

Critical Theory, Critical Ethnography, Critical Conditions: Considerations of Postcritical Ethnography

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Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first as tragedy, the second as farce. . . .

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle-cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language.

—Karl Marx (The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonapart)

PROLEGOMENON: CRITICAL CONDITIONS

During the past few years there have emerged a plethora of studies in which is borrowed the rhetoric, if not always the conceptual understandings, of postpositivism, poststructuralism and postmodernism in framing the object of study. In

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part, this may represent little more than academic faddishness. But I think that something more is at work. During the 19th century, an industrial revolution occurred, which historians have portrayed as being of general social significance. In the United States, this revolution spanned a period of about 80 years, and represented a shift in labor force participation from agriculture to industry of about 20% (Brown, 1976). During the late 20th century there occurred a shift from goods to service production. This shift represented more than 30% change in relative labor force participation and was accomplished in only about 25 years. The *deindustrial revolution* occurred in about one third the time and directly affected many more people than the industrial revolution. It is reasonable to presume that the de-industrial revolution will transform basic social institutions, social relationships, and ideological sensibilities in ways as unexpected and significant as the original industrial revolution (Johnston, 1993; Kellner, 1989). At the very least, we are living in an age of anxiety and structural uncertainty. More likely, we are experiencing a crisis of legitimacy (Habermas, 1975) in which both the institutional forms and ways of interpreting institutional relationships are being called into question. The institution of schooling, as in earlier periods, is one of the most visible social institutions being called on to respond to economic restructuring. Educators are forced to abandon the logic of social reproduction and engage in social reconstruction, but under conditions in which the desirability of competing images of the future is hotly contested. In shaping the future of schooling, educators and social theorists must account for general conditions of postindustrial capitalism and the transformation of the capitalist state now under pressure to respond to (a) fragmenting cultural politics (Apple, 1996; Giroux, 1988, 1992), (b) increasing marginalization as transnational corporations become more powerful, and (c) an ever increasing fiscal (O'Conner, 1973) and legitimacy crisis.

Reflecting on the history of social thought, one finds a process in which the negative philosophers of the Enlightenment did serve, through critique, to free society from the ideological strictures of the ancient regime; but this negative philosophy was considered unsuitable soil on which the seeds of social reconstruction could flourish (Beaud, 1983; Hilton, 1976). Instead, the perceived need was to develop a positive philosophy, guided by instrumental/technical reason, grounded in an epistemology of intersubjectively validated, objective knowledge that could motivate, guide, and sustain efforts to build a new social order. What a remarkable accomplishment this turned out to be. Feudalism, which had reigned for several hundred years, was, in a very brief period of time, overcome by mercantilism. Mercantilism, which had such a short reign that it is seldom mentioned in popular history texts, was replaced by capitalism, which is itself divided into periods: competitive capitalism sustained by classic liberalism, which evolved into advanced capitalism seeking legitimation through modernist sensibilities, which further evolved into corporate-monopoly capitalism grounded in raw economic power, political mystification, and ideological cynicism. And where are we now?

