



Critical theory and the management of change in organizations

Adrian Carr

University of Western Sydney (Nepean), Australia

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Abstract *Raises the initial problem of what is meant by the term critical theory and discusses some common misconceptions that have arisen about the meaning of this term. The dialectic logic that was championed by the group of scholars collectively known as the Frankfurt School is outlined and it is noted how dialectics transcends binary oppositional thinking. It is argued that the body of work of these scholars has a strong contemporary relevance to issues in the management of change in organizations. The other papers in the issue are introduced.*

In writing an introduction to any special issue of a journal, the guest editor would normally be expected to introduce each paper and place it into a context of both a broader body of literature and the other papers in the volume. While I will indeed follow such a protocol, I feel it is necessary to explain what critical theory is and what it isn't[1].

What is critical theory?

The term "critical theory" has a two fold meaning. It is used to refer to a "school of thought". At one and the same time it also refers to self-conscious critique that is aimed at change and emancipation through enlightenment and does not cling dogmatically to its own doctrinal assumptions (see Geuss, 1981; Giroux, 1983).

The "school of thought" with which critical theory is associated is commonly referred to as "the Frankfurt School". Its real title is the Institut für Sozialforschung – the Institute for Social Research. This Institute was established in, but financially independent of, Frankfurt University in February 1923. Established by the wealthy grain merchant Felix Weil, this Institute's first director was the self-declared Marxist, Carl Grünberg, who remained its director until 1929. Max Horkheimer assumed the directorship in 1931 and shifted the focus from a preoccupation with Marxist political economy towards critical theory. The Institute became home to the now famous names of Theodor Adorno, Leo Lowenthal, Walter Benjamin, Franz Neumann, Otto Kirchheimer, Friedrich Pollock, Eric Fromm and Herbert Marcuse. The Institute was closed in 1933, under the Nazi regime, for "tendencies hostile to the state" (Jay, 1996, p. 29) but Horkheimer had anticipated this event and transferred its financial endowment out of the country. Many members of the Institute were Jewish which, in itself, was threatening in those times. After a short time of incorporation in Geneva, the Institute relocated to New York City in 1934 and became affiliated with Columbia University. It seems a little ironic

to have a very left of centre group actually welcomed in, arguably, the heartland of capitalism. After the war some of the members of the Institute (Horkheimer, Adorno) returned to Frankfurt and reestablished the Institute in 1949, while others (notably Marcuse and Fromm) remained in the USA. Jürgen Habermas later took over at Frankfurt University from Horkheimer, in 1964, before establishing his own research centre at the Max Planck Institute in Starnbeg, West Germany, in 1971 (Held, 1980, p. 249). Much of this historical development is well captured by others (see Giroux, 1983; Held, 1980; Howard, 1988; Jay, 1996; Rasmussen, 1996; Tar, 1977; Wiggershaus, 1994), but it needs to be appreciated that one sense in which the term critical theory is used is to refer collectively to the body of work that emerged from the scholars of the Frankfurt School.

The second meaning of the terminology “critical theory” – which also simultaneously includes, as perhaps the major instance, the work of those associated with the Frankfurt School – is one which resonates with a particular process of critique, the origins of which owe multiple allegiances. Critical theory aims to produce a particular form of knowledge that seeks to realize an emancipatory interest, specifically through a critique of consciousness and ideology. It separates itself from both functionalist/objective and interpretive/practical sciences through a critical epistemology that rejects the self-evident nature of reality and acknowledges the various ways in which reality is distorted.

Interestingly, in the context of the last paper in this volume, Raymond Geuss (1981) argues that “members of the Frankfurt School think that Freud . . . was a conceptual revolutionary in more or less the sense in which Marx was, and that the theories of Marx and Freud exhibit such strong similarities in their essential epistemic structure that from a philosophical point of view they don’t represent two different kinds of theory, but merely two instances of a single new type. The general name given to this new type of theory, of which Marxism and psychoanalysis are the two main instances, is ‘critical theory’” (p. 1). In an effort to disentangle the multiple allegiances and bring conceptual clarity, it needs to be said that the term critical theory, although its theoretical orientation and spirit owe much to Kant, Hegel and Marx, was a term that appears to have been ushered in by Horkheimer in an essay in 1937 (see Horkheimer, 1976). Horkheimer, at that time, was attempting to distinguish between traditional theory and what he was calling critical theory.

Horkheimer saw traditional theory as focused on deriving generalisations about aspects of the world. This he saw as true, whether they were derived deductively (as with Cartesian theory), inductively (as with John Stuart Mill), or phenomenologically (as with Husserlian philosophy). Horkheimer argued that the social sciences were different from the natural sciences, inasmuch as generalisations could not be easily made from so-called experiences, because the understanding of experience itself was being fashioned from ideas that were in the researcher themselves. The researcher both is part of what they are researching, and is caught in a historical context in which ideologies shape the

thinking. Thus theory would be conforming to the ideas in the mind of the researcher rather than the experience itself. “The facts which our senses present to us are socially performed in two ways: through the historical character of the object perceived and through the historical character of the perceiving organ. Both are not simply natural; they are shaped by human activity, and yet the individual perceives himself (*sic*) as receptive and passive in the act of perception” (Horkheimer, 1976, p. 213). Horkheimer, in the course of making this point, injected the Marxist and, most specifically, the Lukács notion of reification into his argument – specifically arguing that the development of theory “was absolutized, as though it were grounded in the inner nature of knowledge as such or justified in some other ahistorical way, and thus it became a reified, ideological category” (1976, p. 212). This was later to become the basis for another charge that traditional theory maintained a strict separation between thought and action. In contrast, critical theory was about insight leading to praxis and emancipation.

For Horkheimer, approaches to understanding in the social sciences cannot simply imitate those in the natural sciences. Rasmussen (1996) frames Horkheimer’s resolution to the dilemma well, when he says:

Although various theoretical approaches would come close to breaking out of the ideological constraints which restricted them, such as positivism, pragmatism, neo-Kantianism and phenomenology, Horkheimer would argue that they failed. Hence, all would be subject to the logico-mathematical prejudice which separates theoretical activity from actual life. The appropriate response to this dilemma is the development of a critical theory (p. 18).

What is required, Horkheimer argues, is “a radical reconsideration not of the scientist alone but of the knowing individual as such” (1976, p. 221). This solution to the problem through epistemology, is an approach of such significance that it cannot be overestimated. It signified how critical theory was not simply reflective of orthodox Marxism nor purely Hegelian – notwithstanding the fact that the Horkheimer paper can be seen as being deeply influenced by the Hegelian-Marxist idea of the individual alienated from society. Indeed, it was Marx’s (1906) *Capital: Critique of Political Economy* that largely served as the touchstone paradigm from which resonance and departures were made by the Frankfurt School. However, the epistemological turn gave critical theory a “critique” of a different kind. Contra Marxism which sought to apply a specific template or straight-jacket to both critique and action, which itself was historically contingent, and contra Hegelian thought which privileges consciousness, critical theory was about being self-critical and rejects any pretensions to absolute truth. Critical theory defends the primacy of neither matter (materialism) nor consciousness (idealism), arguing that both epistemologies distort reality to the benefit, eventually, of some small group. In this approach, what critical theory attempts to do is to place itself outside of philosophical strictures and the confines of existing structures. As a way of thinking and “recovering” humanity’s self-knowledge, critical theory often looks to Marxism for its methods and tools.

While critical theory must at all times be self-critical, Horkheimer insists that a theory is only critical if it is explanatory, practical and normative all at the same time – or, as Bohman (1996), in summarising Horkheimer’s criteria, states: “it must explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify actors to change it, and provide clear norms for criticism and practical goals for the future” (p. 190). The focus of critical theory is simply not to mirror “reality” as it is, which is what traditional theory seeks to do, but to change it – in Horkheimer’s words the goal of critical theory is “the emancipation of human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (1976, p. 219, see also p. 224). The three theses that Geuss used to characterise critical theory, cited to open this section of the paper, are perhaps now clearer. However, to achieve its critique and action one needs to appreciate the fact that critical theory presupposes, and is imbued with, a dialectic vision (Carr, 1989). To understand critical theory requires an understanding of dialectical thinking and it is to this aspect I now turn our attention.

The optic of dialectics

The standard reference to the history of the Frankfurt School is Jay’s (1996) book entitled *The Dialectical Imagination*, the original edition of which was published in 1973. This title captures a crucial feature of the Frankfurt School vision. Critical theory was theory that presupposed and was imbued with dialectics. The dialectic “logic” used by members of the Frankfurt School is evident throughout their work, perhaps no more so than in their critique of positivism and pragmatism.

One of the major assumptions of positivism that critical theory challenged was that Nature, or an external reality, is the author of truth or “fact”. The concept of valid knowledge being detached (and therefore neutral) from particular knowing subjects is rejected. Instead, the Frankfurt School championed a dialectical logic. Marcuse (1993) expressed this view succinctly when he argued:

Dialectical thought invalidates the a priori opposition of value and fact by understanding all facts as stages of a single process – a process in which subject and object are so joined that truth can be determined only within the subject-object totality. All facts embody the knower as well as the doer; they continuously translate the past into the present. The objects thus “contain” subjectivity in their very structure (p. 445).

Adorno, similarly, argues that “facts are not in society . . . the resting point on which knowledge is founded because they themselves are *mediated* through society” (Adorno, quoted in Spinner, 1975, p. 78, emphasis added). Adorno is denying the finality on which all knowledge is presumed to rest. Instead, like others in the Frankfurt School, Adorno put the view that there was a constant interplay of particular and universal, of moment and totality.

Thus, for critical theory, the relationship between totality and its moments is to be seen as reciprocal. All cultural phenomena are to be viewed as *mediated* through the social totality (Adorno, 1967). Horkheimer also makes this orientation very explicit, when he chastises pragmatists for being similar to

positivism in their identification of philosophy and scientism. They did not go beyond the existing “facts” and, as far as Horkheimer was concerned, pragmatists were conformist in their undialectic understanding of the relationship between truth and human action:

The epistemological teaching that truth is life-enhancing, or rather that all “profitable” thought must also be true, contains a harmonistic deception, if this epistemology does not belong to a totality containing tendencies really leading to a better, life-enhancing condition. Separated from a definite theory of the entire society, every epistemological proposition remains formal and abstract (Horkheimer, quoted in Jay, 1996, p. 83).

The form of argumentation by Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse is one that comprehends events and engages in a form of reflection that is a dialectic logic. This dialectical thinking owes much to the work of Hegel and Marx. Hegel’s notion of dialectics fundamentally involved recognition that the particular and the universal were interdependent. In this dynamic relationship of interdependence, *contradictions* emerge which in turn promote the generation of a new totality. The dialectic, as such, was conceived as involving three “moments”: thesis, antithesis and synthesis. McTaggart (1896) captures this dynamic when he notes:

The relation of the thesis and the antithesis derives its whole meaning from the synthesis, which follows them, and in which the contradiction ceases to exist as such . . . An unreconciled predication of two contrary categories, for instance Being and not-Being, of the same thing, would lead in the dialectic . . . to scepticism if it was not for the reconciliation in Becoming . . . [Thus] the really fundamental aspect of the dialectic is not the tendency of the finite category to negate itself but to complete itself (pp. 9-10; see also Watkins, 1985, p. 4).

The concept of dialectic employed by the early critical theorists owes much to this Hegelian formulation. Most philosophers have supposed that a philosophical system must have some foundation, some starting point upon which knowledge is built. Descartes, for example, supposed that if the point of departure can be shown to be true, and if the reasoning away from this point is absolutely rigorous, then the result must also be true. If truth is present at the departure point, it is preserved and reappears at the end of the process. Hegel, however, rejected the validity of such a Cartesian foundation with its linear logic. The danger of establishing a foundation is that knowledge is completely derailed when the foundation crumbles or must be abandoned (Steppelevich, 1990; Rockmore, 1993).

Wishing to develop a logic that would capture the ebb and flow of life itself, Hegel reached back to the Platonic dialogues for inspiration (McDonald, 1968). The dialectical process begins with a “thesis”, any definable reality that is the starting point from which all further development proceeds. As is noted above, reflection progresses and this thesis is seen to encompass its opposite, or “antithesis”, as part of its very definition. One “moment” of the dialectic process gives rise to its own negation. The process is comparable to tragedy in which the protagonist is brought down as a result of the dynamics inherent in his/her own character. What emerges from the dialectic of affirmation and negation is a transcendent moment that at once negates, affirms, and incorporates all the

previous moments (Bernstein, 1971). Thus, the thesis should be understood to have possessed the seeds of its antithesis all along. If thought focuses appropriately on the reciprocal relationship between the thesis and antithesis, a synthesis emerges. The synthesis is the understanding of the unity that holds between the two apparent opposites, and which permits their simultaneous existence (Stepelevich, 1990).

The familiar triadic structure of Hegelian thought is, thus, not simply a series of building blocks. Each triad represents a process wherein the synthesis absorbs and completes the two prior terms, following which the entire triad is absorbed into the next higher process. Hegel himself preferred to refer to the dialectic as a system of negations, rather than triads. His purpose was to overcome the static nature of traditional philosophy and capture the dynamics of reflective thought. The essence of the dialectic is this ability to see wholes and the conflict of parts simultaneously (McDonald, 1968). As Adorno expressed it, "Dialectics is the quest to see the new in the old instead of just the old in the new. As it mediates the new, so it also preserves the old as the mediated" (Adorno, 1984, p. 38). Rather than viewing matters in linear, cause and effect terms dialectical thinking calls attention to the ongoing reciprocal effects of our social world.

Marx viewed the Hegelian dialectic as somewhat idealist and reworked the notion by turning it on its head, arguing that the theoretical abstractions are formed from the lived experience of historically-based and evolved social relations – not in the reverse pattern as envisaged by Hegel. Marx's "historical materialism" was a dialectic of the "real world", as Marx himself argues:

My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. To Hegel . . . the process of thinking, which, under the name of "the Idea", he transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external phenomenal form of the "Idea". With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought (1906, p. 25).

Marx retained the concept of contradiction being at the root of transformative processes and saw contradiction as an effect that is implicit in the social structure, or institutional form, itself – the opposition is inherent in the totality, in the same way that death is implicit in birth. For Marx, structure did not arise from or act independently of the thoughts, desires and actions of human agents but from the critical and transformational aspects of dialectics. Watkins (1985) notes the implications of this when he says "it is from this view, with human agents as active and *praxis-inclined*, that the transformation of institutions through the transcendence of the existing contradictions occurs" (p. 7, emphasis added).

The Frankfurt School rejected the class interest analysis that came with a Marxist orientation and placed its emphasis on understanding cultural phenomenon as *mediated* through the social totality. Contra the orthodox Marxist view, the economic system could not be extracted and analysed other than in its broader context. While the founding members of the Frankfurt

School embraced the Hegelian foundation of dialectics they did, however, reject his claims to absolute truth, preferring a historical contextual interpretation. Truth was a mediated truth, and part of that mediation was the historical period. Part of that “truth” also came from the ideologies that were distributed through a “culture industry” and yet another part was to be “found in the material reality of those needs, desires and wants that bear the inscription of history. That is, history is to be found as ‘second nature’ in those concepts and views of the world that make the most dominating aspects of the social order appear to be immune from historical socio-political development” (Giroux, 1983, p. 32). This “second nature”, Jacoby (1975) was to remark, is history hardened into a form of “social amnesia”, that is a mode of consciousness that forgets its own ontology. This suppression of history “is not an academic but a political affair” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 97). This became a crucial issue for the Frankfurt School, particularly Marcuse (1955, 1964, 1970) in his critique of psychology as being too cognitive and ahistorical in its recognition of where needs, want and desires become fashioned. For the Frankfurt School, critical theory and a dialectic optic was needed to unmask these forms of psychological and social domination and simultaneously engender liberation.

Thus, for the Frankfurt School, to embrace the critical theory’s attention to the issue of dialectics is to embrace a perspective that draws attention to the social totality and our *mediated* existence. No aspect of our life world can be understood in isolation. For the philosophically supple (Carr, 1997) this tenet for enquiry, as Bauman (1976) and Ritzer (1996) point out, has both a *synchronic* and *diachronic* aspect. The synchronic aspect is that we are drawn to consider the interrelationship of “components” of a society within a totality. The diachronic aspect is that we are drawn to consider a historical dimension of society. Geuss (1981), in similar vein, notes that “one of the senses in which the critical theory is said by its proponents to be ‘dialectical’ (and hence superior to its rivals) is just in that it explicitly connects questions about the ‘inherent’ truth or falsity of a form of consciousness with questions about history, origin and function in society” (p. 22).

A few misconceptions

Dialectics – the associative term to critical theory – has been used in the discourse in a somewhat loose and “undisciplined” manner (see, for example, Argyris and Schön’s (1978) “organizational dialectic”) which seems to have had the effect of contaminating the original and traditional meaning of the term. This has produced, in some instances, some misconceptions as to how critical theory views the term and how critical theory itself should be conceived. It is useful to outline some of these misconceptions and in so doing further clarify how the term is used by critical theorists.

The first misconception that needs some clarification is that every framework presenting two sides of a question or situation is dialectical. This is not the case. Adorno wrote, “Dialectical thought is the attempt to break through the coercive character of logic with the means of logic itself” (Adorno, cited in

Arato and Gebhardt, 1993, p. 396). In other words, dialectical thought steps within the framework of an argument to offer its critique. Juxtaposition, static opposition, and simple divisions certainly exist, but these are, by definition, undialectical, since dialectic thinking requires that the conditions and circumstances of the whole be taken into consideration as well. Dialectic incorporates a “substantive” contradiction, rather than simply a formal-quantitative one.

A second misconception relates to a simplistic reduction of the familiar thesis-antithesis-synthesis relationship. A perception seems to have arisen that the synthesis is analogous to compromise, a kind of middle ground halfway between the two original starting points. This misinterpretation quite possibly stems from the words Hegel used to describe this new thought process *Vermittlung* (mediation) and *Versöhnung* (reconciliation) as well as, one suspects, from the insistence of textbook editors on offering two-dimensional graphic representations of such a holistic process. Horkheimer (1993, p. 414) speaks contemptuously of the tendency to represent dialectic as a “lifeless diagram”. What is often overlooked in these simplistic formulations is that mediation takes place in and through the extremes (the thesis and antithesis); it is not a simple give-and-take along a continuum. Dialectic is a more supple form of thought than mathematical inference. It always makes higher-order comments on the relationship under scrutiny, stating connections that carry beyond the obvious content (Findlay, 1977). The synthesis becomes a new “working reality” and may, in turn, become a thesis (which then engenders its own antithesis). The contradiction is not “resolved” but instead absorbed: the frame of reference which made the poles opposites in the first case is transcended (Arato and Gebhardt, 1993). Thus, what might appear to be opposites in one context (force and consent, for example) might no longer be opposites in a different context.

A third common misconception, actually very much intertwined with the misconception just outlined, refers to the nature of contradiction represented by the dialectic and the binary oppositional thinking that appears in much Western thought. We talk about right or wrong; rational or emotional; nature or nurture; public or private; heart or head; quality or quantity, etc. These are very familiar oppositions. Embedded in this fundamental style of traditional thinking (or formal logic), however, are not only oppositions but also hierarchy, in that the existence of such binaries suggests a struggle for predominance. If one position is right, then the other must be wrong. Hélène Cixous (1986, p. 63) observes that the oppositional terms are locked into a relationship of conflict and, moreover, this relationship is one in which one term must be repressed at the expense of the other (see Carr and Zanetti, 1999). Nature without nurture seems meaningless, for example, but often nurture struggles to negate the influence of nature. Irigaray (see Whitford, 1991) has similarly observed that one of the principles of Western rationality is that of non-contradiction, where we strive to reduce ambivalence and ambiguity to an absolute minimum. In such a logical system, two propositions cannot be true simultaneously (see, for

example, Popper, 1963). This is so because traditional logic, which focuses on empirical (mostly quantitative) representations of reality, necessarily builds on arbitrarily constructed foundations. At some point, the logic is abstracted from reality (formalized). Thus, in this “system” of logic one proposition must prevail, and the other must accordingly be vanquished. In critical theory, however, form cannot be separated from content. It must continually reflect the whole of reality, not just a simplification of it. But because of the pervasiveness of binary oppositional thinking, the term dialectic sometimes gets mistakenly used to denote a simple binary of opposites where the dialectical contradiction (the thesis-antithesis) is in some fashion conceived as an absolute.

Dialectical relationships do not express simply existence and non-existence; they also recognize the other possibilities available in the whole. For example, “the dialectical contradiction of ‘a’ is not simply ‘non-a’ but ‘b’, ‘c’, ‘d’, and so on – which, in their attempt at self-assertion and self-realization, are all fighting for the same historical space” (Arato and Gebhardt, 1993, p. 398). Horkheimer gives other examples of such dialectic logic and suggests we need to think in terms of substantive opposites rather than formal/logical positivist/logical empiricist ones to help in understanding our assumptions. He gives an example of the contradiction to “straight” which formal logic might seem to suggest is “non-straight”, but Horkheimer (1993) offers other negations: “curved”; “interrupted”; and “zigzag”. Another example might be to recognize that there are multiple negations to power: resistance, powerlessness, and quiescence, all of which have different relationships to power and consequently different dialectical resolutions. Thus, “true logic, as well as true rationalism, must go beyond form to include substantive elements as well” (Jay, 1996, p. 55).

A fourth misconception arises from a misunderstanding that critical theory is merely critique and therefore only capable of being a negative discourse. Marcuse (1993) succinctly puts the counter-argument when he says:

The liberating function of negation in philosophical thought depends upon the recognition that the negation is a positive act; that-which-is *repels* that-which-is-not and, in doing so, repels its own real possibilities. Consequently, to express and define that-which-is on its own terms is to distort and falsify reality. Reality is other and more than that codified in the logic and language of facts (p. 447).

Dialectical logic is critical logic: it reveals modes and contents of thought which transcend the codified pattern of use and validation. Dialectical thought does not invent these contents; they have accrued to the notions in the long tradition of thought and action. Dialectical analysis merely assembles and reactivates them; it recovers tabooed meaning and thus appears almost as a return, or rather a conscious liberation, of the repressed! (pp. 447 and 449).

Some implications

Critical theory is an approach that offers guides to human action that aim to produce enlightenment and are inherently emancipatory. Critical theory also offers a form of knowledge that is multidimensional, avoiding the reduction of knowledge to linear, quantitative-empirical perspectives. Critical theory is also reflective; opening the doors to new possibilities by exploring unexamined assumptions and comparing these with the resonance of lived experience.

Clearly, critical theory has much to offer those seeking to understand where reform in an organization is possible and makes them sensitive to the tyranny of the confining nature of some forms of logic.

The critical theory of the Frankfurt School was imbued with a vision that apprehended social milieu as dialectic. Praxis and emancipation were couched with dialectics assumed. In relating these dynamics to the management of change and public administration, for example, a dialectic appreciation of management and administration would conceive of social reality as being in a state of constant transformation, due primarily to the mediating capacity of human consciousness. The manager/administrator should not simply become aware of dialectical relationships between structures and actors but become more critical in the appraisal of the options in carrying through their tasks. Instead of being preoccupied with control (and largely preserving the status quo), a dialectically aware manager/administrator would recognise, and work through, the tensions and strains that inevitably arise from contradictions, oppositions and negations. Dialectical sensitivity leads the manager/administrator to recognise that they are not only part of the transforming “process” but themselves are also being acted upon. Similarly, dialectical thinking reveals that “people are by nature active rather than passive, and social rather than atomistic. This means that people have a measure of autonomy in determining their actions, which are at the same time bound up in a social context” (Harmon, 1981, p. 4). It has been argued that public administration, in particular, is fundamentally a task involving moral choices (Carr, 1997) but one also needs to be critically apprised of such choices. The inference here is captured by Harmon (1981) when he argues that “the relation of theory to practice involves the practical as well as moral problem faced by all administrators of understanding in order to act” (p. 168). This is the importance of praxis, where the theoretical is not separated from practice, but instead what is encouraged is the interplay of experience and reflection which becomes focused on concrete situations. Critical theory and its dialectical logic work hand-in-glove in such a fundamentally important dynamic which is illustrated in the papers in this special issue.

About the papers in this special issue

The papers that follow have been specifically crafted for this special issue and were selected following an extensive review process. None of these contributors was personally known to the editor. Each contributor was provided with a copy of this introduction to save unnecessary replication. Collectively, the authors demonstrate the contemporary relevance of critical theory to the management of change. Individually, the authors present case studies and facets of the change process where the optic of critical theory and dialectics is used to focus our attention on what otherwise may have been neglected or obscured in other forms of inquiry.

The next paper in this volume is by Joseph Grubbs. He explores the Frankfurt School’s critique of instrumental reason, and the works of

Horkheimer in particular, to throw some light upon different forms of inter-organizational change. An alternative to the more instrumental approaches of interorganizational change is offered which, in keeping with one of the central tenets of critical theory, seeks to enhance an emancipation from some insidious forms of domination that are inherent in much of the literature on organization change.

In her paper, Astrid Kersten discusses one of those undiscussables – race, and the broader issue of managing diversity. It is noted that the Society for Human Resource Management has declared that the management of diversity is the number one issue facing their field. Kersten uses the work of Habermas to reveal how this challenge needs to be understood as a mediated outcome of dialectical tensions in the broader milieu in which the work-organization is placed. The paper provides an excellent understanding of how diversity poses pressure for change as well as giving insight as to how diversity management serves as an ideological strategy for managing and containing racial conflict in organizations and in society at large.

Like the two preceding papers, Carol Rusaw explores the Frankfurt School's critique of instrumental reason, but her focus is upon how training may serve as a, potentially, liberating influence from instrumental reasoning and its functioning as an ideology. A case study is used to illustrate this potential but also to warn of the variety of strategies that might emerge as forms of resistance to change.

Jay Jurie discusses what he calls “organizational competence”, and argues that instrumental reasoning is one of the indicators of an organization's immaturity. He suggests a framework for an organization's broader mission in society and for the development of a model of organizational competency. The issues of “building capacity/capability” and “trust” are raised in the context of a maturing organization. These are issues that make a significant appearance in the next paper in the issue.

Christian Koch provides an insight into how trade unions have a crucial role to play in the management of change – in this case, the matter of technological change. The Frankfurt School had much to say about technology, and the optic provided by this School, and some contemporary critical theorists, is used by Koch in the examination of Scandinavian case examples. The distrust of each other by the parties involved in technological change is highlighted in this paper.

Adrian Carr provides a “note”, in which he suggests that the fundamental assumption made in critical thinking and by the Frankfurt School was that reflection, combined with revelation, is the necessary pathway to emancipation. This assumption might be contested, but what Carr suggests is that this “reflection” and “revelation” may trigger a variety of psychodynamic processes that we need to anticipate and understand if communication is not to be distorted or in some way subverted. These psychodynamic processes are described in a context in which, Carr suggests, the organization functions as a therapeutic setting.

Note

1. The material contained in this paper represents an elaboration of sections from a number of previous works – see, for example, Carr, 1986, 1997; Carr and Zanetti, 1998, 1999; Zanetti and Carr, 1997, 1998.

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