

FRED RUSH

Introduction

Critical Theory was born in the trauma of the Weimar Republic, grew to maturity in expatriation, and achieved cultural currency on its return from exile. Passed on from its founding first generation – among others Max Horkheimer, Friedrich Pollock, Herbert Marcuse, and Theodor Adorno – to the leader of its second, Jürgen Habermas, Critical Theory remained central to European philosophical, social, and political thought throughout the Cold War period. It is still a vital philosophical and political perspective, and a third generation of critical theorists, among whom Axel Honneth is most prominent, continue to press its concerns largely in terms of the tradition that began in the Weimar years. Along with phenomenology in its various forms and the philosophy and social theory gathered loosely under the headings of structuralism and poststructuralism, Critical Theory is a preeminent voice in twentieth-century continental thought.

The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory tracks major themes in the development of Critical Theory from its inception to the present day. While it is characterized by certain shared core philosophical concerns, Critical Theory exhibits a diversity among its proponents that both contributes to its richness and poses substantial barriers to understanding its significance. When pursuing the elements that unify it, it is important not to lose sight of the pluralistic nature of the enterprise, where individual thinkers can differ (sometimes substantially) on various matters. In fact, it is impossible to represent the tradition of Critical Theory accurately without preserving the complications introduced by the relations of the views of its individual thinkers to one another. The complexity that results from the requirement that this plurality not be swept aside is

especially daunting to one seeking to orient oneself for the first time. This effect is further deepened by the extremely diverse intellectual influences on Critical Theory, influences that figure in express ways in the development of philosophical positions among the thinkers associated with Critical Theory, as well as in the technical vocabulary that often figures in the statement of those positions. What is needed is a treatment of Critical Theory as a whole that respects its richness without losing its conceptual main points.

To that end, this volume emphasizes both the conceptual and the historical components to Critical Theory. Chapters 1 through 8 are roughly chronological and more historical than the others in the volume, beginning with the conceptual foundations of the early Frankfurt School, proceeding through the major statements and issues of its middle period, and ending with the Kantian turn in Habermas's thought. Although there are some chapters devoted to a single thinker or to aspects of his thought, most of even the more historical chapters are problem-oriented and involve showing how multiple perspectives from within Critical Theory bear on a select topic. This reflects the general desideratum of the volume that showing significant differences among critical theorists is as important as showing what they have in common. This aim is also present in chapters 9 through 11, which take less historically synoptic views of Critical Theory's account of contemporary mass culture, politics and its relation to its main competitor on the European philosophical scene: French poststructuralism. Chapters 12 and 13 have special places in the volume. They emphasize the relation of Critical Theory to ongoing philosophical concerns. Critical Theory is still a vital force, especially in social and political philosophy and in aesthetics. Stephen White's chapter poses and answers the question of whether there is still anything distinctive about Critical Theory. Axel Honneth's concluding chapter does the same with the question of the legacy of Critical Theory, discussing its past importance, contemporary relevance, and prospects for future development.

In the opening chapter I discuss several fundamental and distinctive features of the conceptual apparatus of early Critical Theory as it is set out in seminal articles by Horkheimer and Marcuse. Key to this is considering the contrast of Critical Theory with two competitor models of social scientific explanation: what Horkheimer calls "traditional" theory, a model that views such explanation as

a special case of methodological considerations that guide the natural sciences, and “vulgar Marxism,” a model of reductive dialectical materialism that analyzes superstructure elements of social formation wholly in terms of their causal relations to economic substructure elements. Michael Rosen’s chapter concentrates on the complex and formative interaction between Benjamin and Adorno, showing that there are important continuities between Benjamin’s early and later thought and that there was significant intellectual disagreement between Benjamin and Adorno, the nature of which the latter was not fully aware of either during Benjamin’s lifetime or later. The most important strand in Benjamin’s thought as a whole is his distinctive form of Kantianism that is itself critical of Kant’s narrow conception of experience. This heterodox Kantianism is also the key to Benjamin’s Marxism, for it is the means by which he confronts the question of what connects different areas of a culture, allowing us to see identity in their apparent diversity. Rosen shows how Benjamin answers this question by deploying the notion of “mimetic experience.” The Frankfurt School was the first group of philosophers not only to embrace Freud, but also to attempt to wed his thinking to Marx’s. Joel Whitebook brings out the intricacies for Critical Theory of the problem of how a Marxist political theory can incorporate Freudian insights by tracing the history of that attempted marriage in the early writings of Horkheimer and Adorno, in the seminal account offered in Marcuse, and in the problematic status of psychoanalysis in Habermas.

Consideration of the middle period of Critical Theory begins with Julian Roberts’s critical assessment of the main arguments of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and, in particular, the book’s central thesis that enlightenment is, or can be, a form of myth. Roberts pays special attention to the claim that the underlying dynamic of enlightenment lies in a pathological insistence on regularity and identity, with the result that science is made to cast a “magic spell” against the terrors of disorder. Also addressed is the claimed sole remedy for this situation, a rediscovery of the particular, of the *hic et nunc*. Raymond Geuss’s chapter deepens the consideration of Adorno, and along with him Marcuse, by turning with great clarity to the question of the relation between the “revolutionary impulse” and dialectic. Geuss traces conceptions of revolution through Marx and Lenin and then joins that analysis with an extended treatment of issues relevant to

the possibility of revolution – for example, objectified belief and the concept of a “false need.” He then canvasses the resources available in Marcuse and Adorno for responding dialectically to the substantial obstacles to revolution. J. M. Bernstein offers a detailed reconstruction of Adorno’s aesthetic theory, in which he presses beyond its manifest concern with criticizing the culture industry to indicate Adorno’s attempt to establish that the practices of modernist art implicitly contain or foster conceptions of knowing, reasoning, and acting that systematically diverge from the rationalized versions of the same that have become hegemonic in the world outside art. Moishe Postone addresses an aspect of Critical Theory that is often neglected in philosophical treatments of it: the analysis of economics, law, and state capitalism in the important work of Friedrich Pollock and Franz Neumann. Postone traces the arc of Critical Theory’s involvement with the question of state capitalism and related issues by situating that involvement in terms of general historical movements in Critical Theory and against the background of the reception of Marx’s concept of labor.

Kenneth Baynes focuses on the all-important Kantian turn in Habermas’s thought that inaugurates later Critical Theory. He shows that Habermas’s rejection of certain cardinal antifoundationalist and nonsystematic features of prior Frankfurt School thought is incremental and so is his adoption of the Kantianism that replaces them, arguing that there are three stages in Habermas’s emerging Kantianism. In the first, Habermas’s criticism of earlier Frankfurt theorists results in the measured methodological return to Kant that occupies *Knowledge and Human Interests*. The second stage involves the increasing importance of the “linguistic turn” to Habermas’s thought and the development of his “universal pragmatics,” culminating in *Theory of Communicative Action*. A third period reveals Habermas’s increasing political liberalism to be motivated in terms of an even more specifically Kantian concept of justice.

Simone Chambers provides an incisive overview of the political theory and engagement of Critical Theory. She highlights how the experience of Fascism formed the deep skepticism of Enlightenment ideals typical of early Frankfurt School political theory and then turns to consider Habermas’s embrace of those very ideals. She argues that Critical Theory’s political engagement has always been a troubled issue for it, a problem for which it has yet to find

a satisfactory solution. Hauke Brunkhorst discusses Frankfurt interpretations of contemporary mass culture, tracing a central ambivalence on the topic in Critical Theory back to Marx. For the early Frankfurt School and Benjamin, the thesis of “enlightenment as mass deception” dominates the reception of mass culture, yet the question of the revolutionary tendencies of such culture remains in the background all along. With Habermas the analysis moves back closer to its Marxist point of departure – that is, it returns to the theory of political democracy and democratic public sphere that Marx developed in his essay on the Eighteenth Brumaire. Beatrice Hanssen tackles the difficult task of making sense of the relationship of Critical Theory to poststructuralism by looking closely at the case of Habermas and Foucault. She properly resists easy assimilation but sees, as did Foucault himself, a possible rapprochement between early Critical Theory and poststructuralism for which the concept of *eristic* is crucial.

In the final two chapters of the book, Stephen White and Axel Honneth examine the question of the continuing relevance of Critical Theory. White evaluates Critical Theory as a distinctive research program both in terms of its history and its present state. He argues that the first issue confronting Critical Theory is whether there is any way of thinking of critical normativity as universal that does not err on the side of overgeneralizing some particular historical perspective. He then considers whether what once counted as “traditional” social theory by critical lights has so changed that it is no longer subject to charges typically brought against it. In the final chapter of the volume, Honneth offers his view of the legacy of Critical Theory for the future, expanding upon his well-known work on this theme and stressing in new ways the importance of the concept of recognition and of making a proper theoretical place within social theory for “the Other of reason.”

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1 Conceptual foundations of early Critical Theory

Critical Theory first develops during a period of extraordinarily complex intellectual activity in Germany. If one were to take the year 1930 as a benchmark – when Max Horkheimer becomes the director of the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt – and were to look back upon the decade preceding that date, one would encounter in their most vibrant forms many of the most important philosophical movements of the twentieth century: the hermeneutic phenomenology of Heidegger; the logical empiricism of the Vienna Circle and the early Wittgenstein; various strands of neo-Kantianism; and the humanistic Marxism of Lukács. In political and social theory, psychology, historiography, and economics the situation is hardly less multifarious. Each of these views or schools, sometimes in combination with elements of others, vies for predominance in the Weimar period. Moreover, each of the contenders takes care to incorporate within it involved criticisms of the others.

Self-definition *ex negativo* can take many forms, but one is nearly universal in the period and is very important for early Critical Theory. All the main philosophical and social-theoretical parties to the disputes of the 1920s and 1930s place great stake in interpreting, appropriating, or otherwise assessing the significance of the history of German philosophy from the time of Kant to the late nineteenth century. This is true even for those philosophical viewpoints that do not accord history a primary internal theoretical importance, for instance, logical empiricism. For a self-avowedly historical set of views such as Critical Theory, the connection between philosophical historiography and the criticism of its contemporary competitors as products of the history of German philosophy is especially explicit,

complicated, and formative. In fact, any account of the conceptual foundations of “early Critical Theory,” roughly the writings of the core members of the Institute from 1930 to 1940, would be greatly impoverished were it not to view the development of Critical Theory in this phase as inherently concerned with defining itself in opposition to other social and philosophical theories. This chapter concentrates on the seminal essays of Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Adorno written in the mid to late 1930s that bring out in an especially vivid way how early Critical Theory was formed by distinguishing itself from rival approaches.

Critical Theory has always been rather fluid, even by design, and it would be a mistake to attempt to treat even its early history univocally. Nevertheless, these essays address a core set of concerns that preoccupy Critical Theory throughout its prewar period and which continue to exert an influence to somewhat lesser degrees in its later, more Adorno- and Habermas-dominated forms. It is possible to distinguish two main approaches to Critical Theory in this period. The first of these is associated primarily with Horkheimer, whose work commentators often view as the dominant force in the formation of Critical Theory. The ascription of preeminence to Horkheimer’s conception of Critical Theory has a well-founded provenance – at one time or another most of the principals of Critical Theory acknowledged Horkheimer’s writings of this period as establishing the blueprint for Critical Theory to come. Even so, one must be careful not to overemphasize the intellectual effect of Horkheimer at this time. His seminal essays present a number of ideas whose rhetorical and programmatic effect was extremely important for the other members of the Institute, but the ideas themselves are not developed very systematically. In some instances the lack of unity is due simply to mutually incompatible elements in his conception of Critical Theory, in others the problem is lack of theoretical detail. Another cause is perhaps that Horkheimer’s stewardship of the Institute as a place in which a number of different perspectives on shared issues was possible causes him to leave open intellectual space in which potentially contrary views might be developed and even encouraged. A blueprint is, after all, not a building. Thus do Marcuse’s writings from the 1930s emphasize in different ways common ground with Horkheimer, sometimes raising questions in reaction as well.

The second strand in the formation of early Critical Theory remains incipient but is highly suggestive for later trends in the Institute. This is the position of the young Adorno, who, under the influence of Walter Benjamin, begins to articulate a more “aestheticized” and guarded view of Critical Theory’s systematic potential. In a much more developed form, this view of Critical Theory will come to dominate the Frankfurt School from the mid 1940s until Adorno’s death in the late 1960s. Horkheimer will migrate over from the first to this second strand, coauthoring with Adorno what many scholars view as the principal text of Critical Theory, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944/7).

HORKHEIMER

Horkheimer’s inaugural lecture of 1930, published a year later as “The Current Condition of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute of Social Research,” signals an important shift in the Institute’s emphasis and scope. For the seven years from its founding in 1923 to the date of Horkheimer’s address, the Institute was concerned almost exclusively with politically engaged empirical social science. Although the broadly Austro-Marxist cast of the Institute facilitated incorporation of elements of non-Marxist methodologies, its members had little interest in philosophical questions and even less in the project of providing a philosophical framework for the work of the Institute. Hence Horkheimer is covering new ground when he states:

If social-philosophical thought concerning the relationship of individual and society, the meaning of culture, the foundation of the development of community, the overall structure of social life – in short, concerning the great and fundamental questions – is left behind as (so to speak) the dregs that remain in the reservoir of social-scientific problems after taking out those questions that can be advanced in concrete investigations, social philosophy may well perform social functions . . . but its intellectual fruitfulness would have been forfeited. The relation between philosophical and corresponding specialized scientific disciplines cannot be conceived as though philosophy deals with the really decisive problems – the process constructing theories beyond the reach of the empirical sciences, its own concepts of reality, and systems comprehending the totality – while on the other side empirical research carries out its long, boring, individual studies that split

up into a thousand partial questions, culminating in a chaos of countless enclaves of specialists. This conception – according to which the individual researcher must view philosophy as a perhaps pleasant but scientifically fruitless enterprise . . . while philosophers, by contrast, are emancipated from the individual researcher because they think they cannot wait for the latter before announcing their wide-ranging conclusion – is currently being supplanted by the idea of a continuous, dialectical penetration and development of philosophical theory and specialized scientific praxis. (*BPSS* 8–9; *HGS* III, 28–9)

Horkheimer hopes to create a new, philosophically informed, interdisciplinary social science to displace both social philosophy and sociology as they were then represented in Europe. In his view the benefits of including social philosophy in the social scientific paradigm developing at the Institute go beyond clarifying general research orientation, important though that may be. Philosophy also enables social scientists to identify and explore questions that might not otherwise be raised. Without philosophically informed social theory of the right sort whole ranges of phenomena might be sealed off from investigation and the potential political impact of the research diminished to that extent.

But, what *is* social philosophy “of the right sort”? The answer to this question is superficially simple: the right sort of social theory is “critical.” But given the myriad uses of the term *critical* since Kant, the simple answer is no answer at all. The question then becomes: what does it mean for a social theory to be “critical” according to Horkheimer? What is “Critical Theory”?

Prima facie one might be tempted to think that Critical Theory is “critical” just because it “criticizes” existing political life. Horkheimer takes the term *critical theory* from Marx and early Critical Theory of course is broadly Marxist. It is an account of the social forces of domination that takes its theoretical activity to be practically connected to the object of its study. In other words, Critical Theory is not merely descriptive, it is a way to instigate social change by providing knowledge of the forces of social inequality that can, in turn, inform political action aimed at emancipation (or at least at diminishing domination and inequality). Following this thought one might think that Critical Theory is “critical” just to the extent that it makes social inequality apparent, specifies some plausible candidates for the causes of the inequality, and enables society in

general (or at least its oppressed segment) to react in appropriate ways. Critical Theory is "critical" because it answers the charge laid by the last of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in different ways; the point is to *change* it."¹

But this is still not an adequate characterization of what makes Critical Theory "critical," for the relevant use of the term *critical* must be understood against an even broader historical background that begins with Kant's idea of a "critical philosophy."² Kant's understanding of critique is important to early Critical Theory for a number of reasons. First, it specifies the *object* of critique, that is, what critical activity operates upon. Kant's critical philosophy directs itself upon "reason." One of Kant's leading themes is that reason has an inherent tendency to seek application regardless of cognitive context, and it is the job of critique to circumscribe reason's epistemic application to what Kant considers to be the bounds of knowledge. Kant calls both the propensity of reason to seek unconditioned epistemic deployment and the insoluble metaphysical problems that result from it "dialectic."³ Second, Kant's conception of critique also supplies Critical Theory with its understanding of the *subject* of critique, that is, with a specification of the agent that carries out criticism. According to Kant reason is also what performs critique. Kant thinks that any justification for placing limits on reason's demand for global scope that did not have a source in that very reason would be incompatible with rational autonomy. Critique is for Kant, then, necessarily *self-critique* and freedom from dialectical illusion possible only upon rational self-regulation. Critical Theory is also concerned to explicate conditions upon rationality and regards this task as implicating its assessment of its own rational limitations. Critical Theory's reflexive structure is thus a third inheritance from Kant.

Critical Theory dissents from some specific core elements of this Kantian picture, but it remains allied to the self-reflective critical model according to which there is never equivalence between thought and its object – that is, the concept of experience still plays a central philosophical role in Critical Theory. In keeping with this complex relation to Kant's thought, early Critical Theory's reaction to Kant does not involve a point by point refutation of elements of Kant's theory based upon criteria internal to Kant's own thought as