What Is Critical Theory Today? (And What Is It For?)

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The first generation of the Frankfurt School assembled at a time of ever-deepening crisis in Western modernity, when the classical liberal system of capitalism came crashing down and fascist and totalitarian regimes were on the rise. Faith in democracy was on the wane, ethno-nationalist sentiments were reaching fever pitch, and millions found themselves stateless and rightless. We are in a strange way fortunate that, thus far, the era of Brexit and Trump appears more a farce than the tragedy of that earlier time. The encroachments against social democracy by resilient neoliberalism, nationalist resurgence, and democratic disenchantment appear much more mild and subtle this time around, but, precisely for this reason, the changes we currently see for the worse are more likely to go unchecked and sediment into the long-term path of our societies. Thus, the idea of a critical theory of society, conceived with an emancipatory intention, is important today in a way it has not been for a long time.

And yet what we today call 'critical theory' and the way it conceives itself has changed dramatically over the last 80 years. The term itself is usually traced to the Frankfurt School, and oftentimes it is still used to describe a specific kind of Frankfurt-descended theoretical orientation or intellectual lineage. But critical theory has in actuality become far more diverse. Say "critical theory" in the United States, and one is just as likely to think of Foucault, Derrida, or Agamben as one is of Horkheimer, Adorno, or Habermas, and there are settings in which critical theory is associated almost *exclusively* with the former group. The umbrella can be extended further to include approaches drawing variously on poststructuralism, agonism, pragmatism, political liberalism, postcolonialism, phenomenology, gender, racial, and ethnic studies, queer theory, STS, and more. Open today an academic journal or book series or visit an international conference that describes itself as dedicated to 'critical theory', some mixture of these influences is bound to be present. The internationalization of critical theory over the last half-century has brought them all into dialogue with one another, to the point that it is no longer possible to consider one school of thought without considering the way it has influenced, is influenced by, and positions itself in relation to the others. And there is no uncontroversial way to say which of them definitively belong to critical theory and which do not.

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While this diversity of voices makes it difficult to characterize critical theory as a whole, I would still say there are at least a few major theoretical, methodological, and political commitments we could identify that lend to critical theory something like a 'center of gravity'. I will do my best to remain even-handed, though my reading will be based on the Frankfurt tradition. Using this reading as a baseline, I will then look at the path contemporary critical theory has taken, some of the lines of contention that have arisen among present-day critical theorists, and some of the challenges it faces as we grapple with contemporary problems. My perspective is necessarily partial and even partisan—as well as '(U.S.) American'—and I cannot claim to have answers to the questions I raise. Indeed, I have written this as much to clarify my own thoughts on these matters to myself as to convey them to others.

1. A Minimalist Sketch

Thomas McCarthy perhaps best summed up critical theory's project when he described it as "the critique of impure reason" (McCarthy 1994: 243). At its root, critical theory is a metatheoretical position on the irreducible sociality of human reason, with a sharp eye to the ways in which that reason is institutionalized in social discourses, practices, relations, and forms of knowledge—and with an even sharper eye to the forms of distortion, alienation, and domination that these may entail. Particularly in the form it developed in Western societies, reason, whatever powers of enlightenment (if any) it may harbor, is intrinsically impure; it is only ever encountered as historical and multiple, divided against itself, and out of joint; its promise is emancipatory but also fugitive; it is at once the tempter, savior, and trickster of modern complex societies. To the extent that most strands of critical theory today share in this basic impulse, they can be said to share some basic methodological commitments.[1]

First, critical theorists share a suspicion of both 'positivistic' approaches to social science and overly 'contemplative' approaches to philosophy, advocating an approach that combines philosophical reflection with social analysis. While not all schools take their lead directly from Horkheimer, his indictment of the mutual renunciation of science and philosophy does capture the idea succinctly. The pretension of the social sciences to a purely 'objective' and 'value-neutral' view of the world as a collection of observed facts, correlations, and causal relations reduces the social scientist to a mere technocrat, devoid of reflection on society as a greater whole or the hopes, fears, ideals, and sufferings of those it comprises. Conversely, philosophy's preoccupation with unearthing a 'pure' and unconditioned reason amounts to a strategy of avoidance of the messy realities of the social world; cowered in the shell of a transcendental subject detached from social or historical context, its normative purview remains restricted to the personal knowledge and ethics of an individual who encounters society only passively. In Horkheimer's view, the very division of science from philosophy is the historical product of a certain 'rationalized' division of labor in capitalist society that produces knowledge tailored to the needs of its own reproduction—isolated, manipulable facts, coupled with an individualized conception of the knowing and acting subject—while systematically constricting our abilities to take account of the larger whole (Horkheimer 1999).

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1   Some of the points made in this section are discussed at greater length, though in a somewhat different way, in Milstein (2015: 5 ff.).

Second, most schools of critical theory share a general intuition that reason, as it has developed in the course of (Western capitalist) modernity, does not exist merely in the subjective consciousness nor as a mere 'tool' that can be freely employed, but as something integrated deeply in societal practice in such a way that generates a certain kind of knowledge, reproduces certain kinds of social relations, and promotes a certain conception of the self. Such societal practice extends beyond science and philosophy to all areas of society—economic relations, state administration, culture, art, family life, medicine, and so on—but the lesson for the theorist is there is no external Archimedean point from which to take stock of the entire complex. Accordingly, critical theory sets for itself the task of not only making sense of this complex of societal rationality, but doing so *reflexively* with regard to one's own place within that complex. One is never merely an observer of social life but always already a product of it, as well as a participant in its reproduction. This does not necessarily mean that there can be no objectively valid knowledge of the world, but, to the extent that there is, it is always an *interested* objectivity. Thus, where the positivistic social scientist tries to deny or neutralize the interests, biases, and value-laden character of knowledge, the critical theorist strives to make them explicit, open, and available for philosophical reflection and scrutiny; and where the contemplative philosopher searches for unadulterated access to pure rationality, the critical theorist looks to situate the development of rationality in broader historical and social contexts.

Third—and finally—most agree that the societal rationality native to Western modernity harbors uniquely modern forms of domination that are deserving of critique. At the very least, there is something in rationalized forms of social life that constrains or prevents us from acting or living in ways we might otherwise want or find somehow more fulfilling. Accordingly, the social analysis in which critical theory is engaged is from the very outset pursued with a definite *practical* interest. Many strands, particularly those inspired by the Hegelian-Marxist tradition or the Frankfurt School, formulate this as an interest in *emancipation*, though not all. But however various theorists might formulate the practical interest of critical social analysis, virtually all are today committed to a normative stance that is uncompromisingly *antipaternalistic*: the practical interests of theory can only be derived from the hopes and ideals of the everyday social actors themselves. This rules out utilitarian or strongly consequentialist understandings of normativity, and, while it often embraces versions of the critique of ideology, hegemony, discursive formations, or subjectivity, it remains cautious about what the theorist may claim about the 'true' or 'false' consciousness of social actors. Most critical theorists today, including those who still draw inspiration from Marxism, thus remain highly skeptical of the 'vanguardist' theories of twentieth-century Marxist-Leninist movements.

Now, while these three methodological themes are more or less shared by the bulk of those who describe themselves as critical theorists, not all of them would state them in precisely these terms. Indeed, while all agree on the need for a social critique of modern rationality as it is conceived, practiced, and institutionalized in Western modernity, deep lines of contention are drawn over rationality's normative status. Habermas is best known for distinguishing between "communicative" and "instrumental" reason in order to salvage the emancipatory promise of the tradition of Enlightenment rationality from the generalized 'will to mastery' evidenced in modern technology, industry, and bureaucracy (Habermas 1984-7). Others insist that, in whatever guise reason may come, modern rationalism is bound to be, if not outright domineering or coercive, then at least in some

way homogenizing, alienating, manipulative, or depriving. This is not the debate I want to get into here—at least not directly.

Instead, I want to concentrate on a few specific points. I want to look, first, at the present status of the idea of critical theory as a mode of analysis that aspires to capture a view of society 'as a whole' and, further, how this aspiration relates to critical theory's 'emancipatory' intentions. Second, I will consider briefly two contemporary approaches to translating the insights of critical theory into political practice. And since I was invited to contribute to this symposium as a representative of critical theory in the U.S., I will close with a few concerns about its future in the Anglo-American academy, which is currently proving itself in a troubling way to be not only an observer of modern-day capitalism but also a participant.

2. Taking Society as a 'Whole'

In *Traditional and Critical Theory*, Horkheimer framed his critique of theory in terms of a Marxist reading of the social division of labor. The traditional theorist is dually divided from the emancipatory needs of the subjected classes insofar as, first, the division of labor *in society at large* gives the traditional theorist the faulty sense of epistemic privilege from which she can understand herself as a neutral observer of society, and, second, the intellectual division of labor *within the academy and civil services* compartmentalizes the production of knowledge in a way that inhibits analytical access to the social whole within and for which knowledge is produced. Only with reference to the 'whole' can the theorist gain an appropriately critical appreciation of how rationalized knowledge is configured by capitalist society for its own reproduction. The idea of *Sozialforschung* referred to an interdisciplinary intellectual program that combined philosophy, sociology, political economy, psychology, law, and cultural theory precisely to gain intellectual traction on the whole.

Even in more 'pessimistic' works such as *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the value of taking stock of the social whole remained key to critical theory's perspective. It remained a concern for the early Habermas as well, though Habermas was already warier of the difficulties of attributing "unity" to historically contingent complexes of social development (see Habermas 1973: 251). Nevertheless, his two-volume *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984-7) has long been considered the last major attempt to grapple critically with society as a whole. Today, attempts to theorize society on this scale are quite few. Luhmann's systems theory comes close in certain ways, and while rational choice theory claims the ability to analyze all aspects of society, it is not a *theory* of society.[2]

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2   In the American academy at least, even critical theory is rarely employed for this purpose. Instead of using it to pull together research from across disciplines, scholars are more likely to draw from the critical theory 'canon' that which is deemed relevant to their own discipline. Political theory, for example, draws on Habermas's theories of deliberative democracy and the public sphere, but largely leaves behind his work on legitimation crises, lifeworld pathologies, Marxism, and critiques of scientism. Various other specializations, such as critical security studies, critical legal theory, aesthetic theory, media studies, cultural studies, or literary theory, also draw on particular aspects and works of critical theory. Theory-minded sociologists are more likely to have broad training in the Frankfurt School and other strands of critical theory; however, it is mainly in select philosophy departments that one is most likely to find broad expertise in critical theory's full range.

Indeed, whether a critical accounting of the social whole with emancipatory intent is possible or even desirable is today a topic of contention. The twentieth century's experiences with totalitarianism already put a heavy damper on the idea of attempting to render society analytically transparent for the purposes of deliberate steering, and even life under postwar social democracy was subject to widespread criticism over the forms of social control, alienation, and loss of meaning generated by over-rationalized forms of life (Arendt 1998; Marcuse 1991; Foucault 1977; Habermas 1984-7). Foucault, for example, was highly skeptical of the idea of a social whole and believed it "dangerous" to theorize in such terms, arguing that societal rationalization was a much more haphazard collection of disparate processes that could only be analyzed in the particular (Foucault 1982: 210; 1988: 27 f., 35 ff.). At the very least, the conceit of an all-encompassing social science of the style once pursued by Marxists and, to an extent, the early Frankfurt School, seems rather excessive (see Saar 2017).

At the same time, the generalized 'fear of the social' characteristic of the mid- and late twentieth-century developed largely in the heyday of the European welfare state, when the problems of capitalist crisis and class conflict that motivated Marxist theory were thought largely resolved (Habermas 1975). And yet the return of major crisis following the 2007/8 recession, along with its prolonged social and political aftermath, seems to have reintroduced the question of the social whole in a new way, as growing exploitation, disaffection with democracy, and nationalist resurgences appear as large-scale *systemic* problems (Mair 2013; Streeck 2014; Müller 2016). This presents twenty-first century critical theory with a dilemma. On the one hand, the worries inspired by the over-bureaucratization of society, with the specter of totalitarianism still hovering in the background, still hold valid as precautions about the risks of 'grand' emancipatory theorizing. On the other hand, if it is the case that capitalism, its crisis tendencies, and its propensities toward extreme stratification are once again urgent sources of domination and pathology calling for emancipatory critique, it is hard to see how critique can continue to refrain from theorizing on a large scale—not only with respect to large systems like the economy but also with respect to the ways they interconnect and come together to structure social life (Strecker 2012; Fraser/Jaeggi forthcoming). While we may still do without an *all-encompassing* theory of society, we do stand in need of a *systemic* theory of society. The question facing critical theory could be stated thusly: Is it still possible to theorize the social 'totality' with an emancipatory intent that does not itself become 'totalizing'?

Difficulties only multiply when the question is posed in a global context. Independently of what emancipatory value reason might have in Western societies, the postcolonial critique takes aim at rationality's entanglements with colonial domination and its legacies. It can be questioned even to what extent and in what manner critical-theoretic concepts like 'emancipation' can be fruitfully utilized in non-Western contexts (Chakrabarty 2000; Mignolo 2007). And yet the increasing multiculturalism within societies and interconnectedness between them, as well as the undeniably global nature of contemporary capitalism, suggests a need to be able to theorize at a global level, and this in turn suggests a need for transnational coordination according to ideas and norms in whose formulation all can participate as equals. Reconciling these two realities may require a 'provincialization' of emancipation and other concepts, yet it points also to a more arduous process of developing the conceptual language necessary to confront global challenges.

3. The Political Ambitions of Emancipatory Theory

Related questions arise when we ask about the link between emancipatory theorizing and political activity. The orthodox Marxist tradition from which early critical theory descended sponsored a more or less clear trajectory toward 'revolutionary' praxis, but for the early Frankfurt School this had already become muted as an explicit goal. The early generation's tendency to give off an appearance of political directionlessness, especially during its more pessimistic turn of the postwar years, was part of what led Lukács to mock them as having "taken up residence in the 'Grand Hotel Abyss'", living the lifestyle of bourgeois academics while passively musing about the downfall of civilization (Lukács 1971: 22).

For most critical theorists today, the antipaternalist commitment of critique prioritizes some version of an intensive democratic ethos—that is, an ideal of democratic freedom, equality, and collective self-determination that is more than merely 'formal'. Critical theory is highly skeptical of approaches that cast philosophers and theorists in the role of 'moral experts' who prescribe principles for society independently of the views of everyday social actors. How these requirements are to be interpreted, however, is a matter for debate. Discourse theory grants that while we cannot dictate normative political principles independently of the real-time deliberations, contestations, and struggles of society's participants, it is nonetheless possible to theorize the prerequisites and conditions under which participants can successfully formulate valid principles for themselves. Here the program of critical theory merges with the theory of deliberative democracy as a means for the reconstruction of liberal-democratic institutions with regard to their ability to enable, channel, and remain responsive to processes of democratic opinion- and will-formation from below (Habermas 1990, 1993, 1996; Benhabib 1996, 2006; Bohman 2000, 2007; Forst 2002, 2012).

Critics of this deliberative-democratic approach worry it already acquiesces too much to historically given liberal ideas and practices to be an effective critic of them. By taking the Western model of liberal democracy to somehow already harbor the prerequisites for 'ideal' political deliberation and will-formation, it covers over the historical contingencies, power relations, and blocking of alternative paths that informed its development (Honig 2009). Moreover, discourse theory tends to rely on Kantian and formal-pragmatic premises that more radical skeptics of reason fear still claims too much 'transcendental' normative authority, imposing on societal participants an image of a 'rational actor' that may bring with it its own artificial constraints as well as propensities toward hegemonic domination and unwelcome homogenization. Thirdly, there is a concern that deliberative theory, by focusing on the conditions of 'ideal' discourse and democratic consensus-formation, becomes too far removed from real-life political struggles to be of much use to emancipatory movements (Azmanova 2012).

Drawing on the work of Arendt, Schmitt, and Heidegger, agonistic or 'radical' democracy strives to locate the critical potential of political action in moments of confrontation and struggle whose energies originate at least partially from 'outside' the established institutional order. Drawing on conceptions of 'the political', 'constituent power', 'beginnings (archê)', and 'dissensus', this approach locates political critique in extra-institutional displays of resistance that disrupt the logic of prevailing hegemonies (Rancière 2001; Mouffe 2005; Markell 2006; Kalyvas 2008; Ingram 2013). Its virtue lies in how it links theory directly to political practice in a way that is comparatively rare (though not non-

existent) in the deliberative literature. The caveat, however, is that agonistic theory seems able to validate the critical moment of extra-institutional action only so long as it remains extra-institutional. Once resistance loses its spontaneous and unpredictable form, it loses its emancipatory luster and once again merges back into the system. This incorporates into theory an important corrective against excesses of utopian or vanguardist thinking. But it raises questions about how far this can be taken as a methodological bar to explicit normative or organizational theorizing, or whether there is a point at which theoretical concerns about the hegemonizing force of reason or the effects of institutionalization become 'too theoretical' to serve as a useful guide to political action.

Similar concerns to those raised above are also relevant to critical theory's capacities to theorize emancipatory politics. At national and transnational levels, present-day governing institutions continue to grow increasingly distant and unresponsive to the concerns of citizens, taking on the appearance of being 'democratic in name only' while answering more and more exclusively to the imperatives of politically insulated technocrats and finance capital (Crouch 2004; Mair 2013; Streeck 2014). This is being met on the other side by right-wing populist movements and fragmentation of democratic constituencies across Europe and the Americas (Müller 2016; Judis 2016). A few exceptions notwithstanding, emancipatory movements have struggled to generate successes comparable to the Brexit referendum, Trump's election, entry into governing coalitions as in Denmark, Austria, or Czechia, or the outright takeover of governments as in Hungary or Poland.

It does not seem that either purely normative theorizing about the conditions of rational discourse or faith in spontaneous moments of resistance is sufficient on its own for the tasks at hand. Democratic institutions are already approaching too desiccated a shape to expect the required normative policy prescriptions to be adopted through 'normal' politics, while a quasi-spontaneist strategy in the style of Occupy Wall Street cannot provide the coordination and long-term momentum needed to mount a sustained offensive against neoliberal technocratization and right-wing nationalism. Nancy Fraser, for example, has suggested thinking again in terms of "hegemony" and "counter-hegemony" as a part of a renewed emancipatory democratic strategy (Fraser 2015: 172 ff.; Fraser/Jaeggi forthcoming). Critical theorists might also take note of the recent 'partisan turn' in democratic theory (White/Ypi 2010, 2011, 2016; Wolkenstein 2016; Invernizzi-Accetti/Wolkenstein 2017; Ebeling/Wolkenstein 2017; Bonotti 2017; Efthymiou 2017). This area is still in relative infancy, and it has thus far remained largely within the confines of analytic ideal theory. However, a critical theory of political partisanship—perhaps joined with a theory of counter-hegemony or other critical-deliberative or agonistic perspectives—may be an idea worthy of exploration.

4. Looking in Our Own Back Yard

The intention behind these reflections is largely to note some of the tasks critical theory faces as it encounters the challenges of the present era. It is by no means intended to be exhaustive, nor is it meant to be a full survey of current work (my Hegelian colleagues have been sadly neglected). Above all, it is not meant to be an indictment of existing work. And as difficult as these challenges may appear, I do believe that contemporary critical theory has the capacity to —if not resolve them—contribute powerful insights in how to confront them. But there is one area about which I'm less sanguine.

It is noteworthy that Horkheimer's original indictment of 'traditional theory' included a critique of the division of labor in the academy itself, and that his idea of pursuing a critical theory of society required a breaking down of not only the boundary between philosophy and the social sciences but a variety of disciplines in order to gain a critical perspective on society as a whole. Today, the pressures of academic life, especially in the U.S. and U.K., point precisely in the opposite direction. Particularly for junior and non-tenured scholars, success in the academy requires an ever more strict adherence not only to disciplinary boundaries but also to specializations within disciplines. To the extent that interdisciplinary specialization is permitted or encouraged, it is sharply limited. Moreover, the de-funding of higher education and the emphasis on acquiring grants steers scholarship toward research projects of interest to those who can fund grants, which are primarily states, corporations, and a handful of NGOs. In addition, the dependence on grant funding, along with administrative and government demands that scholars justify the immediate 'practical use' and 'policy relevance' of their work, discourages the kind of broad theoretical engagement with the larger picture that was the hallmark of critical theory.

Thus, if there is one further area that stands in urgent need of critical theory's attention, it is the academy itself. Many of critical theory's successes over the past several decades have been in challenging various academic discourses with regard to their unacknowledged presumptions and hidden biases. But little critical-theoretic attention is paid today to the broader social-institutional complex in which theory is generated, including critical theory. As critical theorists who are (or aspire to be) working scholars, we remain at the end of the day participants in a social division of labor. Universities in the U.S. and U.K., for example, are changing rapidly, with politicians and segments of the public demanding trimmed-down curricula focused on technological development and vocational training. If the production of theory plays a role in the reproduction of the societies in which we live, then we need to examine how the rise of the 'corporate university', the precariatization of academic labor, the increasing subjection of scholarly work to administrative surveillance, and incentive structures that emphasize metrics such as impact factors may come to alter the way theory is produced in the future. If there were ever a question on which we need to think of ourselves as not only observers of society but also participants, this is surely one.

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