

Society for Socialist Studies

Crossroads: Critical Theories in an Uncertain World

Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences

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<http://www.socialiststudies.ca/>

*You know the nearer your destination
The more you're slip sliding away*
Paul Simon

There are always some people who think that their time has just begun while others fear that they have run the course of history. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, liberals lamented the decay of free market capitalism and social democrats were disappointed that the organized capitalism they had envisioned as an alternative to the unfettered rule of capital had not materialized. Communists saw the general crisis of capitalism as the perfect chance to advocate their Soviet alternative whereas the Nazis rebuilt the power of capital in the name of racial superiority. Reflecting on the economic and political conditions of the 1930s, Adorno and Horkheimer argued that the dialectic of enlightenment had transformed societies in such a way that the historical choices Rosa Luxemburg had seen – ‘socialism or barbarism’ – were replaced by different kinds of barbarism. Dissident intellectuals like Benjamin, Freud, and Arendt seconded such arguments. Keynes struck a more positive tone by suggesting a reinvention of liberalism that could align it with reformist labour movements.

Without a doubt, Keynes’s embedded liberalism was much more human than Hitler’s and Stalin’s respective empires. Yet capitalism with a human face also had its costs: democratic participation was subjugated to technocratic management processes, entire groups of people, notably women, ethnic minorities, and immigrants, were marginalized, the Global South was turned into a site of proxy-wars between capitalism and Soviet communism, and Mother Nature was misused in the name of never-ending prosperity. By the late 1960s, a new generation of protestors, inspired by theoreticians such as Marcuse and Mills but also by poets and

singers of a burgeoning counter-culture, rebelled against the one-dimensional men that the allegedly antagonistic systems of the East and the West had both produced. Critical thinking, it seemed, became a force of social change. Unfortunately, it didn't take long until the then New Left began to mimic Old Left party building, with each self-appointed vanguard organization claiming exclusive possession of the eternal truth, or disintegrating into single-issue movements of all kinds. With hindsight, the respective insularities of those new proletarian vanguards and social movements look like a practical anticipation of postmodern thinking, which accompanied the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s.

The collapse of the Soviet empire completed the complementary rise of neoliberalism on the right and postmodernism on the left. Ironically, even the small group of socialists who maintained that there are alternatives to capitalism and actually existing socialism abandoned their hopes after the latter ceased to exist. During the 1990s, neoliberals were as triumphant as Soviet propagandists had been in the 1930s, while the left was as scattered and disoriented as Great Depression liberals. Critical theories were as homeless as they were during that earlier period. The discontent with neoliberalism, which was growing over the 1990s, eventually produced a new generation of protestors who took to the streets without reading Marx, Marcuse or Mao. At a series of World Social Forums and similar events, each presenting a mix of protests and teach-ins, they sought to build a movement of movements – but couldn't withstand the pressures of permanent warfare to which neoliberalism took refuge after the New Economy boom went bust. The Great Recession of recent years produced new kinds of discontent but, so far at least, nothing that amounts to a movement for progressive change (the many urban occupations that have cascaded from the Arab Spring to the 15-M movement in Spain, and Occupy Wall Street are a hopeful sign). Yet ideas around which such movements could coalesce are in short supply. Where they exist, they oscillate between abstract principles and small-scale experiments as in the days of Fourier and Owen. Unlike the utopian socialists of the early 19th century, though, we possess lots of experiences of failure that might contribute to a new socialist project.

In a world that has entirely changed since capitalism and socialist critique first developed, old questions need to be answered in new ways. What is the relationship between our understandings of the world and visions of a new world? How much understanding of reality is possible in the first place? Where is the line between concrete utopias and eschatological beliefs? Who are the agents of progressive change? Which role can intellectuals play to support such change?

The Society of Socialist Studies invites proposals for papers, roundtables, and session addressing any aspect of the theme of “Crossroads: Critical Theories in an Uncertain World”.

Proposals for Roundtables and Sessions

At this point we are mainly interested in proposals for roundtables and sessions, which will then be posted on our website so that individuals can propose papers to all suggested sessions. Proposals for roundtables should include a list of participants. Unlike sessions they are not open for individual proposals.

Proposals for Papers

You can submit proposals for an individual paper at this point. The Programme Committee will try to find a place for it. Sessions open for individual proposals will be posted to our website as soon as they are accepted by the Programme Committee.

Please note: The Society for Socialist Studies is committed to interdisciplinary work. Anyone suggesting a session, roundtable, or paper who is also affiliated with other associations participating in Congress may think about cross-listing their proposals.

Please submit abstracts (maximum of 100 words) for any proposals before 15 January 2012 to: Ingo Schmidt, Programme Committee Chair, ingos@athabascau.ca