

Summary of critical theory



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The Central Claims of Critical Theory

In order to understand the central claims of Critical Theory, it must first be defined. What is Critical Theory? Critical Theory first coined as such in 1937 is a name given to a series of new approaches to the study of culture, literature and thought that developed during the 1960's primarily in France (Leitch, 2001). It refers to a series of pathways for intellectual inquiry that first emerged with the end of the 18th century European Enlightenment (mid 1600's to late 1700's) (Nowlan, 2001) in which the causes associated with it were legal equality, the right of ordinary Europeans to hold their rulers to account, the rule of law, transparent government, freedom of expression, the right of nations to self-determination and to freedom from colonial domination - and they are as relevant today as they were two hundred years ago (Glendening, 2003). Critical theory questions and challenges that which seems obvious, natural and simple in the world around us - the conviction that what is, or what is in the process of becoming, or what appears to be, or what is most commonly understood to be, or necessary and inevitable - it does not accept any of this (Nowlan).

The Frankfurt School is the name given to a group of German Jewish intellectuals associated with the Institute for Social Research (Institut für Sozialforschung) founded in 1923. Their work was an attempt to integrate psychoanalytic insights and the domain of culture into a Marxist analysis of twentieth century societies. The group composite was that of thinkers such as Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse (Agger, 1993). According to these theorists a "critical" theory may be distinguished from a "traditional" theory according to a specific practical purpose: a theory is critical to the extent

that it seeks human emancipation, “ to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (Horkheimer, 1982, 244). Theories aim to explain and transform circumstances; critical theories provide the descriptive and normative bases for social inquiry aimed at decreasing domination and increasing freedom in their forms. A clarification is given to what is not clearly understood or is questionable.

Theories arise in many ranges - anthropology, film, religion, linguistics and political science - and even family lifestyle. Critical theory is not a system, nor it is reducible to any fixed set of proscriptions (Bronner, 2002). Today, social theory is in crisis because of growing dissatisfaction with the dominant methodologies and conceptions of social theory and research. The 1960's is when Stephen Eric Bronner became interested in critical theory as new theoretical paradigms emerged that questioned prevailing quantitative, empiricist, and positivist conceptions of social theory. But where did the central claim of critical theory begin?

Since the Frankfurt School was the first Marxist-oriented research center affiliated with a major German university directed by Carl Grünberg, it tended to be empirical, historical, and oriented toward problems of the European working class movement. Works by Karl Korsch, Georg Lukacs and others also had works published in its journal *Archiv für die Geschichte des Sozialismus und der Arbeiterbewegung*. Grünberg retired in 1930 and Max Horkheimer became the director. Under Horkheimer, the Institute sought to develop an interdisciplinary social theory which could serve as an instrument of social transformation publishing a journal *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (1932-1941) that contained a wholesome collection of articles and book

reviews. These compilations detailed social theory and defined any misconceptions of their meaning.

Horkheimer, upon assuming his position as Director, delivered an inaugural address on January 24, 1931, entitled "The State of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research (Bronner and Keller 1989: 25-36). Within the contents of the text, he defines social philosophy as an attempt to elucidate the "fate of human beings, insofar as they are parts of state, law, economy, religion, in short, with the entire material and spiritual culture of humanity. He criticizes Kant for grounding social philosophy in the experience and faculties of the particular individual (Ibid: 33) and praises Hegel's theory as an improvement but yet questions speculative metaphysics and their tendencies to celebrate a higher transcendental sphere of Being and meaning over concrete existence. (ibid: 38-39).

Horkheimer continued to defend the importance for critical social theory and envisaged a program of supra-disciplinary research which would investigate current social and political problems. Philosophers, sociologists, economists, historians, and psychologists would be united in an ongoing research community who would do together what in other disciplines one individual does alone in a laboratory, - which is what genuine scientists have always done: namely to pursue the great philosophical question using the most refined scientific methods; to reformulate and to make more precise the questions in the course of work as demanded by the object; and to develop new methods without losing sight of the universal (ibid: 41). Hence we see the first steps toward the formation of critical theory in the making.

It is impossible to characterize the “Frankfurt School” as a whole since its work spanned several decades and involved a variety of thinkers who later engaged in sharp debates with each other. Rather, one should perceive various phases of Institute work: 1) the empirical-historical studies of the Grunberg era; 2) the attempts in the early to mid-1930’s to establish a materialist supra-disciplinary social theory under Horkheimer’s directorship; 3) the attempts to develop a critical theory of society during the exile period from about 1937 to the early 1940’s; 4) the dispersion of Institute members in the 1940’s and the new directions sketched out by Horkheimer and Adorno; 5) the return of the Institute to Germany and its work in Frankfurt during the 1950’s and 1960’s; 6) the development of critical theory in various directions by Fromm, Lowenthal, Marcuse, and others who remained in the U. S.; 7) the continuation of Institute projects and development of critical theory in Germany by Jurgen Habermas, Oskar Negt, Alfred Schmidt, and others in the 1970’s and 1980’s; and finally 8) contributions to critical theory by a variety of younger theorists and scholars currently active in Europe and the United States.

Kellner believes that a crisis of critical theory emerged with its fragmentation after World War II. Social theory stopped developing despite some empirical research projects and sustained meta-theoretical analyses by certain of its members, especially Adorno (Kellner, 1989). He believes that critical theory provides the most advanced theoretical perspectives within contemporary social theory from the 1930’s through the early 1960’s; new socio-cultural developments since then have rendered obsolete some of its theses concerning one-dimensional society, the media, technology, and so on. In

particular, critical theory has not continued to theorize new technologies, new developments in the media, changes in socialization practices, and new cultural developments. This is surprising as earlier contributions were precisely in these areas (Wiggershaus, 1986).

Adorno did a great deal of work in social theory in the 1950's and 1960's, as well as turning out an incredible profusion of texts in the areas of literary criticism, cultural critique, philosophy, and aesthetics. His work turned from supra-disciplinary research to philosophical reflections (Kellner, 1989).

Herbert Marcuse argued that Marxism had degenerated into a rigid orthodoxy and needed concrete experience to revivify the theory and that it neglected individual's problems. He was concerned about individual liberation and well-being in addition to social transformation. The intentions of his writings were of great interest, yet many were unpublished and unknown (Kellner, 1984).

The theory of hegemony by Antonio Gramsci reserves a place for the intellectuals in society. Men find themselves born in a process independent of their will, they cannot control it, they can seek only to understand it and guide their actions accordingly was noted to be economic determination by Marx. Gramsci was concerned to eradicate economic determinism to develop its explanatory power with respect to super-structural institutions. His holdings were that class struggle must always involve ideas and ideologies, ideas that would make the revolution and also that would prevent it. He stressed the role performed by human agency in historical change: economic crises by themselves would not subvert capitalism. He was more "dialectic" than "deterministic": he tried to build a theory which recognized the

autonomy, independence and importance of culture and ideology (Strinati, 1995).

The works in the last decade relative to critical theory has followed Habermas in attempt to develop a more adequate philosophical aspect of critical theory (Heinemann, 1986). A deficit of social research and elaboration of new theoretical perspectives has come about with contributions from members of the postmodern camp who attempt to theorize the impact of new technologies, the media, and other socio-cultural developments (Kellner, 1988 and 1989).

The focus on democracy as the location for cooperative, practical and transformative activity continues in the work of Jurgen Habermas, as does the attempt to determine the nature and limits of “ real democracy” in complex pluralistic, and globalizing societies. Habermas’ work is concerned with rethinking the tradition of critical theory and German social philosophy. He has advanced that tradition in distinctive ways. His rationality consists not so much in the possession of knowledge and thus primarily concerned with the consistency and content of one’s beliefs, but rather in “ how speaking and acting subjects acquire and use knowledge” (Habermas, 1984). Rationality, freedom and justice are not just theoretical issues to be explored and debated. Habermas’ entire work aims to defend and continue the enlightenment project against the challenge of Weber’s instrumental rationality, Horkheimer and Adorno’s earlier critical theory and Nietzscheanism in the forms of post-structuralism as presented by Foucault and Derrida and the postmodernism of Lyotard. The reconciliation of the competition of claims of the reason of the life and the world are contributions

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of Habermas to contemporary and social theory. His account and his answers are not complete, but raise questions without losing the hope of continued research (Rasmussen, 1990).

People create conditions and deal with them. Their opinions influence the thoughts of others. In his theory, Habermas fails to incorporate or appreciate gender and racial inequality. Habermas' calls for particular "reconstructive sciences," whose aim it is to render theoretically explicit the intuitive, pre-theoretical know-how underlying such basic human competences as speaking and understanding, judging, and acting. It is not certain if Habermas' theories are built on a conception of the world in which essentialist characteristics (middle class, white, males, or class) dominate. Historically discourses of rationality and progress have sided with men over women (Stanley and Pateman, 1991). Certain valuable elements are cited of by Selya Benhabib (1986) that can provide basis for a wide-ranging normative critique of contemporary society.

An excerpt from *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*: "essay is a stylistic vehicle with its inherently unfinished quality is the logical form for generating anti-systemic claims and fostering the existence of reflexivity" perhaps best describes the logic that inspired Bronner and Kellner to publish this book. Within is a collection of seminal essays, many appearing in English for the first time, which provides an excellent overview of the critical theory developed by the Frankfurt School. An essay is a short work that treats of a topic from an author's personal point of view, often taking into account subjective experiences and personal reflections upon them (Wikipedia). What better way can a criticism be announced than through an essay? Personal

opinions are relished because they may have something within their contents that was not seen by others. In the essay *Le Prix Du Progress* by Max Horkheimer exemplifies the nature of discussions that were presented to the early theorists. A French physiologist, Pierre Flourens, was disenchanted with the use of chloroform. He states his belief, and cites his reasoning. The essay ends with Horkheimer's comments. Somewhat in the form of an editorial for a newspaper, but yet an answer is given. A concern was presented – a problematic thought was answered. Another famous essay by Theodor Adorno elaborates on *Culture Industry*

Reconsidered. In it Adorno explains the term culture industry, corrects inconsistencies from a prior publication and remarks on the term “mass culture” (from “*The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*” London: Routledge, 1991). In *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader* are included the works of Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, Lowenthal, Pellock, Herbert Marcuse, to mention a few.

The time realm of critical theory displays evidence that modern culture needs to redefine the conclusions of its predecessors. The understanding of theories, imply that they have to be updated continually to include new circumstances. Modernization has to be critiqued to include the changing of the times. We should be concerned with something other than uncovering the past. Instead we should reinvigorate the present, salvage the Enlightenment legacy, and contest those who would institutionally freeze its radicalism and strip away its protest character (Israel, 2001). The inclusion of the way people act and why they act can begin with critical theory of family. Family history provides an example of some of the theoretical deficiencies as <https://assignbuster.com/summary-of-critical-theory/>

in social scenes. The family is attacked and defended with equal vehemence. With a dominant empiricist tradition, historians have come to the field of family history without a clear sense of what the significant questions are. They have not self-consciously theorized the family as a field of investigation. Instead they began by adopting the conventional wisdom of sociology which, goes back for Federic Le Play (*L'Organisation de la famille selon le vrai modele signale par l'histoire de toutes les races et de tous les temps* - Paris, 1871), and saw a broad change in the family from an extended form of the Middle Ages to a nuclear form of modernity (Shorter, 1975). From the family come the leaders of the world. Understanding distinct family structures enables an outline to the future tasks of its members. The tendency of Marxist social theorists is to view the family as a dependent variable, a secondary structure, unintelligible in its own right, which will change after the revolution. The family is an intelligible as a structure (Morgan, 1975) composed of race, religion, gender, which impose these factors towards their beliefs.

From a " Gramscian" perspective the mass media have to be interpreted as an instrument to spread and reinforce dominant hegemony - or they can be used to spread counter-hegemonic ideas too. " Pop culture and the mass media are subject to the production, reproduction and transformation of hegemony through the institution of civil society which cover the areas of cultural production and consumption. Hegemony operates culturally and ideologically through the institutions of civil society which characterizes mature liberal-democratic, capitalist societies. These institutions include

education, the family, the church, the mass media, popular culture, etc. (Strinati, 1995: 168-169).

From Strinati's point of view the main problem with Gramsci's ideas is the same as the the Frankfurt School's theories and Althusser's work: their Marxist background. The framework does not allow history to contradict the theory, and the interpretation of reality becomes rather elementary.

Critical Theory offers an approach to distinctly normative issues that cooperates with the social sciences in a nonproductive way. Its domain is inquiry into the normative dimension of social activity, in particular how actors employ their practical knowledge and normative attitudes from complex perspectives in various sorts of contexts. It also must consider social facts as problematic situations from the point of view of variously situated agents. In conclusion, Kellner feels that in order to find a way out of the contemporary crisis of social theory, it must develop new perspectives. Critical Theory should be responded to with theoretical analyses of developments within the capitalist economy and of changes in class stratification, the labor process, new technologies, the media, and politics. The central claims of critical theory should be emphasized by those who wish to revitalize it in an attempt to politicize it with new social movements and existing political struggles to build a better society. The development of both its " analysis of the present situation and a new politics is in order to become once again the cutting edge of radical social theory" (Kellner, 1989). Critical theory enables the development and refinement of the ability to engage in comments as critics, through movements encompassed around incomprehensible situations of society. All productive and concerned citizens

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should be the empowered critical agents that are able to question, challenge and contribute toward the progress of transformation of the prevailing status quo within the communities, societies, and cultures that are worked in to help maintain and reproduce every day. In relation citizens should not only be inescapably interested, but also vitally important as participants to opionate on theory (Nowlan).

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