

**THEORY, ACTION, AND RADICAL SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION:
DIRECTIONS FOR A RENEWED CRITICAL THEORY**

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“Something of the freedom and spontaneity of the future appears in the organization and community of those in struggle, despite all the discipline grounded in the need for success.”
-Max Horkheimer

1. Introduction

Four key attributes of critical theory are central to the inquiry undertaken in this paper: critical theory's (1) philosophical and political approach to furthering Marxist critique of capitalist modernity, (2) open-endedness in defining evolving economic-political configurations of capitalism, (3) multidisciplinary approach to research and theory building, and (4) underlying socially transformative agenda. Our guiding question is how can Buddhist philosophy and Zen practice contribute to the renewal of critical theory in light of present socio-historical circumstances and persisting challenges around bridging critical theory and praxis. The aim here is to use overlaps between critical theory and Buddhism as a platform to raise questions about how to move the project of enlightened emancipation forward beyond negation and critique to activate the social change that is necessary for agents to realize their true interests and potentials.¹ After deriving a basic conceptual framework, we present a case for potential application in order to ground further questions. While neither critical theory nor Buddhism are explicitly spatial, their mutual aims to enlighten, emancipate, and ultimately enliven agents within the realm of the every day carries substantial implications for both cities and students of urban planning.

2. Critical theory and the project of enlightened emancipation

Critical theory originated from the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt, Germany in the 1920s as a critique of capitalist modernity. Birthed in the Marxian tradition, the "Frankfurt School," including Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Lowenthal, and Pollock,

¹ Given the nature of our exercise, our analysis of critical theory and Buddhism is based entirely on secondary sources.

steadily shied away from the scientism and determinism of orthodox Marxism and instead embraced the more philosophical and humanistic interpretations of Lukacs and Korsch whose Marxism emphasized subjectivity, culture, class consciousness, and self-activity. Inspired by Hegel's dialectical method, the Frankfurt School (whose members not only had ideological overlaps but also significant differences beyond the scope of this paper), offered "comprehensive and systematic theories of the trajectory of modernity, combined with critical diagnoses of some of the latter's limitations, pathologies, and destructive effects, while providing defenses of some of its progressive elements" (Kellner 1989). Their extensive critique of ideology entailed development of concepts such as false consciousness, reification, and cultural hegemony and assigned intellectuals a key role in raising consciousness and facilitating action to eradicate systems of domination (Held 1980).

From its inception, critical theory was multidisciplinary in its approach to research and constructing theory. The scholars drew from a myriad of sources including philosophy, literature, art history and critique, and Freudian psychology in addition to political economy to maintain their pulse on the transient historical condition. When the existing economic-political configuration surpassed the stage of market, entrepreneurial capitalism (described by Marx) and shifted into a one where bureaucracy, finance capital, and ties between the economy and the state were prominent, Marcuse, Horkheimer, and Adorno, along with other institute members, turned to Weber's findings on the rationalization of society to better understand witnessed changes. As exiles in the US during the late 30s and 40s, some of the scholars became interested in consumerism, popular culture, and the culture industries, and incorporated studies of bourgeois art, pop culture, astrology, and

music in analyzing the process by which the production of “social cement” perpetuates the existing order (Kellner 1989). Studies on the individual, family, and society and the “authoritarian personality” undertaken from the 30s through the 50s incorporated a number of Freudian psychoanalytic categories in examining processes of socialization. In the 1960s, Habermas drew from Freud’s methodological and interpretative framework, Chomsky’s contributions to linguistics, and Austin and Searle’s theory of speech acts among others in developing his theory of communicative competence as a new foundation for critical theory (Geuss 1981).

While not all of the scholarship explicitly deals with the issue of praxis, there is a socially transformative agenda underpinning all works of critical theory, some of which can be traced back to Lukacs’ influence on the Frankfurt School. In *History and Class Consciousness* (Lukács 1971), Lukacs argued that the proletariat, by virtue of its class position, possesses the unique potential to facilitate the social and historical processes of evolution. While the reification (whereby human relations take on the character of a “thing”) of all aspects of life delivers one objective reality for all of society, actors experience and mediate the immediacy of social existence in different ways based on their class positions. As every individual is a subject, or center of his/her experience while simultaneously manifesting an objective existence in that society, the “subject-object of social process coexist in a state of dialectical interaction.” For the capitalist, the palpable effects that emanate from his daily existence bound him to his “true state of affairs.” On the other hand, “in every aspect of daily life in which the individual worker imagines himself to be the subject of his own life he finds this to be an illusion that is destroyed by the immediacy of his existence.” According to Lukacs, by raising to consciousness this structure

of reification and exposing the rift between the actual and possible from the standpoint of the proletariat, social theory can lay the foundations of knowledge upon which “the true existence of the proletariat will begin.”

The critical theorists retained Lukacs’ concern for “the importance of theory as a promotive factor in the development of the masses” at the same time they questioned whether the “standpoint of the proletariat” necessarily provided the criterion of truth (Held 1980). This unresolved question of who is the rightful subject of critical theory and problem of defining a criterion of truth continues to challenge the practical viability of critical theory, an issue we will return to later. As for the functional role of critical theory in developing a general revolutionary consciousness, Raymond Geuss, in *The Idea of a Critical Theory* (Geuss 1981), provides an extensive examination of how critical theory (here encompassing the work of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and Habermas), as a reflective theory, aims to provide “agents” with the kind of knowledge inherently productive of enlightenment and emancipation. Through *ideologiekritik*, or a radical criticism of society and its dominant ideology, critical theory serves to reveal the false ideologies that legitimize coercive social institutions and delude agents about themselves and their position, society, and interests. The Frankfurt School and Habermas diverged on the question of which set of epistemic principles should serve as the basis from which a form of consciousness is judged to be false.² Despite these differences, they saw critical theory as facilitating social transformation in much the same way: The provided knowledge helps

² Horkheimer and Adorno believed the breach between ideals and reality should be assessed based on the claims of that society’s particular conceptual principles, while Habermas believed in an innate human ability (inherent in the structure of speech) to access a transcendental criterion of truth, freedom, and rationality (Geuss 1981).

agents self reflect and become aware of the unconscious determinants of their consciousness and action as well as the fact that their beliefs, attitudes, norms, and worldview were acquired under conditions of un-freedom; agents further realize their own power to affect reality, which in turn dissolves pseudo-objectivity and stimulates self-activity toward the realization of their true interests; this enlightenment and emancipation from self-imposed coercion and self-frustration of conscious human action becomes the precondition for a long course of political action that radically transforms society such that all agents are free to realize their true potentials.

3. Critical theory, self-reflection, and action in a positive sense

The differences among Lukacs and the various critical theorists in how they conceptualize the precise relationship between theory, self-reflection, and action merit attention. Lukacs was primarily concerned with conceptually framing the standpoint of the proletariat as a unique position from which to understand and change society radically. The implication being that the special position of the proletariat in society and history suffices as a basis for generating a self- understanding and consciousness that will catalyze actualization of society's full potentialities, the details of how revolutionary action might unfold are left open to be determined in the specific socio-historical moment. The Frankfurt School likewise assumed a contextualist, historical approach and generated more philosophical works and cultural critique than it dealt with practical political issues. Resuming Lukacs' examination of the subject-object dialectic and the concept of reification while not focusing on the class position of the proletariat per se, it aimed to unveil for agents the false ideologies that legitimize coercive social institutions and impede

realization of their true interests within their particular socio-historical context. For the Frankfurt School, the critical theories themselves were historical entities that were limited to appealing to the agents' particular epistemic principles and ideals of the good life (Geuss 1981). Grappling with the question of how to logically structure critical theory "to encompass a transitory element inherent in the destiny of men" (Held 1980), they stopped short of formulating concrete prescriptions on how an agent, once enlightened and emancipated, may pursue political action that transforms coercive social institutions to effectively sustain and amplify liberation.

Examining the conceptual challenges faced by the Frankfurt School provides a context in which we can understand Habermas' contributions to critical theory. The Frankfurt School's efforts to synthesize philosophy, the social sciences, and radical politics began to dwindle down in the 1940s, as Adorno and Horkheimer questioned the practical aims of critical theory. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, they cast doubt on the emancipatory potential of enlightenment on the basis that reason, in the form of instrumental rationality, served to dominate and control rather than liberate individuals from repression to realize truth (where the possible becomes the actual). Already their ambiguity in identifying a transformative agent rendered critical theory purely abstract, and once they discounted the capacity of the individual subject to attain truth through reason, critical theory ceased to have any transformative power even at a theoretical level. Besides the lack of a central revolutionary agent, another conceptual challenge relates to the issue of epistemic principles. The Frankfurt School struggled to reconcile transcendental concepts and values of freedom and rationality with a materialist method that rejected historical skepticism at the same time it acknowledged the historical embeddedness of knowledge. Consequently,

the scholars developed varying bases for critique; for Horkheimer, in the early 30s, the agent's marginalized position was the foundation for criticism, while Adorno relied on the claims implied by conceptual principles, and Marcuse grounded his critique in human instincts and theory (Held 1980).

Habermas, having studied with both Adorno and Horkheimer, likewise acknowledged the socio-historical specificity of the knowing, acting subject but additionally developed a naturalistic, universalist moral framework that locates rationality within the basic human capacity of interpersonal communication.³ Recasting the history of the Enlightenment around the concept of the public sphere, where subjects participated as equals in critical discussion in pursuit of the common good, he resurrected the capacity of reason, through undistorted communication, to realize ideals of freedom and truth. Like the Frankfurt School, Habermas has not identified a subject of emancipation/agent of social transformation or concrete situations where critical theory can be applied (Held 1980, pp. 395). However, in casting inter-subjective communication as the focal point of self-reflection and political practice (Held 1980, pp. 256-257), he sets foundations on which to build the practical political dimensions of critical theory in a positive sense beyond critique and negation. The premise being that a public sphere and political practice based on free discussion between equal, truth-seeking individuals can help preserve autonomy against a rationalized capitalist society, the public sphere is set as a platform upon which to renew democratic politics and attain truth, where social actuality converges with what ought to be.

³ Given Habermas' work is both prolific and complex, we will speak generally about what is most relevant to the purpose of this paper.

By integrating the subject of Buddhist philosophy and Zen practice into the discussion where Habermas leaves off, we can begin to formulate a set of practical political prescriptions for critical theory. While Buddhism appears offhand an unusual candidate to contribute to a discussion concerning critical theory and the project of enlightened emancipation and social change, certain aspects of its philosophy and practice produce overlaps in both method and aim. To begin, Buddhist philosophy operates within a universalist moral framework that locates structures of truth and rationality in the activity of being, while the practice of Zen Buddhism is grounded in the tribulations of everyday (resonating with critical theory's blending of transcendental principles with a materialist method). Secondly, both Buddhism and critical theory seek to inform a process of self-reflection that anticipates enlightenment and emancipation. As the value of a critical theory ultimately rests on its capacity to help subjects alter their objective conditions, a common metaphor for Buddhist text is a raft that takes people where they need to go but is not clung to as a place in itself. Hence for both critical theory and Buddhism, the emphasis is on *self*-reflection and activity as driver of social change. However, only Buddhism, of the two, concretely prescribes the process by which this self-reflection can translate into praxis that can potentially alter social conditions (still, within a similar framework as critical theory), presenting a set of opportunities further explored in the next section.

4. Buddhist philosophy, self reflection, and action

Buddhism, or the "Buddha dharma," refers to the teachings of Buddha, or "the awakened one," who for 45 years around 500 BCE, taught the way of enlightenment as well as of the suffering and despair that inevitably characterize life. Enlightenment means

simply seeing things as they are, and for the enlightened, action is said to arise as appropriate to the circumstance, that is, without habits of the mind coloring perceptions and begetting intention. There are four central tenets in the Buddha dharma: (1) human life is characterized by *dukha*, or suffering and dissatisfaction; (2) *dukha* arises within us; (3) we realize the origin of *dukha* and the fact that we can put to end to it in its most profound and existential forms; (4) the means to realizing this *nirvana*, or freedom of mind is through becoming fully present in the here and now (Hagen 1999). There are eight aspects to this fourth truth, which serve as guiding posts for maintaining a conscious existence, the premise being that unsound morality begets consequences that inhibit the immediacy necessary for *nirvana*. Where “right” is a translation of *samma*, which is akin to “appropriate” and “in sync with reality” rather than the opposite of “wrong,” the eightfold path consists of right view, thought, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and meditation. Here, the eight elements do not comprise a path in an ordinal sense but rather occur concurrently and are interdependent. Again, worth noting is the emphasis on the subject/self as agent of change.

Zen, a derivative of the Sanskrit term for meditation, is a school of Buddhism that is less concerned with philosophical understanding than practice as a path to enlightenment. Zen practice is distinguished by the centrality of *zazen*, which directly translates to “sitting meditation,” although Zen meditation encompasses innumerable activities including walking, standing, lying down, and eating. When practicing basic *zazen*, the mind follows one’s breathing and in doing so detaches itself from habitually rising thoughts, which detract from full occupation of the present. As the mind inevitably starts to wander, the simple act of watching the mind “like clouds passing through a sky” has a culling effect

(Sungsan Tae 1976; Suzuki and Dixon 2006). *Koan*, or philosophical meditation, is an additional aspect of Zen practice that tests a person's depth of enlightenment and in some cases serves to shock the person into a state of awareness. Koan are typically stories from Buddhist sutras or historical records that refer to a failure of openness and insight resulting from an inability to remain in present discourse free of intention and anticipation (Wright 1998). Their structures of logic correspond more with intuition rather than discursive thought, given the emphasis on understanding reality as a direct experience. Aside from their cultural significance, zazen and koan play a practical role in opening the acting subject to various possibilities latent within the present through an iterative process of self-reflection.

Three general concepts within Buddhist philosophy and Zen practice are particularly relevant to our discussion of activating critical theory to encompass praxis and social change: presence, small mind/big mind, and emptiness. So far, we have elaborated on the centrality of presence in Buddhist philosophy and Zen practice, i.e. the goal of Buddhism to teach the way of enlightenment (a state of complete presence in the here and now) and Zen practice serving to condition the subject to directly experience the present, without falling prey to wandering habits of the mind.⁴ Given presence alone fails to necessarily challenge the status quo, the latter two concepts are key in translating the state of presence into socially transformative action. "Small mind" implies a one-sided, dualistic understanding of life that centers on the projected self, whereas "big mind" has a more widely encompassing view of life where the self is perceived as an integral part of the social

⁴ This experience of living that is free from thought constraints is akin to critical theory's notion of enlightened emancipation.

totality (Suzuki and Dixon 2006). Each perspective entails a different approach to living, the former characterized by reactive, petty conduct and the latter, by compassionate behavior that is mindful of the whole (including the extent to which one's actions affect others). Meditation, or the exercise of self-reflection, is in some ways a systematic effort to open up the small mind to achieve the big mind and prompt "right" action. Finally, the concept of emptiness underpins potential imagination and enactment of new possibilities. Deriving from the Sanskrit term for zero-"ness," it speaks to the impermanence of things including all that we see, hear, feel, and think. Realizing that all things and states have no essential "ness" but rather are in constant flux, the subject can become free from fixed perspectives and open to a boundless reality.

Buddhist philosophy and Zen practice thus offer active prescriptions by which a subject may practice self-reflection in order to attain enlightenment and emancipation and in turn expand their realm of possibility. While the four central tenets and eightfold path emphasize the subject's central role in attaining freedom from repressive thought constructs and acting upon life's circumstances, zazen and koan provide training to equip the subject to encounter reality as a direct experience without falling prey to forms of false consciousness. The concepts of big mind and emptiness in turn inform the process by which a state of presence translates into praxis with the potential to radically transform society. Subjects in sync with the big mind act in consideration of the whole rather than on the basis of their narrow self-interest, as those embracing the concept of emptiness accept life's inexorable transience and in doing so become attuned to the unlimited opportunities latent in the passing of moments. Theoretically speaking, subjects that are fully present, conscious of their impact upon the social totality of which they are an integral part, and

open to new possibilities may enact actions veering closer to rationality and truth, which then serve to challenge and overturn coercive social institutions. Yet in practice, there remains an issue of scale and politics, more specifically, the question of how to effect sizeable, lasting change in societies rife with competing interests and power imbalances that favor the status quo. What emerges is a need for coordination that entails expanding the state of enlightened emancipation among individuals and breeding an awareness of our mutual dependence and complementarity in order to collectively envision alternatives and pursue new possibilities. Having drawn implications from Buddhism to better bridge critical theory with self- reflection and activity, we next turn to Scharmer's work on "presencing" and the "U process" to further explore the link between praxis and the outcome of radical social change.⁵ While Scharmer's framework is frequently applied in (and particularly well suited for) firm settings such that the nature of its content significantly varies from that of critical theory and Buddhism, it does offer valuable implications for political action aimed at radical social transformation, and it is on this basis that we explore it's applicability for this exercise.⁶

5. From enlightened emancipation to social transformation

Inspired by traditions in philosophy and social theory ranging from Buddhism to works by Hegel, Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Habermas, Scharmer's work on "presencing"

⁵ C. Otto Scharmer is a senior a lecturer and co-founder of the Leadership Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and the founding chair of Emerging Leaders for Innovation Across Sectors (ELIAS), a program linking twenty global institutions representing the private and public sector as well as civil society in order to drive system innovations for a more sustainable world (www.ottoscharmer.com).

⁶ Habermas' theory of communicative action is an alternative venue that for the time being will remain a subject of future inquiry.

and the “U process” offers a systematic approach to social innovation that builds from the individual level to effect large scale, institutional change. “Presencing,” an amalgamation of “presence” and “sensing,” can be defined as “liberating one’s perception from the prison of the past and then letting it operate from the field of the future” (Scharmer 2007). The U process operationalizes the concept of presencing as an individual and group- level process, the latter case giving way to its functions as a “social technology.” To guide movement through the five steps of the U process (initiating, sensing, presencing, prototyping, and institutionalizing), Scharmer has developed additional principles and practices that help a group “link with and realize their best future possibility.” The U process can be applied to practical situations as a blueprint that guides a step by step process, a general framework whose principles can be situated and adapted to accommodate specific contexts as needed, and finally as an inspirational source that strengthens the intentions and relations underpinning a collaborative effort.

The U process being most relevant to our discussion as a group practice, we present below a summary of the five movements of the U as they apply to both the “the macro level of innovation projects and change architectures and to the meso and micro levels of group conversation or one-on-one interactions” (Scharmer 2007, pp. 377-442).

1. *Co-initiating* is the first step of the U process, which entails convening a constellation of stakeholders (that need one another to take action and move forward) and building common intent among them through a practice of deep listening that uncovers common ground. The opposite of co-initiating is marketing, which entails trying to get people to buy into a pre-formulated idea. Barriers to success include the need for power, ownership, and money.

2. *Co-sensing* is where this group sees emerging opportunities and the key systemic forces at issue by going places, talking to people, and learning by doing. Participants are instructed to practice deep listening and dialogue, which entails suspending their Voice of Judgment and connecting with the mind, heart, and will wide open. This shared seeing and dialogue produces a new capacity of collective sense making and thinking together. By coming to see the situation as a whole, participants are positioned to also act from the emerging whole from that point on.
3. *Presencing* is characterized by a coming in of the new and transformation of the old (akin to the Buddhist concept of emptiness). Various exercises aid the process of reflection by which participants shed parts of them that are inessential (i.e. Voice of Cynicism, Voice of Fear) in order to open themselves to aspects of their highest possible future selves. Participants consequently begin to operate with a heightened level of energy and sense of future possibility. They together form a safe collective holding space in which to support one another in making sense of and advancing their life and work journeys.
4. *Co-creating* entails exploring the future by doing rather than by thinking and reflecting. Participants build microcosms of the future they want to create and present these prototypes to all stakeholders in order to generate feedback and refine the assumptions about the project. The commitment of the core group creates an energy field that begins to attract people, opportunities, and resources that build momentum. The opposite of co-creating is executing without improvisation and mindfulness, endless reflection without a will to act, and talking without a connection to motivation and action.

5. *Co-evolving* is about growing innovation ecosystems by seeing and acting from the emerging whole. It begins with reviewing the group's progress to determine what prototypes might have the highest impact on the system in order to connect these with the institutions and players that can help take them to the next level of piloting and scaling. The group additionally lays innovation infrastructures by shaping safe places and rhythms for peer coaching.

We return to the issue of scale and politics, specifically, the question of how to scale up from the unit of the enlightened and emancipated individual to effect sizeable, lasting change in societies rife with competing interests and power imbalances that favor the status quo. Here, the U process can serve as a means for coordinating collective visioning and action that goes beyond reconciling varied interests and aggregating resources internal to the group. The process of co-initiating allows stakeholders to uncover common ground and move forward on the basis of shared intent, while co-sensing enables participants to take in and act on the situation as a whole rather than from their personal vantage point. The fact that the U process not only joins various individuals around a common interest but also heightens their individual and collective level of energy and sense of future possibility further enhances the capacity of marginalized agents to counterbalance powers that be, given they are co-present and together creating microcosms of their emerging future. Finally, the process of co-evolving, in which actors together build institutional ecosystems and supporting infrastructure for subsequent levels of piloting and scaling, not only safeguards gains but also engenders a generative effect for future innovations. In sum, where the relationship between Buddhist philosophy and Zen practice provides insights

that can help forge a stronger connection between critical theory and praxis, Scharmer's U-theory can help inform the steps by which praxis can deliver radical social change.

6. Criteria for a renewed critical theory

We began this paper with an overview of critical theory (focusing on its four key attributes), examining the conceptual and practical-political challenges of critical theory as well as Habermas' reformulation of the philosophical foundations. We next explored the relationship between Buddhist philosophy and practice along with Scharmer's work on presencing and the U process in order to derive implications for bridging critical theory and praxis, the larger aim being to activate critical theory's agenda of radical social transformation. What remains now is the question of how we can transpose the above findings to sketch a framework for a renewed critical theory that operates in the present socio-historical context to provide agents with the kind of knowledge that helps generate enlightenment and sustained emancipation, which necessarily implies political action and radical social change. Based on the above findings, our preliminary set of criteria for a renewed critical theory is as follows:

- A critical theory, in order to be practically and politically useful, should identify a subject of emancipation/agent of social transformation and concrete situations where critical theory can be applied. In deciding the subject, variables to be considered include the present economic-political configuration including relations of production, the architecture of social institutions, and means of collective consumption.

- Ideologiekritik (a radical criticism of society and its dominant ideology) serves an integral role in making subjects aware of the unconscious determinants of their false consciousness, frustration, and repression. The Frankfurt School established a robust tradition on this front, and we should continue to provide subjects with knowledge that helps clarify their world picture and overcome the social institutions that contribute to their repression.
- However, building a society where all actors can realize their true interests and potentials requires more than critiquing and overcoming negative aspects of what exists. What is additionally needed is a process of reflection, will formation, and strategic action at both the individual and collective level, which generates new imaginations and bases for action.
- In considering the implications of deriving methodological prescriptions appropriate to a series of specific socio-historical moments, we can perhaps confront the dilemma of relativistic epistemic principles by locating reason within the transcendental condition of presence (at the individual and collective level, the latter condition delineated by the U process). "Presence," as a positive formulation, is in some ways a negation of two negative concepts that originally served as focal concerns of the Frankfurt School- false consciousness and reification.
- So then *how* can a critical theory facilitate presence in a way that enables subjects to imagine and create new alternatives without being circumscribed by the limiting conditions of the present? At the individual level, critical theory could perhaps draw from Buddhism to facilitate a self-reflective practice that serves to empirically confirm for the subject various elements of ideologiekritik as well as preview an

alternative mode of being in the present, where subjects are mindful of the whole circumstance of which they are an integral part, acting in consideration of the whole rather than on the basis of their narrow self-interest, and attuned to the unlimited opportunities latent in the passing of moments.

- At the collective level, a critical theory can point out specific openings for social transformation where enlightened and emancipated agents can focus their political energies. It could further draw from Scharmer's work to provide directions on how various stakeholders can co-initiate, co-sense, presence, co-create, and co-evolve together in order to drive the "social innovation," or radical social transformation that is necessary to attain a society where all actors can realize their true interests and potentials. The process of collective capacity building does not always have to start from scratch, as existing organizations and initiatives may convene with progressive others to act on the basis of something much greater than their immediate self interest.

7. Case example

Having derived a basic conceptual framework for a renewed critical theory, this final section presents a case for potential application. We start by identifying an appropriate subject in light of the given socio-historical context. If bureaucratic and mechanical rationalization summarized the economic-political configuration of the Frankfurt School's time, flexible specialization perhaps characterizes ours. Over the last 30 years, neoliberal trade policy, the emergence of just-in-time production, and increased outsourcing and off-shoring, along with developments in transportation and information

and communication technology, have restructured the American economy as to result in mass closure of manufacturing plants and reduction of union jobs in urban centers across the country. At the same time, slashed federal spending on public sector employment, public transit, housing programs, and other social services have further devastated already debilitated communities. The result has been dramatic increases in income and wealth inequality, with effects of the recent housing and financial crisis falling particularly harshly upon the many poor working people in America that were left out of the prosperity of the last few decades. We designate this group of workers as the rightful subjects of our critical theory and move ahead to examine a present opportunity where ideologiekritik, self-reflection, and action can potentially coalesce into collective capacity that engenders radical social transformation.

The Emerald Cities Project is a national coalition including labor unions, community organizations, environmentalists, and social justice activist that aims to improve energy efficiency across urban centers in America and, in the process, create high road jobs and strengthen communities (Emerald Cities 2009). With political and financial backing from the Obama administration, the project is piloting building and retrofit programs across residential, commercial, industrial, institutional, and public sectors in select cities whose success will be judged by their capacity to grow the union sector, build the local community, democratize the urban economy, and green the targeted city. The project's success will not only benefit poor, working people in America and their advocates who are involved with the project but also fundamentally alter city building and modes of collective consumption to become more conscious of and better integrated with the natural

environment.⁷ As a result of its broad-based coalition, Emerald Cities enjoys substantial economies of scale (in numbers and politics) while simultaneously encountering risks related to competing interests, power imbalances, and disassociation from the true interests of the poor, working people that it represents. This precarious balance presents an opening for a renewed critical theory to guide a reflective, democratic, and generative process that acts on its commitment to radical social transformation. While our framework is certainly not without problems, the long course of political action leading to a rational and free society not only underscores the need for a critical theory that is explicitly practical and political but also ensures that it will be tested and honed through continual application.

⁷ For labor unions, the project will add jobs and hours for members, increase union membership and density, grow and/or capture new markets, grow existing contractors, sign new contractors, and strengthen their overall position. For community organizations, it will provide new construction careers, add good jobs, create new high-road enterprises, raise living standards/ reduce poverty, and lower energy costs for working families. At a broader level, the project will help democratize the economy by increasing labor-community input into economic development agenda, pursuing pro-working families economic strategies, and building lasting infrastructure to shape the urban economy. While environmentalists may be particularly pleased with outcomes such as lower carbon footprints, reduced energy usage and increased energy savings and efficiencies, the benefits will accrue to all members of present and future generations (Emerald_Cities 2009).

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