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Chapter · January 2017

DOI: 10.1057/978-1-137-55801-5\_1

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# Introduction: What Is Critical Theory?

*Michael J. Thompson*

## 1.1 THE CONCEPT OF CRITIQUE

Whether viewed as a tradition, as a set of questions, or as a series of distinct thinkers, critical theory has continued to attract attention in academic circles throughout the post–World War II era. The reasons for this should come as little surprise. The members of the Institute of Social Research at the University of Frankfurt in the years leading up to the victory of Nazism in Germany—what we generally know as the Frankfurt School—had in view some of the most compelling problems and questions of modern society. Critical theory is not, however, simply a subfield within social theory, philosophy, or the social sciences. It is a distinctive form of theory in that it posits a more comprehensive means to grasp social reality and diagnose social pathologies. It is marked not by *a priori* ethical or political values that it seeks to assert in the world, but by its capacity to grasp the totality of individual and social life as well as the social processes that constitute them. It is a form of social criticism that contains within it the seeds of judgment, evaluation, and practical, transformative activity. Critical theory is, then, a radically different form of knowledge from mainstream theory and social science, one that the chapters contained in this book will explore and chart.

If we think of what is distinctive about critical theory, we must begin with the concept of “critique” (*Kritik*) itself. Critique is a distinctive form of knowledge derived from the insights of German idealism and developed in Marx’s writings that is opposed to the merely empirical and positivist models of knowledge. The concept of critique is an essential feature of this tradition as a whole and of its distinctiveness. For one thing, it means not simply an act of

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M.J. Thompson (✉)

Department of Political Science, William Paterson University, Wayne, NJ, 07470, USA

judgment or resistance, but also a specific way of relating to the world, a way that any subject relates to an object. This is because critique is a means to relate what is perceived in everyday life with a deeper, more rational knowledge that world. For Kant, the activity of critique was applied to relating the perception of objects in the mind (*phenomena*) and our rational, conceptual grasp of those objects (*noumena*). Marx, too, saw critique as the relating of the isolated phenomena of the material-economic world (commodities) and the various aspects of the systems of production (those structured by capital) that constituted them, as well as the community that produced them. And for Freud, a similar strategy was taken to peer beneath the apparent forms of human behavior and the underlying rational structures of the unconscious that produced them. All were concerned with the power of reason to unmask what appears to us and explore the rational structures that grant us rational access to the world.

In this sense, critique is a more comprehensive way of relating subject and object; it entails the subject's capacity to grasp an object in its totality, in its real, actual form. It means, as Hegel had posited in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the consequent *transformation of the subject* as a result of this deepened knowledge of the object. The concept of a critical theory of society maintains that any valid, true form of knowledge about society and its products is one that is aware not only of the object of consciousness and its various dynamics, but also of the subjective factors of cognition that determine the knowledge of that object. A critical theory of society is therefore set with the task of uncovering the social conditions under which knowledge about itself is articulated, since the way we comprehend the objective world is related to the ways we conceive of ourselves. At the same time, it was a form of thinking that is designed not only to comprehend, but also to *transform*: its purpose is to change not only our knowledge of the objective world—of society, of institutions, of culture, and so on—but simultaneously the nature of the subject in a *practical sense*.

Today, many different kinds of theory lurk under the banner of critical theory. No longer associated with the theories, the philosophical traditions, and the political aims of the initial generation of critical theorists, much of what passes for critical theory today is associated with anything that seems to be “critical” of culture and society. Hence, strands of thought such as feminism, deconstruction, and postcolonialism, among others, have been crowded under the banner of critical theory. But to do this is to commit an error about what critical theory—indeed, about what *critique*—actually is. To be sure, much of this aberrant use of the term stems from the destructive impulse of postmodernism and its project of destroying reason as a privileged position from which to judge and to understand power, domination, freedom, and human progress as well as the pseudo-political radicalism of academics alienated from real politics. Despite what many have surmised, critical theory was always preoccupied with the normative validity of human progress, by the need to defend the political and cultural values of the Enlightenment and to expand the sphere of human emancipation through reasoned, rational consciousness, and activity (Bronner 2004). For the theorists of the Frankfurt School, reason had been

corrupted by modernity and degraded by instrumentality toward the ends of domination.

What was central to critical theory as a form of thought was its ability to see the inherent relation between thought and action. Truly rational (i.e., critical) thought would lead to transformation, to new shapes of human activity, since it “anticipates a release of emancipatory reflection and a transformed social praxis” (Schroyer 1973: 31). Immanent critique, or the process of understanding the world and its defects and potentialities from within rather than imposing on it from without, therefore constitutes the crucial core of critical theory (Antonio 1981). This is because defective forms of reasoning lead to the re-creation and sedimentation of the prevailing, existent reality and to the continued endorsement by members of that society of its irrational and dominating relations and forces. The key insight of a critical theory of society is therefore not meant to impose some set of *a priori* values and ideals onto the social world, but to unravel the contradictions that already exist within it; to make evident an emancipatory insight into the very fabric of what we take as given, as basic to our social world.

## 1.2 THE ORIGINS OF CRITICAL THEORY

The political and intellectual origins of critical theory can be found in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution and the movements that occurred throughout the first decades of the twentieth century. Orthodox Marxism set forth a rigid scientism that, it believed, could predict an inevitability to the emergence of revolution and communist social transformation. They viewed Marx’s core contribution to be that of a scientific understanding of history based on class struggle, one which conceived of the process of historical change as essentially mechanistic and systemic. Class society worked according to certain laws—laws that, once discovered, would predict the inevitable collapse of capitalist society and the mobilization of the working class toward revolutionary consciousness and activity. Actual circumstances on the ground, however, showed that this model of social change was far from accurate. What emerged was a crisis in theory based on the political failures of socialist movements and a need to reformulate the practical–political aspect of working-class movements (Bronner 1994). Lacking was a more nuanced theory of society and human action. In providing a revised understanding of consciousness, personality, culture, and civil society, these thinkers would open a pathway toward critical theory by setting the foundations for an alternative view of the subject and society and its relation to politics and the opposition to capitalism, the administrated society, and instrumental reason.

Four thinkers can be seen as core figures in a move away from a dogmatic, orthodox Marxist approach to political consciousness among members of the working class: Karl Korsch, Georg Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, and Wilhelm Reich. For each the problem was to revise the theory of the subject as well as of society in light of the ways both were mediated by one another as well

as by culture, by psychological forces, and by consciousness itself. Korsch and Lukács, in particular, saw that there was an essential and irreducibly ethical, subjective moment, as opposed to the determinism of orthodox Marxist theory, to radical political activity. Korsch, in his groundbreaking book *Marxism and Philosophy* (1970), referred to this as the “subjective factor” in Marxism which he saw as necessary for a truly effective political movement. The subjective preconditions for revolutionary activity had to be brought about through a remaking of social–psychological conditions of the working class. What was needed was the capacity of working-class people to be able to reflect and critically comprehend the system of which they were a part. To do this, a critique of ideas, of *ideology* was needed. Korsch further pointed to the need to understand the concept of critique as that which “includes from the point of view of the *object* an empirical investigation ... of all its relations and development, and from the point of view of the *subject* an account of how the impotent wishes, intuitions and demands of individual subjects develop into an historically effective class power leading to ‘revolutionary practice’ (*Praxis*)” (Korsch 1971: 65, also cf. Korsch 1967: 32ff.). A return to the “subjective factor” meant that a truly critical theory of society had to locate the genesis of social change within the consciousness of the agents of that transformation rather than any kind of mechanistic or positivist “laws” operating externally to those agents.

For Lukács, the problem was very similar. In his essay “Tactics and Ethics,” (1972 [1919]), he dealt explicitly with the problem of individual conscience and ethics. The issue of what constitutes “correct” versus “incorrect” political action could only be raised once it was grasped that the orthodox determinist positions were discarded. Rather, for Lukács, “morally correct action is related fundamentally to the correct perception of the given historico-philosophical situation” (Lukács 1972 [1919]: 9). This would lead Lukács back to the subject–object problem of German Idealism in his *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), published the same year as Korsch’s *Marxism and Philosophy*. A critical engagement with the social world was predicated on the capacity of any rational agent to be able to grasp dialectically the essential structure of the world seen as praxiologically and relationally constituted (see Jay 1986; Feenberg 2014). The lack of radical critique and revolutionary activity was due to the blockage of the rational comprehension by the subject of the object. This was due to the concept of “reification” (*Verdinglichung*) a pathology of consciousness which was brought on by the proliferation of the commodity form and the routinized, rationalized forms of instrumentalized social production which made capitalist social relations a “second nature.” Human products were now seen as mere “things,” as manipulable and inert aspects of a dehumanized reality. As a result of this problem of reification, Lukács reasoned that working-class consciousness was stunted and the ability for a new form of emancipatory practice was stalled.

A similar set of questions to that of Korsch and Lukács was taken up by Gramsci and his analyses of civil society and culture. For Gramsci, the primary problem to be addressed was the same as that of Korsch and Lukács: given

the exploitive, dominating features of modern capitalism, why was there not more reaction against the system? Gramsci's (1971) analysis of this question led him to confront the problem of how dominant ideas were woven into the cultural fabric of civil society, the family, the education system, and so on. This led to the theory of *hegemony* where the ideas of the bourgeoisie were ingrained within the fabric of everyday institutions. For Gramsci, the culture and practices of the dominant powers of any class-based society would necessitate the deployment of particular cultural norms and mindsets that would dull and inhibit critical consciousness, thereby short-circuiting the radical activity of the working class. Culture was therefore made into a particularly important domain of critique (see Aronowitz 2015: 93ff.) since it was there that power and domination could become woven into the consciousness and everyday life of subjects. Gramsci therefore adds to the ideas of Korsch and Lukács by showing how cultural ideas, practices and norms could work against the class consciousness and political interest and lead individuals to endorse the very kind of social world they ought to oppose.

Wilhelm Reich also posed the crucial question of why the working class did not follow what were supposedly their object interests in a socialist society and instead became reactionary. What had to be explained “is not the fact that the man who is hungry steals or the fact that the man who is exploited strikes, but why the majority of those who are hungry *don't* steal and why the majority of those who are exploited *don't* strike” (Reich 1970: 19). The problem, according to Reich, was to be found in the theoretical structure of Marxism itself which was overly materialistic and “failed to take into account the character structure of the masses and the social effect of mysticism” (Reich 1970: 5). More importantly, Reich pointed to the ways that attitudes and emotions embedded within the personality structure of the individual play a pivotal role in how ideology is processed and how their relation to the world was structured. The crucial problem was that the economic factors of social life were not the root cause spurring the appeal of fascism. Rather, it was the repressed nature of the personality that, once combined with the crises in capitalist political economy, gave rise to the expression of authoritarian impulses. Reich's theoretical effort was to unify the theories of Marx and Freud, and he was the first to undertake this project. According to this move, to understand the nature of domination in modern society we had to look to the ways that the repression of primitive drives and needs (specifically the moral inhibition of the natural sexuality of the child) through the institutions of society—from the family through the schools and the workplace—posits an authoritarian structure that inhibits the will to freedom and instead instills a “fear of freedom” and the embrace of reactionary politics. The working class' embrace of fascism in Europe was therefore, for Reich, no surprise.

These four thinkers constitute a decisive break in the direction of Marxist theory in the early twentieth century, and they set the basic framework for what would come to be known as critical theory. Their emphasis on the subjective, psychological dimensions of the individual, the attention paid to the cultural

and institutional lifeworld that shaped consciousness, and the insistence that a new form of consciousness able to break the shackles of ideology acquired during the pulses of everyday life, were all crucial building blocks for what would become known and self-described as critical theory. A critique of culture, a critique of the legitimating institutions, the logics of modern technological forms of life, communication and production, no less than the new forms of state and legal institutions and the structure and dynamics of the family and the modern personality—all were now to become the domain of research for the critical theorists. These thinkers would combine the theoretical insights of Marx, Weber, Freud, Nietzsche, and Lukács in order to reveal the highly nuanced and complex ways that modern society was creating and recreating a system of domination, of unfreedom, and compliant subjects to the existent reality. What they saw happening was the disappearance of the great motivating political and cultural forces that had served to bolster the radical political movements of their time, but also to presage their failures. The next generation of thinkers would integrate these various insights into a coherent framework and research paradigm, and bring its insights to bear on the greatest transformations and crises of the twentieth century.



### 1.3 THE THEORIES OF THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

By the time Max Horkheimer took the helm of the *Institut für Sozialforschung* (Institute of Social Research) in Frankfurt, the above theoretical problems were becoming the foundation for a new form of social inquiry into the structures and dynamics of modern society. Although initially led by Carl Grünberg, a former teacher of many Austro-Marxists such as Otto Bauer, Karl Renner, and Rudolf Hilferding, it was Max Horkheimer, the Institute's most influential director, who would set the stage for its bold research program after Grünberg's stroke in 1929. For Horkheimer, "critical theory" was to be counterposed to "traditional theory" in that the latter was concerned only with some descriptive analysis of a problem or phenomenon, whereas a critical theory of society sought explanation as well as the normative evaluation of what made the object of investigation problematic (i.e., a synthesis of "facts" and "values"), not to mention that it would also have to identify the agents responsible for its transformation (Horkheimer 1972; cf. Held 1980: 175ff; Abromeit 2013). With this notion of critical theory, Horkheimer was able to establish a new and compelling framework for social research. Now, social problems examined with the explanatory methods of the social sciences could be dialectically transformed by the evaluative categories of moral judgment and with an eye toward the practical-transformative activity needed for its resolution. But in addition, the different members of the Institute—T.W. Adorno, Erich Fromm, Friedrich Pollock, Herbert Marcuse, among others—would rework many of the basic concepts of the social sciences and begin asking fundamentally new questions about the structure of late industrial societies, popular culture, the personality structure of the members of mass society, as well as aesthetics and the nature

of modern social power (Kellner 1989). For all of the members of the institute, a synthesis of social theory, critical philosophy, and psychoanalysis was the standpoint to begin the analysis of the totality of modernity (cf. Wellmer 1971; Howard 1977; Bronner 1994).

Marx's critique of political economy—with the basic account of the imperatives of capital, exploitation, commodity fetishism, alienation, and so on—was taken as basic to the structural and material foundations of modernity. Thinkers such as Adorno and Marcuse, in particular, would see the problem of commodity fetishism and the predominance of exchange value over use value as critical tools to understand the dehumanization of culture. But these Marxian insights, for the most part, were to be complementary to the theoretical ideas of Freud and Weber. As Reich had shown, Freud's theory of the unconscious, his psychoanalytic model of the ego was essential to understand the irrational forces that plagued political and critical consciousness. For Weber (1972), the concern was the expansion of the rationalization of society, particularly in terms of the rise in bureaucratic and administrative forms of institutional power. With this came the spread of rational or legitimate forms of authority and domination (*Herrschaft*) that was beginning to constitute a new form of mass society, one based on an implicit form of domination and control, rationalized by new forms of administrative power and commodified forms of culture. Critical theorists saw this as an essential aspect to the structural imperatives of capitalist society (Dahms 2002) since it was now clear that capitalism was becoming more than a system of production, but also—and in many ways, more importantly—a *normative force*, securing forms of legitimacy and acceptance among the broader public.

The basic thesis that began to arise from these ideas was that an emancipatory interest was being eroded by these new institutional and cultural forces. This was a problem of consciousness, of ideology itself (Tar 1985). The basic philosophical and methodological problem was therefore to be stated as a problem of *Ideologiekritik*, or the critique of the cognitive forms of thought processes that produced a false form of knowledge or conception of reality. The distinction in German Idealism between “understanding” (*Verstand*) on the one hand and “rationality” (*Vernunft*) on the other was a central starting point. The former represented the insufficient forms of reasoning that could only give the subject an empirical, thin conception of the object. It was akin to a knowledge of the surface of things, but it was deemed by thinkers such as Hegel as inadequate and defective. Rationality, on the other hand, was a deeper, comprehensive conceptualization of the object of knowledge. It was able to grasp the whole, the totality of the object and its dynamics and processes. As Hegel had demonstrated in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, consciousness and reason itself had to be seen to move through different defective stages until it was able to achieve “absolute knowledge,” or that knowledge that no longer required any external foundation for what it could account for rationally. This form of knowledge granted access to the *essence* of things rather than to their appearance. Marx, too, had made much of the need to penetrate



beyond the appearance (*Schein*) of things and grasp their essential, inner processes. Ideology, in this sense, was a false knowledge about the world rather than one that captured its true, essential nature.

For critical theorists, this became one of the primary philosophical and methodological aspirations of a critical theory of society. Shattering ideological thinking meant overcoming the reificatory aspects of consciousness brought on by administrative rationality and the penetration of the commodity form and exchange value into all aspects of mass society. In his *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), Herbert Marcuse studied the various ways that a new form of consciousness and reasoning was colonizing mass society. One-dimensionality, as Marcuse called it, was the result of the spread of technologized forms of thinking that emanated from the new forms of capitalist production which was able “to institute new, more effective, and more pleasant forms of social control and social cohesion” (Marcuse 1964: xv). The critique of consciousness was to be understood as critical of the social formations that shaped it since the self-understanding of individuals was being affected and distorted by defective social relations and structures. The social relations and structures may be efficient in terms of productivity and social stability, but they also caused human pathologies, stunted a true expression of human development and freedom, and were therefore in contradiction with any conception of a genuinely rational society. The key element of critique was therefore to be found in the ways that the normative concepts such as freedom were being collapsed into the very ideological structures of the techno-industrial system. Genuine critique, an authentic grasp of human freedom, was only possible once the narrow forms of self-reflection and self-constitution of technically efficient administrative-capitalist society were overcome.

But these problems were only deepened when looked at in conjunction with the psychological dimensions of the self in mass society. The rise of Nazism, Stalinism, and anti-Semitism more generally gave rise to a research program that sought to uncover the dynamics of authority in the modern personality (see Abromeit 2014). Early on in his “Authority and the Family,” Horkheimer (1971) was able to point to the ways that the modern, bourgeois family acted as a mechanism for routinizing authority into the developing ego. Erich Fromm’s (1984) important work on the class consciousness of the German working class during the Weimar period, initially published in 1929, showed the extent to which the subjective ideas of the working class were divorced from their objective interests. Workers were more likely to accept and see as legitimate the norms of their society than to take a critical standpoint toward it. Much later, in his *Escape from Freedom* (1941) Fromm, who had psychoanalytically trained with a Reichian group, demonstrated how forms of authority, conformity, and acquiescence to the status quo were expressions of an ego weakened by the proliferation of social relations and processes structured by modern capitalist society. Social forces shaped the self, formed the ego in specific ways such that there was an attraction to authority and submission and a decided move away from the impulse toward freedom.

Adorno and his colleagues were ultimately able to provide a highly nuanced account of the structure and dynamics of authoritarianism in their study *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950). For Adorno and his group, the basic explanation for the emergence of authoritarian and antidemocratic attitudes and values was the repressive nature of authoritarian parenting which fostered attitudes of intolerance. Individuals were shaped by power and authority and reproduced it. The roots of anti-Semitism and other forms of authoritarian attitudes were rooted in the dialectical interplay between psychological factors and social factors. Further studies would deepen and confirm this basic hypothesis, thereby making the study of the personality and authoritarian attitudes and their rootedness in the social conditions of the personality and its development a central area of critical theory. Reworking the theories of Freud vis-à-vis Marx remained a theme for other critical theorists. Fromm would continue to discuss the ways that capitalist society mutilated human drives and created pathological social relations and individuals (Fromm 1955). Even further, Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* (1955) would posit the thesis of "surplus repression" which was a kind of social repression of nonalienated labor within the capitalist social order that prevented a society of free, creative labor and, consequently, free individuals, from taking shape.

For some members of the Frankfurt School, however, it was not only the rise of fascism before World War II and the rationalization of capitalist society in its aftermath that was the root of the problems of modernity, but the reality of the Holocaust and the increasingly destructive powers of technology and the spread of administrative rationality effected a turn toward the powers and effects of modern reason. For Adorno and Horkheimer (1972) this meant that the nature of modern forms of rationality had to be investigated as causes of the pathologies of modernity. The spread of instrumental reason was itself rooted in material forms of production and administration. Now the search for critical rationality became ever-more circumscribed by subjectivity. The collapse of working-class movements, the reconciliation of ever more groups and individuals to the society and culture of administrative-capitalist society, and the increasingly social nature of individual pathologies, all pointed to a dilemma that many of the critical theorists were unable to solve: how were modern individuals to cultivate a critical mentality in an age of conformity and reification?

The role of aesthetics was of importance here. In classical German philosophy, art was typically seen as a distinct form of cognition. Critical theorists essentially shared the conviction, despite whatever differences they had over what kind of aesthetic they championed, that artworks could provide the subject with a sphere of experience that could explode the context of reified existence. Marcuse (1978) argued that art was a force to break through the established reality and to disrupt the stable ideological shape of the existing world; Lukács (1970) maintained that only realism would be able to provide a valid, politically relevant aesthetic that could disclose the true mechanisms of capitalist society for the reader; Ernst Bloch (1988) sought to show how

utopia gave shape to an “anticipatory illumination” that could prefigure the experience of a liberated world beyond the present; and Adorno saw the high modernism of Arnold Schoenberg and Celan as a kind of “force field” against the reifying tendencies of an instrumentalized, commodified world, expressing the suffering, contradictory nature of modernity. The critique of jazz and popular culture that Adorno unleashed in his writings was therefore meant not as an attack on what was “popular” but rather on what was commodified, mass-produced experience that, in turn, dulled the subject’s aesthetic reception to the liberatory impulses that art otherwise had the capacity to communicate.

The subject’s collapse into the prevailing reality therefore became an increasingly distinct and important problem in late critical theory. Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* (1973) attempted an answer to this question by arguing that only by seeing how modernity represents for us not an affirmative reconciliation of the subject and object, but rather, a negative one where the world is now governed by a kind of rationality that destroys difference and forces identity onto the subject. Now, this kind of reason was compelling the subject into conformity with the kind of one-dimensionality that Marcuse had explored earlier—what was needed, Adorno maintained, was a *negative dialectic* that would refuse, indeed, would *negate* rather than affirm the subject’s relation with the prevailing social reality. But in this way, as in his *Aesthetic Theory* (1998), Adorno makes a move back to the subject and the need for the subject to resist the reificatory forms of rationalization that have now come to pervade modern society. Critical theory had morphed by the late 1960s from a critical research program with practical political intent, to a philosophical defense of the subject against the reifying experiences of the totally administered society. As a result, the practical-political capacity of critical theory was left wanting.

#### 1.4 THE COMMUNICATIVE–PRAGMATIC TURN

Responding to this crisis in critical theory, Jürgen Habermas proposed in *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1971) a different path for critical theory. For Habermas, the cynical view of rationality and the Enlightenment project taken by Adorno and Horkheimer—not to mention postmodernism as well—was mistaken. Adorno and Horkheimer had merely collapsed reason with instrumental rationality (Habermas 1987: 106ff.). Reason had to be reconceptualized from an intersubjective paradigm rather than the paradigm of subject-centered reason and the philosophy of consciousness (Habermas 1987: 294ff.) if its emancipatory and critical impulses were to be realized. Seeking to maintain the distinctive view of a critical theory that is immanent within social practices as well as saving rationality from the grasp of instrumental reason, Habermas pointed to the ways that intersubjective, communicative practices within groups were a framework for a renewal of critical theory. The difference between the two was summarized as follows: “The rigorously empirical sciences are subject to the transcendental conditions of instrumental action,

while the hermeneutic sciences proceed on the level of communicative action” (Habermas 1971: 191). Still adhering to the need for an immanent form of rationality that was able to achieve a normative and practical–critical standpoint on society, Habermas opened a new pathway in critical theory by positing communication as a new form of social action derived from American pragmatism (e.g., Peirce, Mead and Dewey) and the work pioneered by Karl-Otto Apel (1980).

Communicative reason was now turned into a category of social action, complimenting the categories laid out by Weber, and particularly seen as a means to oppose the instrumental rationality that the Frankfurt School theorists had seen as a major cause of modern pathologies. With theory of communicative action, Habermas would make a turn away from Marx and move toward a Kantian–pragmatist model of reason and social action that shaped a democratic conception of reason that retained its critical import. The structure of language and communication, seen as a series of speech acts, was now seen as the vehicle for coming to a rational form of solidarity through mutual consensus (Habermas 1984). The capacity to justify, to open assertions, norms, and institutions to communicative, justificatory criticism was now the theoretical framework for a new theory of democracy with critical–theoretical intentions (cf. Dallmayr 1984: 192ff.). What Habermas would come to term “discourse ethics” was not only to be understood as a critique of existing practices, but also a capacity to produce a new and more democratically rooted ethical and political consciousness and norms through the ability of social agents to achieve mutual agreement through discourse.

In this new turn in critical theory, the emphasis on language and communication has led to the vision of a critical public sphere that can engender the kind of justificatory and multi-perspectival intersubjective relations that would provide a more democratic form of action and practice (Bohman 1996, 1999). Habermas’ ideas would transform critical theory moving it away from its roots in the Marxian problems of the early-twentieth century and move it back toward Idealist principles and philosophical concepts. In his defense of reason as a normative, critical, and emancipatory force, Habermas was able to defend the Enlightenment project against its detractors and to link critical theory to concrete political questions, in particular to theories of the state and law (Habermas 1996, 1998). Habermas therefore succeeded in putting the Enlightenment project back in line with critical theory as well as establish a link between the German philosophical traditions that framed critical theory and the pragmatist insights from the American philosophical tradition.

But the influence of pragmatism did not stop with the emergence of Habermas’ communicative and discursive turn. Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition has also built off of a return to Idealism mediated through the theories of Mead and Dewey. For Honneth, critical theory must move on from the Marxian foundations upon which the first generation of theorists had based their theories of power and domination and instead embrace the forms of social action independent of economic logics (Honneth 1995a). Where Habermas

returns to Kant to establish a rationalist conception of critical reason and ethics (cf. Bernstein 2010: 168ff.), Honneth reconstructs the theory of recognition through a reading of Hegel mediated by Mead. For Honneth, the expansion and accumulation of rights-claims in the context of modernity “had gradually increased, because, under pressure from struggles for recognition, ever-new prerequisites for participation in rational will-formation have to be taken into consideration” (Honneth 1995b: 114–115). For Honneth, this serves as the basis for a new theory of democratic practice and norms (Honneth 2011) that can link critical theory with concrete, objective practices and institutions. These views have not gone without significant critique (Fraser 1995; Zurn 2005; Borman 2009; Jütten 2015; Thompson 2016), but there is little question that the concern with recognition succeeds in adding a crucial ethical and political component to the tradition of critical theory.

## 1.5 WHY CRITICAL THEORY PERSISTS AND THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

The evolution of ideas throughout the tradition of critical theory should not be seen as a linear one. Indeed, the persistence of critical theory and its expansion within intellectual circles in recent years can be explained by its own explanatory efficacy. The mainstreaming of the social sciences and philosophy no less than the increasing power of capital and the contradictions stemming from its economic and social dynamics has meant a return to many of the themes that motivated the first generation of critical theorists. Critical theory always sought to transcend disciplinary boundaries, to move toward a dialectical form of reasoning against purely analytical forms, and to maintain the centrality of the ways that critical reason would be capable of liberating actual political practice. Even though the realities of fascism and world war do not occupy the concerns of a new generation of students, they still gravitate toward critical theory for its power to, as Marx once wrote, make the petrified relations of capitalist culture dance.

With this basic outline of the concept and tradition of critical theory, the reader can perhaps explore with more clarity the chapters that follow. Each is meant to grant the reader access to the tradition and the core concepts and approaches of critical theory. There is no way to survey exhaustively every thinker and every aspect of the tradition of critical theory. What has been attempted here is not only a survey of critical theory as a concept, but also to delineate the major impulses of the traditions, irrespective of current academic fads and fashions. The purpose of this handbook is therefore not only to guide the reader through the most essential aspects of critical theory and its major areas of concern. It also seeks to offer new perspectives on a still vibrant, very much active domain of research and method of thinking about the world. This handbook is therefore put forward to survey many of the core themes, ideas, thinkers, and epistemological concerns that concern critical theory as a structure of thought. It does this in order to keep alive many of the basic

concepts and approaches that the critical theory tradition has at its core and to keep the flame of rational, immanent social criticism alive for a new generation who will seek to transform their world.

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