Webinar Speaking Notes

Intro: Criticizing, Criticism, and Critique

Slide 1.

* What does it mean to be “critical”? (SP)

While “criticism” is often about pointing out deficiencies or drawbacks, or - in an artistic sense - analyzing and judging, and these activities \*can\* have a political purpose, “critique” tends to take a broader approach aimed at demystifying or clarifying phenomena, structures, or processes that may be obscured. Critique does not stop at explanation - the phenomena, structures, or processes that it is concerned with tend to either be taken for granted, supported by power (social, political, economic, religious), or so deeply entrenched in a field (a discipline or a profession, for instance) that they are hard to grasp and even harder to challenge. Kant’s “critique of pure reason”, for example, was not simply concerned with laying out his own philosophy, but in challenging and exposing the structures implicit in the dominant philosophy that came before him. “Criticism” and “critique”, then, are closely related, but they are different activities, based primarily on their goal or aim.

Slide 2.

“Critical theory” is a framework that underpins a particular critique. Critical theory is often a combination of social theory (what society is made up of and the way it works) and political theory (where power resides and how it operates), and can include elements of various subfields of philosophy: ethics, epistemology (how we know), ontology (what is the world made up of), and sometimes metaphysics (what are the underlying or originating dynamics of the world). What makes critical theory different from all of these field is its goal: critical theory is always about questioning, challenging, and subverting existing social and power structures. Additionally, while social and political theory can have a normative component, they are often purely descriptive. In other words, they are concerned with describing the world as it is rather than aiming at what the world *should* be like. Critical theory is normative, that is, it challenges the way things are from the perspective of the way things should be. It often has as an end goal the idea of human emancipation, the dismantling of unfair, oppressive, or repressive structures of power and domination.

Slide 3.

* Why is “critical librarianship” needed? (SP)

Libraries and librarianship exist in society, and so they are a part of the structures of power and domination that hold sway in society at large. Many of the assumptions, values, structures, and power dynamics that exist in society more broadly also exist within librarianship, and these assumptions, values, etc, often go unremarked, unquestioned, and unchallenged. But we can see the effects of these things in the profession, in our problems with diversity, in gender inequality, in our decision-making structures, the way power flows through our institutions, and in our relationships with social institutions like property and economic value, or with values enshrined in our constitution, like free expression. For example, when we speak of “librarians”, who do we mean? What kinds of power structures are reinforced when we speak of librarians, library technicians, and support staff? What are the social and political consequences of explaining to the public that not everyone who works in a library is a librarian? Often there are assumptions and presumptions that go unexamined in cases like this. Very often, critical librarianship prefers to distinguish between library workers and librarians, only using “librarian” when we are discussing things specific to accredited librarians, and cognizant of the implications of using the term. When we want to refer to everyone who works in the library, we tend to use “library worker” rather than list all the different kinds of positions libraries employ, especially where listing them can contribute to a reproduction of the hierarchy of the profession.

Librarianship often sees itself as a technical profession, and one of the unexamined presumptions is that technical work doesn’t involve itself in questions of value or power. Libraries become spaces of neutral, practical intellectual effort, spaces from which ethical and political issues are ostensibly excluded. This means that the issues of value and power tend to take root unconsciously within the profession, making it hard to connect the effects (lack of diversity, gender inequality, for example) with our own actions and practices. Critical theory can help us make these connections, with a view to changing our practices so that we can, in the end, fix the problems.

This technical focus often lends itself to the idea that library workers are not subject to any kind of theory, that they focus on clear-cut, apolitical technical work. But one thing that critical theory exposes is that we are all subject to some kind of theory. Often, when we don’t agree with someone’s underlying theory, we dismiss it as ideology, but we *all* subscribe to some kind of ideology. The values and assumptions we learn from our parents or in school, from the media, from politicians, and from our peers, all create a - conscious or unconscious - theory within each of us. This is not bad and not something we can ever stamp out - it is simply what it means to be a human being living in a society. Very often, when a great many people share an underlying theory, it takes on the guise of “common sense”. Critical theory says that such theories are dominant or hegemonic, meaning that they quietly govern all our decisions and social relationships while remaining in the background, so to speak. When such theories emerges from the background, they often do so in the way we speak, the way we create narratives to explain our society. As a result, we often refer to these theories as “discourse”. One task of critical theory is to unmask these hegemonic discourse.

Slide 4.

So what kind of underlying theories or discourses are we talking about. A good example is the gender pay gap. If you subscribe to the theory that people are paid for the work that they do, then you might imagine that people get paid less for doing less work (however “more” and “less” is defined). But if a study points out that in general women are doing the same amount of work as men (if not more - critical theory has much to say about this as well), then the discourse of the amount of pay being measured by the amount of work is challenged. Critical theory can offer an alternative explanation for how people are paid. But rather than change the default theoretical position, the dominant discourse will often move the goalposts, arguing, for example, that women just aren’t asking for as much money - either in terms of pay raises, or in salary negotiations for a new position. Again, studies disprove this empirical proposition, and critical theory not only explains why this might be the case, but offers alternative explanations.

It should be clear from this brief example that dominant or hegemonic theories seek to ensure that things stay the same - in this case, that the gender pay gap remains in force. On the other hand, critical theories are aimed at *changing* the situation. Of exposing the underlying power dynamics and structures of oppression that underpin seemingly “innocent” phenomena. For critical theory, nothing social can be innocent. Using critical theory in librarianship means engaging with - often uncomfortable - questions of domination and power, especially around race, gender, class, sexuality, and disability. And it means committing to change things.

This goes against the grain in mainstream LIS research. Again, there is an underlying theory at work: a social-scientific assumption that properly performed empirical research is “value-free”, descriptive as opposed to normative. Our research methods classes and the dominant perspective of editors in the field subscribe - consciously or not - to this discourse, which makes it hard to engage in research committed to change and emancipation. Nevertheless, there are communities of LIS practice and research which are so engaged, and outlets - like the Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies and the Journal of Radical Librarianship which are committed to publishing and supporting this research.

Slide 5.

The question of practice is more difficult to tackle. The power structures of our institutions mirror the power structures of the broader world and it is difficult to challenge those structures. It is impossible to do it alone, at any rate, and one of the common threads of the various critical theory approaches, is that challenging dominant practices require collective rather than individual action.

Main: Marxism as Critical Theory

Slide 1. Outline:

 Who was Karl Marx and what is Marxism?

 Marx and Engels' Major Works

 Marx's Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach

 Marxist Critical Theory

 Three sources and three component parts

 Librarianship and Philosophy

 Librarianship and Politics

 Librarianship and Political Economy

Slide 2. Who was Karl Marx

Originally studied law, but became interested in philosophy. Worked in journalism where he fell foul of the authorities and had to leave Prussia. Settled first in Belgium, and then in London. In London he took advantage of the collections of the British Museum library to study politics and economics.

Slide 3

It was his work in journalism that first got him interested

in political economy and the condition of the poor and the

working class. In London he was able to study the most

advanced form of capitalism then in existence.

In 1847, he and his friend Friedrich Engels wrote \*The

Manifesto of the Communist Party\* for the International

Working Men's Association just in time for the 1848

revolutions which swept Europe.

In the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels laid out what

they saw as the fundamental problems of capitalism

(exploitation, poverty, etc.) and,

according to a theory of history which they had developed,

predicted its overthrow by a workers' revolution.

Slide 4.

Marx and Engels major works.

Each of them wrote quite a lot. These are three major works: Engels’ Condition of the Working Class in England was an anthropological and sociological study of industrial workers in Manchester, a class of people who were still quite new to Western society. The Communist Manifesto lays out Marx and Engels’ understanding of communism, their theory of historical development, and their predication for the working-class overthrow of capitalism. Marx’s largest work – left unfinished at the time of his death – is called simply *Capital*. It is partly a critique of the dominant economic theories of the time, but also a masterly analysis of capitalism and an explanation for why it produces misery and crisis.

Slide 5.

Some other important works by Marx and Engels: Marx’s notebooks written in Paris when he was a young man. These are considered more “humanist” or idealistic notes, and they had a huge effect on the anti-Soviet Marxism of the mid-20th century. The Grundrisse is a collection of notebooks Marx wrote in preparation for writing Capital. They cover much the same ground as Capital, but from a very different perspective: less economic, more political. Again, a later generation of Marxists in the 1970s began to focus on the Grundrisse as a way to access more political agency within Marxism. Engels’ Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State. This was very influential in feminist circles, as it was the first sustained attempt to give a political account of the development of patriarchy and women’s oppression. It’s largely been superseded by later work, but it’s still an interesting account.

Slide 6.

Theses on Feuerbach. Feuerbach was a German philosopher who argued that the content of religion, specifically Christianity, were nothing but an expression of the social relationships that obtain in the real world. Marx took this idea over to show that ideology in general was an expression of the socio-economic relationships that form the basis of a given society. Marx’s 11th thesis has become a slogan for Marxism in general, warning theorists not to be satisfied with interpreting or explaining the world, but to work towards changing it.

This idea obviously has enormous implications for the

relationship of theory to practice. For Marx and subsequent

Marxism theory and praxis have to be a unified thing.

Gramsci referred to Marxism in his prison notebooks as "the

philosophy of praxis"

Slide 7.

What is Marxist Critical Theory – theory that aims at both critiquing society and at changing it.

Usually associated with the Frankfurt

School of Social Research, which included members Theodore

Adorno, Marx Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and Jurgen

Habermas.

Frankfurt School distinguished between "scientific theory"

and "critical theory".

So how is critical theory different from scientific theory, either in the natural sciences or the social sciences?

Slide 8.

Scientific Theory:

* It's "aim or goal [is] successful manipulation of the external world." In this sense, then, you could argue that scientific is a philosophy of praxis too, except that scientific theory aims at the technical *domination* of the world, rather than changing the world in a socially liberating way.
* Objectifying: "one can distinguish clearly between the theory and the 'objects' to which the theory refers."
* Evidence: "require empirical confirmation through observation and experiment."

Essentially, scientific theory is worked out using the scientific method.

Slide 9.

Critical Theory:

* "Aim at emancipation and enlightenment, at making agents aware of hidden coercion, thereby freeing them from that coercion."
* Reflective or self-referential: "a critical theory is always part of the object-domain which it describes; critical theories are always in part about themselves.
* Evidence: "are cognitively acceptable only if they survive a more complicated process of evaluation, the central part of which is that they are 'reflectively acceptable'."

Source: Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 55-56

Slide 10.

In a pamphlet of 1913, Lenin wrote that Marxism had three sources: German philosophy, French socialism, and English political economy. A Marxist critical theory should stake

its claims with respect to these three subjects: philosophy,

politics, and political economy. Note that in those days – and for many Marxists today – disciplinary divisions are artificial, and are part of the isolation of human activity that capitalism produces. Just as Marxism tries to overcome a division between theory and practice, Marxist theoretical work is often very inter or transdisciplinary

Slide 11.

Librarianship and Philosophy. This is Georg Lukacs, who was a Leninist philosopher in the early 20th century. His book *History and Class Consciousness* is a major contribution to Marxist thinking about ideology. How might this apply to libraries and librarianship?

A Marxist approach to librarianship wouldn’t just try to produce a philosophy or mission for

Librarianship to continue working the same as they have always done, but would question the fundamental assumptions

of the profession and ourselves. When we talk about

"intellectual freedom", for example, what do we mean by

"freedom"? What is the philosophical history of that idea

within the profession or within society?

But also, questions of ontology: what are the objects that

compose our world? Individuals? Social classes? What do we

mean by "identity"? These kinds of questions are vital and

are often ignored when we concentrate on concrete aspects of

our work, or when we don't critically challenge hegemonic

discourses.

And again, the point here would not merely be to understand librarianship or to unmask its oppressive practices in terms of labour, gender, race, sexuality, or disability, but to change the profession, to make libraries a radically different space.

Slide 12.

Librarianship and politics. This is Antonio Gramsci, who produced most of his theoretical work while imprisoned by Mussolini’s fascist government in the 1920 and 30s. Gramsci’s major contribution to Marxist thinking – and political thinking more broadly – is around the concept of hegemony, or the ways particular ideas and social classes become unquestionably dominant within a society. Gramsci’s theory lets us ask questions about the power relationships within the profession, or between librarianship and the wider world, our parent institutions, or our patrons and users. Internally, how do we reach decisions – are libraries authoritarian, or collegial, or democratically organized? How do we develop our policies and what are the intended or unintended consequences of those policies? How do our actions conform to or differ from our words? Who do we privilege or exploit? Who do we include or exclude? Whose voices do we hear or silence? How does the politics of libraries relate to politics more broadly, for example with respect to Indigenous sovereignty or pipeline expansions. These are all the kinds of questions that a combination of politics and librarianship should approach, and Marxism – especially Gramsci’s Marxism – can help us do that. In fact there is a tendency within critical librarianship to try to employ Gramsci’s idea of hegemony as a way to resist neoliberalism in the library world.

Slide 13.

Librarianship and political economy. This is David Harvey, one of the most popular Marxist thinkers today. He really became popular after the 2008 financial crisis, both for his work explaining the crisis and for his courses on reading Marx’s capital, which are available online. He asks questions about economics and finance that we rarely ask in the library world, questions like here does our money come from? How do

we spend it? What kind of an employer are we? What are our

labour practices? What is our relationship with other

economic sectors, like the technology or publishing

sectors? What is the political economy of universities or

of municipalities? What is the underlying political

economy of copyright, and how does that relate to private

property more broadly?

Slide 14. Conclusion

Marxism has, if not answers, at least

suggestions for how to approach these questions and ways

of thinking about them which are logically coherent and

which aim at changing the world. This image is of the

famous closing passage from the Communist Manifesto: "The

proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They

have a world to win.