents a kind of knowledge inherently productive of enlightenment and emancipation” (p. 2). To Horkheimer (1995) “its goal is man’s emancipation from slavery” (p. 246) though he warned against a simplistic translation of the theory’s tenets into schemes for emancipatory action. In his view, “philosophy must not be turned into propaganda, even for the best possible purposes . . . philosophy is not interested in issuing commands” ([1947] 1974, p. 184). In terms echoing Freire’s later warnings regarding unreflective activism, Horkheimer declared that “action for action’s sake is in no way superior to thought for thought’s sake, and is perhaps even inferior to it” ([1947] 1974, p. vi). But the fact remains that critical theory is clearly transformative and exists to bring about social change. 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 in directions they (the adult citizens concerned) determine.

Horkheimer goes on to argue that a third crucial difference between critical theory and other kinds is that it breaks down the separation of subject and object, of 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 Geuss (1981) observes, 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 or not 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.

The fact 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. In Benhabib's (1986) terms, the project of critical theory is situated somewhere between social science and practical philosophy. Empirical investigation and utopian speculation are intimately connected. 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. This vision holds individual identity to be socially and culturally formed. Adult development is viewed as a collective process since 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 grounding of critical theory in a preconfigured vision and set of values opens it to the criticism that it is not a genuine theory at all but a set of preferences, prescriptions, and platitudes—"Marxist flower power" as a onetime colleague of mine character-

ized it. Horkheimer (1995) himself acknowledges this criticism commenting that “although critical theory at no point proceeds arbitrarily and in chance fashion, it appears, to prevailing modes of thought, to be speculative, one-sided and useless . . . biased and unjust” (p. 218). He notes that this leads critics of the theory to portray it as “an aimless intellectual game, half conceptual poetry, half impotent expression of states of mind” (p. 209). After all, basing a theory on the “single existential judgment” of critiquing and transforming the commodity exchange economy does predetermine the focus of study. Yet it is not that simple.

In fact, trying to realize the philosophical and social vision of critical theory is enormously complicated. The industrial proletariat that figures so centrally in Marx’s analysis has expanded into third-world peasantry (some of whom work in the first world) as capital has become increasingly mobile. As Collini (2000) notes in commenting on the internationalizing of class conflict, “The ‘proletariat’ of global capitalism mostly have different colored skins from those of the global bourgeoisie” (p. 12). The seductive promise of a life full of more and better consumer goods has managed to blunt revolutionary impulses among those working-class adults who might be regarded as the engine of social change. Indeed, in Western capitalist societies the last years of the twentieth century saw a decline in political institutions, such as trade and labor unions, organized to serve working-class interests.

The analytical terrain on which critical theory is fought out has also grown more complicated. Race and gender have attained an equal prominence with social class as units of analysis. Poststructuralism has challenged our simple understanding of the exercise of sovereign or state power so that we are more aware of how we exercise censorship, surveillance, and discipline on ourselves. And postmodernism’s emphasis on the idiosyncratic and uncontrollable nature of experience seems to undercut the possibility of critical awareness, freedom, and emancipation so central to critical theory’s project. As society has fragmented by race, culture, and gender, so too the possible configurations of what freedom looks like have expanded. In and out of cyberspace, the ways human agency and social preferences are exercised are, at least potentially, infinitely diverse. This contemporary emphasis on difference and

diversity is one reason to reexamine pragmatism as a tradition that embraces experimentation and emphasizes the different ways people think about realizing their humanity.

Of course, once we start using terms such as *realizing humanity* we have to acknowledge that these are culturally loaded, their meanings reflecting the class, gender, race, and ideology of those using them. The images generated by these terms vary greatly depending on the cultural milieu of the definer, with some images having much greater status than others. To some the classical concert hall has much more cache as an appropriate place to realize one's humanity through artistic creativity than, say, the mosh pit. To others, free market capitalism is seen as a more mature way to encourage freedom and creative energy than, say, state socialism. Additionally, postmodern analysis calls into question the idea that people contain a coherent identity waiting to be developed, arguing instead that this view represents a misplaced modernist confidence in the basic rationality and ultimate perfectibility of human beings. In postmodernism each of us is "fragmented among a plurality of partial identities, identity being only provisionally determined and underdetermined, and therefore open to the contingent addition of further partial identities" (Bagnall, 1999, p. 107). Faith in people's capacity to become more humane, and society's ability to organize itself along more compassionate lines, is shattered by the continuing existence of horrors such as genocide and ethnic cleansing. In Bagnall's words, postmodernism suggests that "morally, individuals appear to be capable of anything at all, so long as it is sanctioned by the frameworks of belief within which they are operating" (p. 108). To the extent that critical theory posits the creation of a more just and compassionate society as a pursuable ideal, it is unashamedly modernist.

This brings us to the fifth and final intriguing and distinctive element of critical theory, the fact that verification of the theory is impossible until the social vision it inspires is realized. In other words, we won't 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) puts 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. By way of contrast, Horkheimer warns that the struggle to create the conditions under which the vision of critical theory can be tested is a long, sometimes violent, often revolutionary struggle.

### **Outlining Critical Theory's Relevance for Adult Learning**

So how does all this connect to adult learning? And how, in particular, can adult learning theory be reframed in the light of critical theory? For me, two elements are central. First, and most importantly, we can focus on the dimensions of learning central to the chief concern of critical theory. This concern might be expressed as the desire to understand how the reproduction of blatantly unequal structures based on massive economic disparity is accepted as the natural order of things by adults within successive generations. What does critical theory tell us about how adults learn to accept and then challenge this state of affairs? Second, we can explore the way critical theory applies the critical reflection on assumptions—often claimed to be a distinctive characteristic both of adult learning and of adult education practice—on itself. Let me take each of these elements in turn.

### **The Centrality of 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 usually implicit in critical theory's propositions. Welton (1991, 1993, 1995) is perhaps the most forceful expositor of how critical theory, specifically that associated with Jürgen Habermas, 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 are a number of related concerns. One of these is to investigate how dominant ideologies educate people to believe certain ways of organizing society are in their own best interests when the opposite is true. Another is to illuminate how the

spirit of capitalism, and of technical and bureaucratic rationality, enters into and distorts everyday relationships (what Habermas calls the colonization of the lifeworld by the system). A third (and this is particularly important to a theory of adult learning) is to understand how people learn to identify and then oppose the ideological forces and social processes that oppress them.

A theory of adult learning originating in these general concerns of critical theory would attempt to answer a series of more specific questions focused on the way people learn to awaken and then act on their human agency. These questions would ask how people learn to challenge beliefs and structures that serve the interests of the few against the well-being of the many. Some of these specific questions might be:

How do adults learn forms of reasoning that challenge dominant ideology and that question the social, cultural, and political forms that ideology justifies?

How do adults learn to interpret their experiences in ways that emphasize their connectedness to others and lead them to see the need for solidarity and collective organization?

How do adults learn to unmask the flow of power in their lives and communities?

How do adults learn of the existence of hegemony—the process whereby people learn to embrace ideas, practices, and institutions that actually work against their own best interests—and of their own complicity in its continued existence? And, once aware of it, how do they contest its all-pervasive effects?

How do adults learn to defend the lifeworld (the set of understandings and assumptions that frame how people live with each other) and civil society (the relationships, associations, and institutions not directly under state control within which people form relationships and develop identities) against the intrusion of capitalist ethics, market forces, and bureaucratic rationality?

How do adults learn to think critically by recognizing when an embrace of alternative views is actually supporting the status quo it appears to be challenging?

How do adults learn to recognize, accept, and exercise whatever freedom they have to change the world?

How do adults learn the practice of democracy with all its contradictions and disciplines?

As should be clear from these questions, a critical theory of adult learning is inevitably also 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, unmask power, defend the lifeworld, and develop agency. Such a theory must 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 development. A critical theory of adult learning will always come back to the ways in which adults learn to do this.

### A Critical Posture Toward Critical Theory

The second element a critical theory of adult learning should display is a self-critical stance toward its own propositions. 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. For critical theory to be critical, it must be on guard against its own ossification and entombment 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 regarding its universality and accuracy. This means that those engaged in theory building must apply the same standards of critical analysis to their own theory as they do to 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, a prominent American historian, points out that those who challenge the social order are just as capable of creating their own orthodoxies as are dominant groups. He writes, "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" (1990, p. 8). Zinn urges us to make declarations of independence from rigid dogmas, and it is precisely this self-critical posture toward its own propositions that a critical theory of adult learning must display.

This self-critical stance is not unfamiliar within critical theory; after all, the theory itself began as an attempt to reformulate Marxist thought in conditions Marx had not foreseen. As Bronner and Kellner (1989) observe, "Inspired by the dialectical tradition of Hegel and Marx, critical theory is intrinsically open to development and revision" (p. 2). Even as strong a Marxist as Antonio Gramsci 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" (1971, p. 407). In a 1918 article in *Il Grido del Popolo* (The People's Cry), Gramsci warned 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" (1988, 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 deification.

It is easy to forget this and to allow critical theory to become subject to the very reification it condemns. For example, Oberg and

Underwood (1992) noted that when they enthusiastically introduced critical theory to preservice teachers as a new way for them to understand their experiences, this perspective served to “function in the same debilitating way as the other frames already discarded, separating students from the daily events of their own practice and directing their attention to someone else’s construction of their reality” (p. 166). Those of us convinced of the accuracy of critical theory’s perspective can easily force this on learners and colleagues in a self-defeating way. Our insistence that we have found *the* one truly accurate way of understanding the world can smack of condescending triumphalism, particularly if we dismiss all criticism of our perspective as ideologically motivated propaganda. There should be no contradiction in critiquing critical theory. It is quite possible to accept, provisionally, the basic accuracy and utility of explanatory frameworks drawn from the critical theory tradition, while at the same time doing our best to challenge these. This is the purpose of books such as Mills’ *The Marxists* (1962), Eagleton’s *Ideology* (1991), Fay’s *Critical Social Science* (1987), and Kellner’s *Critical Theory, Marxism, and Modernity* (1989), all of which exemplify Marcuse’s (1989) contention that “critical theory is, last but not least, critical of itself and of the social forces that make up its own basis” (p. 72).

The strenuous effort to disprove the validity of one’s own ideas on the assumption that what’s left after this effort is over must have intrinsic merit is essentially an application of Popper’s (1959) principle of falsifiability, which to me is one of the elements of traditional theories that Horkheimer (1995, p. 242) acknowledges is part of a critical attitude. Theorizing critically requires that we be self-critical, that we turn a self-referential and skeptical eye on our own tentative conclusions. As Kellner (1989) declares, “If critical theory is going to remain on the cutting edge of social theory, then it must be subject to the sort of critique which it applies to traditional theories and must move beyond previous inadequate or obsolete positions” (p. 2). Hegemony, ideology, alienation, the lifeworld, commodification—these concepts may help us understand our experiences, but if something comes along that makes more sense and explains things more clearly, then we should be ready to seize it.

This second element of critical theory draws partly from the tradition of analytic philosophy but particularly from the pragmatic tradition with its emphasis on contingency and fallibility. Pragmatism holds that all theory, indeed all practice, is provisional and open to reformulation. Its inclination is to experimentation, to undercutting its own foundations. Partly it anticipates post-modernism in encouraging an ironic skepticism regarding claims to universal explanations and in delighting in playing with unpredictable possibilities. But a pragmatic inclination can be deployed in the service of social justice in the manner articulated by Cornel West. For West, “One sign of commitment . . . is always the degree to which one is willing to be self-critical and self-questioning, because that’s a sign that you’re serious about generating the conditions for the possibility of overcoming the suffering that you’re after” (West, 1999b, p. 295).

One of the temptations facing those who draw on critical theory is the development of an overconfidence regarding the accuracy of their analysis (of course, the same is true of proponents of traditional theory and positivism). A sense of triumphalism can creep into an analysis that purports to penetrate the ideological veil drawn over everyday life to reveal the hegemonic reality lurking beneath. This can then translate into an attitude of condescension toward those whose consciousness has yet to be raised and who have yet to see how they are colluding in their own oppression. There are also “no-go” areas that tend to be immune from critical scrutiny. For example, capitalism is often viewed as uncontestedly, irredeemably, and completely evil. A book such as James Loewen’s *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (1995) that admits that capitalism, whilst creating and maintaining enormous social inequity and justifying genocide in the pursuit of expanded markets, might also have produced some benefits is the exception rather than the rule.

An interesting example of a sympathetically critical stance toward critical theory is Fay’s *Critical Social Science* (1987). In his analysis Fay summarizes the criticisms most commonly made of critical theory: “That it is inherently unresponsive to empirical evidence; that it starts with the a priori assumption that it has ‘the answer’ to which it necessarily holds no matter what occurs; that it is inherently subjectivistic because it irreducibly contains a moral

element; and that the goal of transforming society is incompatible with the objectivity required to study it with scientific rigor” (p. 5). His response to these criticisms is not to dismiss them as attacks made by politically compromised enemies seeking to defuse critical theory of its revolutionary power. Instead, after laying out his own arguments for the relevance and accuracy of critical theory, he attempts to critique the overly rationalistic and utopian dimensions to the ideas he has just espoused. In doing this, Fay models the kind of critical approach to criticality I am arguing should be integral to critical theorizing.

Put briefly, Fay argues that critical theory downplays the constraining influence of tradition, culture, and history, tending to view these as inherently conservative forces. Yet, as he points out, a tradition such as a populist skepticism of wealthy political leaders is inherently emancipatory. He also acknowledges that there is a great deal of critical theorizing that is not directly associated with the Frankfurt School, even if it is framed by similar concerns. For him it is important to broaden critical analysis beyond Germany. He quotes as examples of this contention figures as diverse as the psychoanalyst R. D. Laing and the ex-director of the Highlander Research Center (well known to adult educators) John Gaventa. In the book you are now reading, the insights of figures such as Foucault, Gramsci, Williams, West, hooks, and Althusser for adult learning are reviewed, yet none of these worked at the Frankfurt School, though to different degrees their work either responds to or builds upon Marx’s ideas.

Finally, Fay breaks with those who dismiss calls for empirical verification as a misplaced application of positivist technical-rationality to a critical epistemology. He aligns himself with Marcuse’s (1964) view that where its judgments of the possibility of liberation are concerned, critical theory “has to demonstrate the objective validity of these judgments and the demonstration has to proceed on empirical grounds” (p. xi). Fay argues that predictive possibilities are inherent in critical theory’s formulations and that the accuracy of these can be assessed by public reference to empirical evidence. In other words, we should not be afraid of studying how well social and educational experiments influenced by critical theory operate in the real world.

It is important to reemphasize that infusing critical theory with the spirit of self-critical inquiry was a hallmark of Frankfurt School writers. Jay (1973) makes the point that critical theory developed dialogically, through a critical engagement with other philosophical systems, and that this gave it “its essentially open-ended, probing, unfinished quality” (p. 41). In his survey of the Frankfurt School, Held (1980) writes regarding Horkheimer and Adorno that “it is ironic that they were attacked in the 1960s for their political pessimism and lack of practical involvement, but, after their deaths, for their supposed encouragement of ‘terrorism’ and ‘political irresponsibility’” (p. 39). Indeed, to many sympathetic to the Frankfurt School’s line of analysis one of the most frustrating developments was Horkheimer’s, Adorno’s, and (to a lesser degree) Marcuse’s pessimism regarding the possibility of revolutionary change and human liberation. These three thinkers refused to hold out the promise of false emancipatory hope when everything they observed empirically convinced them of the enduring impermeability of the forces of social control. The same independence of thought, unwillingness to toe any predetermined ideological line, and readiness to reverse previous positions in the face of new evidence or theorizing are characteristic of many of the theorists surveyed in this book such as Foucault, Habermas, and West.

Because of its exercise of internal criticism, critical theory has undergone a number of important reformulations over the years. First, class is no longer the only or sometimes even the primary unit of analysis amongst those who identify themselves as critical theorists. Though it remains crucial, it is usually linked with race and gender in the holy trinity of contemporary ideology critique. Second, Foucault’s (1980) analysis of power has alerted us to the way that sovereign power (power clearly exercised by some central authority such as the politburo, the military junta, the king, the cabinet, the party’s central committee, and so on) has been partially displaced by the exercise of disciplinary power (self-discipline exercised by subjects themselves who conduct their own self-censorship and self-surveillance at their own sites of life and practice). Third, postmodern critique has called into question the modernist underpinnings of critical theory, particularly those aspects that emphasize the unproblematic possibility of individual

and collective liberation, emancipation, and transformation. Fourth, the legacy of critical pragmatism has encouraged a skepticism regarding any attempt to plunder methods and approaches that are apparently successful in one political context (such as Freire's approach to conscientization and problem-posing education developed in rural northeast Brazil) and then to parachute them into quite different settings (such as American colleges and universities).

In this chapter I have argued that the starting point for exploring critical theory's relevance for adult learning is to elaborate the dimensions of learning embedded in the chief concerns of critical theory. I have acknowledged that these concerns are normatively grounded in a social-philosophical vision of a democratic society that tries to realize values of freedom, fairness, justice, and compassion (the fact that these values may sometimes be in contradiction will be discussed later). The next stage in exploring this theory is to illuminate in more detail what the learning tasks of a critical theory might be and how they intersect.