Book Review

Charlie Angus
Dangerous Memory: Coming of Age in the Decade of Greed
Toronto, Canada: House of Anansi Press, 2024.

Reviewed by Eleanor D. Glor

Charlie Angus has been a Member of the Canadian federal Parliament for the riding of Timmins—James Bay, representing the New Democratic Party from 2004 until 2025, when he retired, eleven years. Surprisingly, for an MP, he has written nine books, sometimes with others. It is also interesting that as a young man he was a member of a working-class punk band.

Likewise, this is a surprising book for someone to have written who co-ran a Roman Catholic-sponsored home for the homeless for about ten years in Toronto. This was during the liberal period in the church under John Paul, who was pope of the Roman Catholic Church from 1978 until 2005.[1]

The book is conceptually based but nonetheless very personal and accordingly readable yet thoughtful. It is based on the concept of dangerous memories, memories originating from before neoliberalism took over the Western economies, including Canada's, and attacked the working class and western societies. Each chapter is based on a memory from the 1980s that continues to affect the world today. These memories have become obscured, in part because of "toxic political rhetoric and disinformation." Angus addresses how his life his life was affected by these issues.

The 1980s began with the Soviet Army crossing the border into Afghanistan; the hostage-taking by Iranian students of the American diplomatic staff in Tehran, Iran; USA President Jimmy Carter tearing up the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty II (SALT II) in response; Margaret Thatcher had just been elected and Ronald Reagan was about to be, promoting the New Right and much more military aggressiveness. Under Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship of Chile from 1973 to 1990, the Chicago School, led by Milton Friedman, had conducted the farthest-reaching economic counterrevolution in the history of Chile. The 1980s were a decade "born in turmoil, strife and change" (President Carter). This is Charlie Angus' *first dangerous memory*.

His *second dangerous memory* is the 1980s' and neoliberalism's efforts to break the working class. Corporations were allowed to move their operations to lower-wage areas, depleting industrial jobs in the USA, Canada and Europe. The 1980s began with a severe economic recession, the bleakest economic situation since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Unemployment was high. Unions and workers were convinced to give up wages and benefits to

[1] Only two Roman Catholic members of Parliament voted for same-sex marriage, Angus and one other. Both were denied Communion by their church for having done so (Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlie_Angus).

help out their employers (that were not returned). Corporations and governments started contracting out work so they would not need to pay union wages or benefits. Governments of the 1980s and 1990s removed protections for workers, weakened labour laws, unemployment insurance and workers' compensation programs. The recession of 1980-82, a long recession, "hammered the working class." This became Operation Break the Working Class.

A *third dangerous memory* is that some positive things were happening. "For young punks and art students in Canada it was a boom time" (p. 31). Angus reports some of the elements of this cultural renaissance in Toronto, with input from the USA and the rest of Canada. "Punk rock upended the politically disengaged entertainment world of the late 1970s" (p. 31). The first wave of punk hit Toronto in 1976. Its uncompromising desire to challenge the status quo inspired many youth. Angus' inspiration was Joe Strummer who challenged punk youth to respond to the cynicism of the establishment, reject nihilism and get engaged, (p. 33). Angus and a friend formed their first band, L'étranger, named after Camus' novel, in grade 11 (secondary school). Angus talks about the bars where they played and the political messages they offered, alternate publishers, and people. Toronto became vibrant with urgency. The mainstream music industry was hostile. Punk was dismissed but it was inherently political because its musicians were cultural outsiders. One band leaned heavily into misogynistic imagery. A feminist collective fought back and won. Toronto produced the first two all-female punk groups in North America. Toronto also had a queer subgenre. A gay woman broke through the straight barrier of pop radio. This cultural awakening happened amid the brutal economic hammering of the early 1980s. Industrial Toronto was disappearing. Young people had little awareness but these economic forces would soon turn on the young bohemians.

As Angus' band began to play at isolated bars along Highway 401, the main highway from Montreal, Québec to Windsor, Ontario, the devastating impacts of Operation Break the Working Class became apparent. This Operation and the different union responses in the USA and Canada is the *fourth dangerous memory*. Before 1980, southern Ontario's Welland, with its many unionized factory jobs, had the highest per capita income in Canada. Those jobs were being wiped out.

In 1984, the United Auto Workers at General Motors in the USA agreed to no wage increase and benefit cuts. The Canadian UAW did not and went on strike. GM threatened to close its Canadian operations but came back to the bargaining table and negotiated a fair settlement. "Canadian workers suffered grievously during the 1980s but not nearly as bad as workers in the United States" (p. 50). The Shock Doctrine (Klein, 2007)[2] was resisted in Canada because of solidarity among the union movement, the progressive left and elected politicians (the New Democratic Party). In the USA, "the powerful consensus of labour, the Democratic Party and the left that had driven the New Deal had broken apart in acrimony during the Vietnam War" (p. 50).

This is one of the reasons Operation Break the Working Class succeeded beyond imagining by the ideological right in the USA. In the USA in 1970, the unionized were 25 percent of the workforce. In the 2000s it was 6 percent, similar to the rates during the early 1900s. In Canada the unionization rate survived better, dropping from 31 percent during the 1970s to 28.4 percent in 2003. Angus attributes this striking difference to the resistance of the

[2] *The shock doctrine* was a term coined by Naomi Klein.

Canadian working class (p. 51). This is his *fifth dangerous memory*. In the 2020s, Angus points to echoes of the Reagan/Volker (head of the Federal Reserve System in the USA at the time).

Angus attended demonstrations. He describes the attendees as peace activists and church types. Angus was one of the church types. He demonstrated against Lytton Systems, a subsidiary of a major American defense contractor, that had recently received a contract related to cruise missiles with the USA military. President Reagan loved cruise missiles and ordered at least 10,000 of them. Daniel Ellsberg, an employee of the RAND Corporation, released the Pentagon Papers, revealing estimates of the numbers that would be killed if the USA launched a unilateral nuclear attack—325 million within six months, 600 million in adjacent countries. The nuclear arms race was "defined by a reckless willingness to gamble with deadly forces beyond human comprehension" (p.56).

Nuclear readiness meant always having nuclear bombers in the air. Only, they had a tendency to crash—12 had crashed and seven had to jettison their bombs. One accidentally dropped a nuclear bomb 300 kilometres from Montreal. Another dropped an H-bomb (much more powerful than the A-bombs employed during World War II) on a family farm in the United Kingdom (UK). Since the 1950s, there have been at least 32 such incidents. To the extent possible, they were covered up (pp. 57-58). Angus describes some of the many efforts to pull Canada out of the arms race. Canada refused to allow American cruise missiles to be stationed on Canadian soil.

Angus recounts other efforts to keep out cruise missiles—those of the Berrigan priests in the USA, the UK Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, with its 100,000 members. He highlights the Mothers' March to Greenham Common in the UK. Greenham Common was preparing to receive cruise missiles. The mothers surrounded the large nuclear base. Former Soviet Union president Mikhail Gorbachev indicated that he attended the Reykjavic Summit that achieved a nuclear disarmament agreement because of the Mothers' March. It gave him hope. Angus describes the movement started by four young mothers from Wales that inspired the leader of a superpower as his *sixth dangerous memory*.

Angus describes great challenges—an extreme right-wing demonstration held in a working-class district of Toronto, attended by the self-styled Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan and active in local high schools. The Wizard was active with a Canadian neo-Nazi group and a group of mercenaries trying to overthrow the government of Dominica. A centre for conspiracy theories was set up in Toronto where Ernst Zundel ran a holocaust-denial publishing house with worldwide reach among neo-Nazi hate groups. Canadian courts failed to address his hate messages. In 1981, a white supremacist established the Canadian Association of Free Expression to defend the white power movement. Toronto papers published articles on violent hate crimes, especially against South Asians. An NBC documentary described Toronto as a bastion of Anglo-Saxon identity in a city that was becoming increasingly multi-racial, due to increasing numbers of Caribbean immigrants since the 1960s and Canada's change in immigration policy in 1972. The week NBC aired it documentary, there were three vicious racist attacks in Toronto. In 1979, police killed Albert Johnson. Two thousand black residents demonstrated against police violence and racism. When Mayor John Sewell suggested an independent board to deal with Black concerns, he was attacked in the press and municipal politicians like Art Eggleton set out to

assure he was a one-time mayor. A "Our Cops are Tops Campaign" was welcomed. The local head of the Roman Catholic Church, G. Emmett Cardinal Carter, was asked by the City to look into the police issues. He was shocked by what he found: the police targeted those who might speak up against police abuse and found it was "dangerous" for a Black man to attempt to submit a complaint in writing.

The Black music scene was galvanized by the killing. Both Black and white bands wrote and performed songs about the situation. The Punk scene could have gone either way on the issue: it was an overwhelmingly white scene and had both progressive and regressive bands. The far-right UK National Front political party was organizing among skin heads and the Oi! punk movement. The line between youths who ascribed to white power extremism and those who just loved more aggressive punk was not always clear (p. 72). Angus' band refused to allow those wearing Nazi symbols into their concerts and a promoter did the same. There was violence against his band at one of its concerts but it refused to be driven off the stage. The show opened Angus' eyes about the need to push back against fascist elements in the punk music scene, which they began to do, helping to organize a Toronto chapter of Rock Against Racism (RAR), a movement that arose against racist attacks on the streets of the UK. "Music played a key role in driving down any appeal the extreme right might have had for disaffected white youth" (p.75). "The activism of the early 1980s in Toronto reflected a much broader level of political engagement within the music scene" (p. 76).

Besides in music, there was a major organizing drive by NGOs, students and churches to shame corporations into divesting from the racist state. L'étranger released a video that connected the struggle against apartheid, a system of racial segregation in place in South Africa and South West Africa from 1948 until the early 1990s, and the RAR work they were doing in Toronto. This occurred at the same time L'étranger started being played on commercial radio, thanks to an upstart radio station in Brampton, Ontario. In 1983, L'étranger was nominated for the corporate-sponsored Canadian musical Juno Award, then discovered that the sponsor had investments in South Africa. They refused to participate, a serious impediment to their band's success.

"Today's racial justice movements must struggle in an increasingly toxic environment in which even elected political leaders amplify hate messages. Dangerous memories are desperately needed to remind us how ordinary people and artists can offer a better way. This is Angus' *seventh dangerous memory*.

Angus describes adventures and what he learned touring with his band. One time, in a bad snow storm, they had to repair a rent-a-wreck with their shoe laces. They gave a ride to an air force officer headed to Germany whose vehicle was in the ditch, in return for his shoe laces. Angus learned that touring is the quickest way for a young musician to realize how important it is to stay in school. Ottawa, Canada's capital city and my home, was a great punk rock town, partly due to great promoters. I never went as I was young when folk music, rock 'n roll and the blues were the "in" music. Nearby Montreal was harder ground for punk. One element that made punk rock difficult was the mob. The band brushed up against darker criminal elements along the 401. In the late 70s and early 80s, the bars in blue-collar southern Ontario were the site of turf wars among biker gangs. The band was naïve, playing in bars that were a focus. In one, the

strippers were on the main floor and the punk bands upstairs. As long as the bands kept their noses out of what was going on with the strippers, the bikers made sure nobody bothered the punk and college kids going upstairs. There was trouble, though. Bottles were thrown, the band was not paid. Dealing with that was the roadies' job. Powerful men with strong political connections slummed at these bars, exploiting women who had no power. Many artists were able to benefit from the recession of the early 80s, but the rising economic precarity had a severe economic impact on young working-class women, many of whom were driven to nude dancing in an increasingly exploitive environment. Traffickers began bringing in young women from eastern Europe and Africa, who knew little of Canadian law and often owed money to their traffickers. They were expected to comply with the wishes of club owners and managers. The Montreal mob moved into southern Ontario, dealing cocaine. Punk kids were privileged to peak into these rougher elements but were mostly cocooned. Angus tries to remember these darker places when he is tempted to be nostalgic about the 1980s.

"Nostalgia is a symptom of privilege. Angus' *eighth dangerous memory* challenges us to dig deeper. The current marginal spaces are all around—the online world of abuse and harassment, exploitation through human trafficking.

Angus' *nineth dangerous memory* is the Roman Catholic Church's gospel of liberation, of which he was a part. He and his band mates exhibited this by being one of the more political bands in the punk band scene. Angus' political life started in high school, when a teacher handed him a newsletter from the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of San Salvador, the capital and the largest city of El Salvador, the smallest country in Central America. Instead of the usual church bulletin, "it was a list of human rights violations, disappearances, and killings in various parishes across El Salvador" (p. 90). It listed the "names of Church workers, peasants, and priests" murdered or imprisoned. Being a Catholic wasn't so much about individual piety as Catholic identity and a broad cultural network, underpinned by a sense of social obligation. In Canada, priests sometimes supported social action and urged their parishioners to do the same. Social activism wasn't seen as right- or left-wing but as a religious obligation to practise works of mercy. Angus' teacher's action was a challenge. What responsibility did he have to make a difference in the world? Thus began Angus' education in the brutal history of economic exploitation in Latin American. Groups attempting to be helpful were active in Toronto, organizing marches, letter-writing and fundraising concerts.

Much later Angus ran for political office with the New Democratic Party in a northern, rural, mining area of Ontario. Angus' entry into political life through his church was paralleled in western Canada, especially Saskatchewan, where the protestant Social Gospel Movement was a strong element in the Canadian Commonwealth Federation (CCF) party, that was in power in Saskatchewan, a poor province, especially under Premier Tommy Douglas, who was premier for 17 years. He was a Baptist minister and a strong supporter of the Movement. The Social Gospel Movement in the Protestant churches was especially strong in the northern USA and the provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Another similar group was the NAACP and Martin Luther King's fight for Black liberation from segregation. John XXIII, Pope of the Roman Catholic Church 1958 to 1963, called an ecumenical council, Vatican II. John Paul II, Pope 1978 to 2005, campaigned against political oppression, violence, and materialism. Under his reign South and Central America became supporters of liberation theology. The generals who had

seized power in Latin America denounced liberation theology as a Marxist plot but it drew its inspiration from Jesus, Old Testament prophets, Catholic saints and bishops. The White House appreciated that John Paul insisted his priests keep silent about economic injustice in Latin America but was willing to challenge Soviet power in Eastern Europe. "To Reagan, the political quid pro quo came down to the issue of women's reproductive rights" (p. 97). Reagan cut funding to any international aid project providing birth control or abortion services to women. The Bishop of San Salvador, and other supporters of liberation theology, were assassinated. In Canada, Canadian bishops met with the Minister of Foreign Affairs to demand the government speak out against the violence in Latin American. The Vatican's[3] Canadian representative told the Minister that on the issue of murdered and raped women, the bishops did not speak for the Catholic Church. The tide had turned but Angus urges us to remember when the Church was progressive. He hopes it will happen again.

Angus' *tenth dangerous memory* is the time beginning in 1982 when governments considered doing and tried to develop Canada's oil and gas wealth to benefit the larger national interest. His *eleventh dangerous memory* is the time when Angus and his partner opened their own house of hospitality, Angelus House, a refuge for people cut adrift from society. They would live with them, not as social workers but as friends. Angus put an important question to himself: Was it enough to speak against social injustice or did he have a responsibility to put himself on the line? (p. 121). They were inspired by Dorothy Day. "Homelessness was a crisis manufactured by the 1980s and institutionalized through deliberate government neglect in the decades that followed. The federal government withdrew from building social housing, the provincial governments (especially Ontario) reduced welfare rates, mental health and addiction services" (p. 135). These services remain poor cousins. Since then, this approach has spread to students, the elderly and working couples. Angus' *twelfth dangerous memory* is that it is not normal for 235,000 Canadians to be homeless, that public housing and mental health services are not giveaways but fundamental and make a country civilized and humane. The cost of homelessness is estimated to be $7 billion per year. Angus' *thirteenth dangerous memory* is that the addiction crisis was created. In 2021, McKinsey Consulting paid $600 million in damages for its role in promoting OxyContin. Angus' *fourteenth dangerous memory* is of how change has been made real, such as with Pride events. Angus' *fifteenth dangerous memory* is when the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Ukraine exploded in 1986, rendering a large area uninhabitable. This was behind Ukraine withdrawing from the Soviet Union. When the Russians invaded Ukraine in 2022, they drove their soldiers through this northern contaminated area and took control of the southern Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant.

Angus' *sixteenth dangerous memory* is that when working with those on the margins, happy endings were rare. As Dostoevsky said, "love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to the love of dreams" (*The Brothers Karamazov*, quoted on p. 165). Angus' *seventeenth dangerous memory* is the time when youth dreamed of building a more equitable future. Forty years later, the world looks even bleaker. Angus' *eighteenth dangerous memory* is that the terrible wars, civil wars and displacement of one billion people, including due to climate change, has created a staggering level of human misery. The challenges of people with PTSD and no home have been mostly left to families, community groups, churches and mosques to deal with. Angus' *nineteenth dangerous memory* is that the 1980s may have been the time of the serial

[3] The Vatican is a sovereign city state.

killer but another folk devil has emerged—the mass shooter. These are said to incels, loan wolves and white nationalists. Angus sees these terms as euphemisms for the root cause, rageful male misogynists. Angus' *twentieth dangerous memory* is the massive retrenchment in the Roman Catholic Church. Women were shut out; lay people were shut out; power was recentred in the clerics. Angus' *twenty-first dangerous memory* is the scandals of the late 1980s as the systematic sexual abuse by Catholic clerics was revealed and covered up. Angus' *twenty-second dangerous memory* is that scientists started recognizing that climate change was occurring in the 1950s and that the oil companies knew about it. He also remembers that the Montreal Protocol agreed to address the damage being created by chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs). The chemical companies purposefully undermined the science, the United States announced it would not be bound by the agreement. Yet the Protocol succeeded. While only 24 countries signed initially, eventually 197 did. Hopefully countries will also cooperate to deal with climate change. Angus' *twenty-third dangerous memory* is of Toronto before the neighbourhoods were tamed and the parks were made unwelcoming, when it was open and optimistic. Our urban spaces could be this way again.

Angus' *twenty-fourth dangerous memory* is the technology of the 1980s, with a music scene driven by cultural experimentation and urban petri dishes like Toronto, the Bronx, London, Manchester, Vancouver and L.A. In Canada, as the isolated punk communities spread, they became the foundation for a large and diverse music scene. By the end of the decade, the music industry was completely changed by technology, money and the rapidly evolving nature of the 1980s. In the 21st century technology shifted from the shock jocks of AM radio to online forums like YouTube, 4Chan and TikTok. These platforms erased the regulatory border protections that had kept Canada largely outside the extremist grip. It has become a serious question whether democracy can survive in a world of pumped-up algorithms and political disinformation. But there was a time before "media and online spaces became forums of rage and disinformation" (p. 243), before the working and middle classes were sold out by the toxic capitalism of the 1980s" (p. 242). Angus' *twenty-fifth dangerous memory* is that "there was nothing natural or inevitable about the way free trade was exploited to the detriment of the working and middle classes" (p. 254) and there is nothing that says it must continue. Angus' *twenty-sixth dangerous memory* is of how the "peace dividend" created by the fall of the Soviet Union was cashed for the benefit of the profiteers and ideologues.

Angelus House closed in 1990. Angus and his partner moved to Cobalt, Ontario, a northern mining town (Angus was born in 1962 in Timmins, also a northern Ontario mining town and a four-hour drive from Cobalt. He moved to Toronto in 1973). He got involved in an effort to prevent urban garbage being shipped to northern Ontario; as part of this effort, he connected with Jack Layton, Toronto City Counsellor. He didn't want to dirty his hands with politics but he watched governments walk away from their basic responsibilities to the poor and unemployed. When Layton became leader of the national New Democratic Party (NDP) in 2003, he approached Angus to run for Parliament. Angus still believed in his duty to take responsibility at the local level, but had come to realize that housing, the environment and social justice were issues of public policy. Dorothy Day had said that the role of the Catholic Worker Movement was to "build a society where it was 'easier for people to be good'…. It is much easier "if they have access to quality housing, a secure income and a stable environment" (p. 267). Angus agreed to run, in a riding larger than the United Kingdom. He won seven terms, became a prominent Member of Parliament and recently retired from Parliament.

Despite the burning boreal forests and that politicians have thrown in the towel in holding climate change to +1.5C as governments tiptoe around the corporate culpability of Big Oil, talk is of adaptation. There is no adapting to suffocating heat domes, disappearing river systems or corporate conspiracy. Our collective story for the last four decades of the neoliberal era has set us irrevocably apart from the world that was before. Life has gotten faster, shorter and memory has grown shorter. Each of us is responsible to decide how we as a species go forward in our uncharted future. We need to take action.

My only complaint about this important book is that it has no Index.

Angus' books include:

- *We Lived a Life and Then Some* with Brit Griffin, Sally Lawrence, and Rob Moir. Toronto, Canada: Between the Lines Books, 1996. ISBN 1-896357-06-7.
- *Industrial Cathedrals of the North*, with Louie Palu and Marguerite Andersen. Toronto, Canada: Between the Lines, 1999. ISBN 1-896357-18-0.
- *Mirrors of Stone: Fragments from the Porcupine Frontier*, with Louie Palu. Toronto, Canada: Between the Lines, 2001. ISBN 1-896357-49-0.
- *Les Costello: Canada's Flying Father*. Toronto, Canada: Novalis, 2005. ISBN 2-89507-631-6.
- *Cage Call*, with Louie Palu. Portland, Ore.: Photolucida, 2007. ISBN 978-1-934334-02-7.
- *Unlikely Radicals*. Toronto, Canada: Between the Lines, 2013. ISBN 9781771130400.
- *Children of the Broken Treaty: Canada's Lost Promise and One Girl's Dream*. Regina, Canada: University of Regina Press, 2015. ISBN 978-0889774018.
- *Cobalt: Cradle of the Demon Metals, Birth of a Mining Superpower*. Toronto, Canada: House of Anansi Press, 2022, ISBN 978-1487009496
- *Dangerous Memory: Coming of Age in the Decade of Greed*. Toronto, Canada: House of Anansi, 2024. ISBN 9781487012885.

About the Author:

Eleanor D. Glor is Editor-in-Chief and Founding Publisher of *The Innovation Journal: The Public Sector Innovation Journal* (*TIJ*) (www.innovation.cc) and Fellow, McLaughlin College, York University, Toronto, Canada. As a practitioner, she worked for the Government of Canada, two Canadian provincial governments, a regional municipality and a city. Eleanor has published about public innovation in the areas of aging, rehabilitation, public health, aboriginal health, the Province of Saskatchewan, and other Canadian governments. She has published seven books, five chapters and 46 peer-reviewed articles on public sector innovation from an organizational, especially a public service perspective. Eleanor published five articles in a special issue on Public Innovation in Saskatchewan, Canada, *TIJ,* 28(1), 2023, https://innovation.cc/all-issues/ Her most recent publication is Innovative Differences among Canadian Federal and Provincial Governments, in *TIJ,* 29(3), 2024. Email address: glor@magma.ca

References:

Klein, Naomi. 2007. *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. New York, NY: Henry Holt.