

A Rational Society?

Student Protest, Politics and the Relevance of Jürgen Habermas

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ABSTRACT

Within the past century in North America, Europe, and elsewhere, brief episodes of student political activism and protest have alternated with much longer periods of apparent apathy and social conformity (fringe elements of artistic bohemianism notwithstanding). This article looks to the ideological origins of student protest in the Marxist tradition and to the relationship among generational protest, critical theory and the influence of Jürgen Habermas on the evolving issues of democracy, social justice, and environmental sustainability. While Marx remains central to the critique of capitalist economics and the exploitation of workers under capitalism, Habermas opens the path to a more expansive, communication-based understanding of domination with implications for transformative education that will contribute to a social change based on a wider platform than social class, including issues of ecology and social justice in a comprehensive approach to human emancipation.

KEYWORDS

Communication, Critical Theory, Democracy, Ecology, Labor, Marxism, Student Protest

INTRODUCTION

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were nothing if not optimists. They were also exemplars of the European Enlightenment and the cultural movement of “Modernism” (Berman, 1982, pp. 87-130, 1999, pp. 91-152, 2000). They joined in the view that authentic human history would truly begin with the passage of stages of social development from infancy through adolescence and into maturity. All previous forms of human society from the earliest nomadic bands in subsistence economies through eras of primitive agriculture, slavery, feudalism, mercantilism and into industrial capitalism were quasi-Darwinian stages of development dominated in various ways by the primary problem of scarcity and our species’ response to it. Increasing economic progress was marked by a growing division of labor, the creation of private property, and the exploitation of human labor based on the social class formations appropriate to the political economies of the time. By these Marxian lights, having successfully passed through the social infancy and adolescence of our species, the full flourishing of humanity would require no fulfillment of the Darwinian fate—infirmary and death; instead, it reassuringly suggested that, coming from pre-history into history would permit us to endlessly finesse the inevitability of extinction for as long as the planet rotates around the Sun.

In any case, the scientific study of society surely allows us to comprehend our development from simpler cultures through increasingly advanced systems of economic exploitation and political domination, into an era of potential emancipation when technology and new methods of social organization permit the problem of scarcity to be overcome. That, at least, is the modernist conceit as shared by capitalists and communists alike.

From the latter perspective, the key to the creation of a society of individual freedom and social equity was the dynamic evolution of successive modes of production (based on ample resources, increasing energy sources, labor, and technology (the “means of production”), and corresponding arrangements that organized those means including the division of labor and the allocation and distribution of commodities, goods and services (the “social relations of production”). As technology became more powerful, manufacturing, transportation, communications and the applied arts of education and medicine transformed the successive societies. Leaving behind scarcity and inequity became real possibilities. The principal instrument of achieving the conditions of human fulfillment, as had been the case with previous evolutionary transformations, was class conflict over the ownership and control of the means of production.

The optimism displayed by Marx, Engels, and their many and diverse followers has been severely tested during the 125 years since Engels’ death, the almost 140 years since Marx’s death, and the nearly 175 years since they wrote their much referenced, but less often read, *Communist Manifesto*. Short-lived periods of hope for the end of capitalism in a mighty uprising of workers have been repeatedly dashed. Occasionally successful revolutions have appeared merely to substitute the party-controlled state for the capitalist-controlled state, leaving disillusionment and worse in their wake.

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