

Critical Theory

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The Roots

- German theorists referred to as the Frankfurt School established Critical Theory.
- Institute for Social Research was first Marxist-oriented research school in Europe.
- Marxism was made the inspiration and theoretical basis of the institute's program. There was a philosophical approach when Horkheimer assumed control.

Institute for Social Research

- Philosophical thinking realized Marx's analysis needed drastic revision.
- Work was put on hold for a short time as Hitler continued his rise in power, forcing Jewish members of the institute into exile.
- This caused the institute to be relocated to Columbia University in New York City in 1934.
- This is where the term Critical Theory was first termed.

History

- Concept was initially a type of code because their radical commitments weren't viewed in a good way. The environment was hostile to anything remotely associated with Marxism.
- First theorists return back to Germany in 1950. The institute had been reestablished by 1953.

G.W.F. Hegel(1770-1831)



- Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel
- Considered to be a central figure in the development of the school of modern Critical Theory
- “The Phenomenology of Minds”
 - Free human agents from the forms of social life within which those coercive illusions thrive and find expression
 - Liberation of both the individual and the species from a system of constraints
- Hegel took the form of internal or immanent examination of various sources of deception, illusion and distortion that the mind undergoes in its journey to Absolute Knowledge. Such an activity is critical, or “negative”.

Georg (Gyorgy) Lukacs(1885-1971)

- Was a part of the early Frankfurt School
- Lukacs argued that subjectivity is “annihilated” by “commodity production.”
- Believed capitalistic system creates a “phantom objectivity” that undermines class consciousness.
- Emphasized the importance Marx placed on the fetishism of commodities



Max Horkheimer (1895-1973)

- 1934 the Institute relocated to Columbia University in New York City under his dictatorship.
- Traditional and Critical Theory
 - Emphasized a dialectical reinterpretation of Marx's critique of political economy as providing the basic analytical framework for the development of critical theory.



Max Horkheimer

- Society was a totality which is “continuously restructuring itself.” As a result, the idea of a social absolute—a complete or perfect state of social phenomena—is criticized.
- There are no general criteria for critical theory as a whole. Critical theory aims to assess “the breach between ideas and reality.”

Theodore Wiesengrund-Adorno (1903-1969)

- Born in Frankfurt
- Attempted to establish a “critical social consciousness,” especially in term of how philosophy expresses the structure of society.
- Just as forms and pieces of art involve critical perspectives, so could particular philosophies.
- History of mind continually reveals the “superiority of objectivity.” Objects exist for us through conceptuality.



Theodore Wiesengrund-Adorno

- Negative Dialectics
 - Dialectic approach is not a middle point between absolutism and relativism.
 - Against the idea that critical theory should merely criticize one point of view in favor of another.

Defining Critical Theory

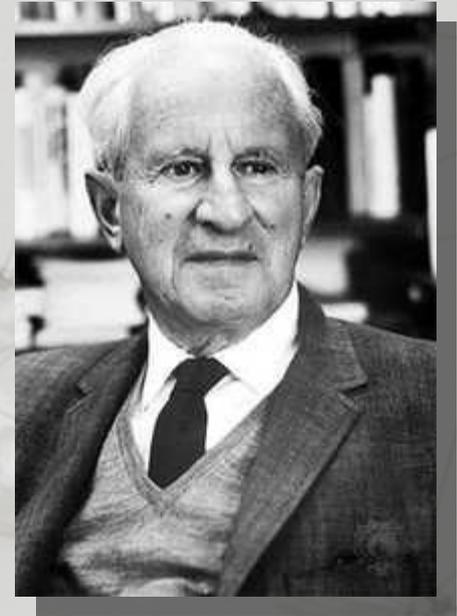
- There is no clear cut definition of critical theory.
- Multidisciplinary approach to society. Normative social theory that seeks a connection with empirical analyses of the contemporary world.
- Always subject to change yet it remains fundamentally inspired by the dialectical tradition of Hegel and Marx.
- Maintains a nondogmatic perspective which is sustained by an interest in emancipation from all forms of oppression, as well as by a commitment to freedom, happiness, and a rational ordering society.
- Involves a critical assessment of capitalism, disparages the optimism of Enlightenment, and views the use of science for constructing a better society as naïve, illusional, or even harmful

Marxian tenets

1. We live in a society dominated by the capitalist mode of production, and a society based on exchange principles of value and profit.
2. The commodity character of products is not simply determined by their exchange, but by their being abstractly exchanged(through labor)
3. Capitalist society ensures fetishism and reification.
4. Capitalism is not a harmonious social world. Contradictions between socially generated illusions (ideology) and actuality (performance, effects) lead to potential crisis.
5. The free market is progressively replaced by the oligarchies and monopolistic mass production of standardized goods.
6. The progressive rise in the organic composition of capital—the amount of fixed capital per worker— exacerbates the inherently unstable accumulation process, its protagonists utilize all means available—including imperialist expansion and war.

Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979)

- In summarizing Hegel's objection to Kant, Marcuse argues that if 'things-in-them-selves' are beyond the capacity of reason, reason will remain a mere subjective principle without relevance to the objective structure of reality.
- Critical Theory of society is essentially linked with materialism.
- The material and ideal coexist with neither having priority over the other



Herbert Marcuse

- Technological rationality
 - a system that he believed was fundamentally irrational in that it operates on the basis of creating false needs.
 - Leads to a materialistically satisfied society.

The New Left

- A series of books and articles which articulated New Left politics and critiques of capitalist societies.
- *Repressive Tolerance* (1965)
 - Attacked liberalism and those who refused to take a stand during the protests and controversies of the 1960s
- *Essay of Liberation* (1969)
 - Praised the work of such diverse radical groups as the hippies and Vietcong sympathizers
- *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (1972)
 - describes the social system's predictable movement toward normality—the lack of protests and social
- **Limitations**
 - They possessed no clear program, no viable organization, not even a formidable constituency



Revolution

- Marcuse proposed a global revolution where capitalism is replaced by socialism.
- Wanted to challenge corporate capitalism, but the revolutionists are concentrated at two opposite poles of society : the ghetto population and the middle-class intelligentsia

The Sexual Revolution

- Was in favor of the sexual revolution
 - it implied a type of revolution against oppressive social control apparatuses
- Against those who tried to impose sexual codes of conduct on others in the name of religion.
- *Eros and Civilization (1966)*
 - Considered sexual repression one of the most important attributes of the exploitive social order.
- “But Marcuse is no less the foe of all who reduce the definition of human liberation to the dimension of pure sexuality, a reduction which leads in the end to the simplistic equation that unhampered sexual intercourse is identical with freedom”

Jurgen Habermas (1929)



- Grew up during Nazi regime and World War II
 - Profoundly effected his thinking and future writings
 - Worked as Adorno's assistant at the Institute for Social Research.
 - His works reflected commitment to a social framework that ensures that fascism will not reappear
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- **Significant Publications**
 - *Communication and the Evolution of Society (1962)*
 - *Knowledge and Human Interests (1968)*
 - *The Theory of Communicative Action (Volume 1, 1981; Volume 2, 1984)*
 - *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity (1987a)*

Jurgen Habermas

- Influenced by works of Marx, Weber, and early members of the Frankfurt School.
- Transforms Marxist theory by adding increased emphasis on communication and interaction
- His new emphasis based on twentieth century phenomenology, interaction theory, and modern theories of communication and cognitive development, clarifies the process by which subjective consciousness can be transformed

“The Tasks of Critical Theory”

- Habermas stated that the work of the Institute for Research was basically dominated by six themes until the early 1940s
 1. The Forms of Integration in Post liberal Societies
 2. Family Socialization and Ego Development
 3. Mass Media and Mass Culture
 4. The Social Psychology behind Cessation of Protest
 5. The Theory of Art
 6. The Critique of Positivism and Science

Communication Theory

- “Habermas argued that linguistic communities are predicated upon an understanding that communication should be based upon a free flow of information undistorted by coercion.”
- Habermas described the ideal speech situation as one that is uncoerced, free for all people, and in which all people are treated equally
- Habermas expands Marx’s conception of humanity by adding language(communication) to work (labor) as a distinct feature of species-being

Communication Theory

- As with the psychoanalyst, the role of the critical theorist is to assist the repressed to recognize and understand their collective, social situation and, as a result, formulate emancipatory practices.
 - Influence of Freudian psychoanalysis

Communication Theory

- Mutual understanding: communicative action serves to transmit and renew cultural knowledge
- Coordinating action: it serves social integration and the establishment of solidarity
- Socialization: it serves the formation of personal identities
- The symbolic structures of the life world are then reproduced by the continuation of valid knowledge, stabilization of group solidarity, and socialization of responsible actors

Rationality and Modernity

- Rationality-the ability to think logically and analytically-is a form of communicative action.
- Rational behavior serves the individuals best interest and is a key ingredient in understanding others during social behavior
- Ideas of Rationality led Habermas to explain modernity

Rationality and Modernity

- Modern age is applied whenever a new consciousness is being developed
- Habermas believed the modern world is distinguished from the old by the fact that it opens itself to the future.
- Modernity, then, is characteristic of a historical consciousness, with the present enjoying a prominent position as contemporary history

Democracy

- Criticized Marx for attempting to reduce social life simply to the realm of work and labor
- Disagreed with Weber's conclusion that society would fall trap to an "iron cage"
- Democracy should be seen as a particular way by which citizens make collective and rational decisions
- Envisioned a "deliberate democracy"

Douglas Kellner (1943-)

- Kellner is especially known for his systematic and critical review of television in the United States.
- Believes that the media, and in particular , television, have long served the interest of the powerful
- Kellner's critical theory is based on the premise that we have not moved into a postmodern, or postindustrial, age, but rather that capitalism continues to reign supreme, as it did in the heyday of critical theory.



Kellner

- **Media and Culture**
- Influenced by Jean Baudrillard theory of a new postmodern society rests on a key assumption that the media, simulations and what he calls 'cyberblitz' constitute a new realm of experience and a new stage of history and type of society.
- Criticized Baudrillard for ignoring the important terrain of cultural politics, for not addressing alternative media practices, for believing that all media are mere producers of noise and are devoid of meaning, and for believing that the media are merely an example of one-way communication.

Kellner

- He believed television had a tremendous impact on culture
- Concerned that television is a threat to democracy because it serves the interests of the dominant economic and political forces
- Kellner believes that television contributes to social integration and implies that democratized media could be the basis for a revitalized public sphere.
- Through his examination of television in the 1980s, he concluded that television has worked increasingly to further conservative hegemony, which helped produce a crisis in democracy.

Relevancy

- Critical Theory separates its self from conflict theory by avoiding the idea of economic determinism, and it disagrees with the positivistic style of functionalist theory and its attempt to explain social life by discovering universal “social laws”
- Critical Theory can be divided into three eras
 - 1st generation of Frankfurt philosophers who maintained a commitment to Marxist ideology
 - 2nd generation those who reconstructed Marxist ideology
 - Contemporary critical theorists have increasingly turned their attention to media and other forms of entertainment in their examination of modern culture.

Relevancy

- Cannot be characterized by a particular set of methodological techniques and propositions but is still a coherent approach that is separate from other types of sociology and Marxism.
- Critical theory is committed to a critique of society by attempting to uncover distorting forms of consciousness, or ways of thinking

Criticisms

- 1. It reproduces idealist (utopian) positions**
Herberma's concepts of ideal speech, undistorted communication and political autonomy are philosophical ideals not grounded in everyday reality.
- 2. It developed from a purely academic setting and thus was isolated from working class politics.**
- 3. Its preoccupation with negativity**
Since purpose is to criticize it will always be viewed as "negative"

Criticisms

4. It is ahistorical.

Critical theorist have look at a variety of events without paying attention to their historical and comparative contexts.