

**PG Semester III, Course: CC 3.3. Cultural Studies**  
**How critical is Critical Theory: (Idea, Philosophy & comments from a few Theorists)**

Critical Theory has a narrow and a broad meaning in philosophy and in the history of the social sciences. "Critical Theory" in the narrow sense designates several generations of German philosophers and social theorists in the Western European Marxist tradition known as the Frankfurt School. According to these theorists, a "critical" theory may be distinguished from a "traditional" theory according to a specific practical purpose: a theory is critical to the extent that it seeks human "emancipation from slavery" , acts as a "liberating ... influence", and works "to create a world which satisfies the needs and powers " of human beings (Horkheimer 1972, 246). Because such theories aim to explain and transform all the circumstances that enslave human beings, many "critical theories" in the broader sense have been developed. They have emerged in connection with the many social movements that identify varied dimensions of the domination of human beings in modern societies. In both the broad and the narrow senses, however, a critical theory provides the descriptive and normative bases for social inquiry aimed at decreasing domination and increasing freedom in all their forms.

Critical Theory in the narrow sense has had many different aspects and quite distinct historical phases that cross several generations, from the effective start of the Institute for Social

Research in the years 1929–1930, which saw the arrival of the Frankfurt School philosophers and an inaugural lecture by Horkheimer, to the present. Its distinctiveness as a philosophical approach that extends to ethics, political philosophy, and the philosophy of history is most apparent when considered in light of the history of the philosophy of the social sciences. Critical Theorists have long sought to distinguish their aims, methods, theories, and forms of explanation from standard understandings in both the natural and the social sciences. Instead, they have claimed that social inquiry ought to combine rather than separate the poles of philosophy and the social sciences: explanation and understanding, structure and agency, regularity and normativity. Such an approach, Critical Theorists argue, permits their enterprise to be practical in a distinctively moral (rather than instrumental) sense. They do not merely seek to provide the means to achieve some independent goal, but rather (as in Horkheimer's famous definition mentioned above) seek “human emancipation” in circumstances of domination and oppression. This normative task cannot be accomplished apart from the interplay between philosophy and social science through interdisciplinary empirical social research (Horkheimer 1993). While Critical Theory is often thought of narrowly as referring to the Frankfurt School that begins with Horkheimer and Adorno and stretches to Marcuse and Habermas, any philosophical approach with similar practical aims could be called a “critical theory,” including feminism, critical race theory, and some forms of post-colonial criticism. In the following, Critical Theory when capitalized refers only to

the Frankfurt School. All other uses of the term are meant in the broader sense and thus not capitalized. When used in the singular, "a critical theory" is not capitalized, even when the theory is developed by members of the Frankfurt School in the context of their overall project of Critical Theory.

It follows from Horkheimer's definition that a critical theory is adequate only if it meets three criteria: it must be explanatory, practical, and normative, all at the same time. That is, it must explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation. Any truly critical theory of society, as Horkheimer further defined it in his writings as Director of the Frankfurt School's Institute for Social Research, "has as its object human beings as producers of their own historical form of life" (Horkheimer 1993, 21). In light of the practical goal of identifying and overcoming all the circumstances that limit human freedom, the explanatory goal could be furthered only through interdisciplinary research that includes psychological, cultural, and social dimensions, as well as institutional forms of domination. Given the emphasis among the first generation of Critical Theory on human beings as the self-creating producers of their own history, a unique practical aim of social inquiry suggests itself: to transform contemporary capitalism into a consensual form of social life. For Horkheimer a capitalist society could be transformed only by becoming more democratic, to make it such that "all conditions of social life that are controllable by human beings depend on real consensus" in a rational society (Horkheimer

1972, 249–250). The normative orientation of Critical Theory, at least in its form of critical social inquiry, is therefore towards the transformation of capitalism into a “real democracy” in which such control could be exercised (Horkheimer 1972, 250). In such formulations, there are striking similarities between Critical Theory and American pragmatism.

The focus on democracy as the location for cooperative, practical and transformative activity continues today in the work of Jürgen Habermas, as does the attempt to determine the nature and limits of “real democracy” in complex, pluralistic, and globalizing societies.

As might be expected from such an ambitious philosophical project and form of inquiry, Critical Theory is rife with tensions. In what follows I will develop the arguments within Critical Theory that surround its overall philosophical project. First, I explore its basic philosophical orientation or metaphilosophy. In its efforts to combine empirical social inquiry and normative philosophical argumentation, Critical Theory presents a viable alternative for social and political philosophy today. Second, I will consider its core normative theory—its relation to its transformation of a Kantian ethics of autonomy into a conception of freedom and justice in which democracy and democratic ideals play a central role (Horkheimer 1993, 22; Horkheimer 1972, 203). As a member of the second generation of Critical Theory, Habermas in particular has developed this dimension of normative political theory into a

competitor to Rawlsian constructivism, which attempts to bring our pretheoretical intuitions into reflective equilibrium.

A fundamental tension emerges between a comprehensive social theory that provides a theoretical basis for social criticism and a more pluralist and practical orientation that does not see any particular theory or methodology as distinctive of Critical Theory as such. In this way, the unresolved tension between the empirical and normative aspects of the project of a critical theory oriented to the realization of human freedom is manifest in each of its main contributions to philosophy informed by social science. Finally, I examine the contribution of Critical Theory to debates about globalization, in which the potential transformation of both democratic ideals and institutions is at stake.

Students kindly note that I will be discussing a few of the topics mentioned below (related to an understanding of the various critical and literary debates surrounding Critical Theory)

1. Critical Theory as Meta philosophy: Philosophy, Ideology and Truth
2. Democracy as a Practical Goal of Critique: From Ideology to Social Facts
  - 2.1 Critique of Liberalism to the Dialectic of Enlightenment
  - 2.2 The Structural Transformation of Democracy: Habermas on Politics and Discursive Rationality

### 3. Critical Theory, Pragmatic Epistemology and the Social Sciences

#### 3.1 Critics, Observers, and Participants: Two Forms of Critical Theory

#### 3.2 Social Inquiry as Practical Knowledge

#### 3.3 Pluralism and Critical Theory

#### 3.4 Reflexivity, Perspective Taking and Practical Verification

### 4. A Critical Theory of Globalization: Democratic Inquiry, Transnational Critical Theory

#### 4.1 Social Facts, Normative Ideals and Multiperspectival Theory

#### 4.2 The Fact of Globalization and the Possibility of Democracy

### 5. The Emerging Ideal of a Multiperspectival Democracy: The European Union

#### 5.1 The Multiperspectival Public Sphere: The Critical and Innovative Potential of Transnational Interaction

### 6. Conclusion: Critical Theory and Normative Inquiry.

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