

CRITICAL THEORY Vs POST MODERNISM

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Abstract

Postmodernism broadly refers to a socio-cultural and literary theory, and a shift in perspective that has manifested in a variety of disciplines including the social sciences, art, architecture, literature, fashion, communications, and technology. It is generally agreed that the postmodern shift in perception began sometime back in the late 1950s, and is probably still continuing. Postmodernism can be associated with the power shifts and dehumanization of the post-Second World War era and the onslaught of consumer capitalism. The very term Postmodernism implies a relation to Modernism. Modernism was an earlier aesthetic movement which was in vogue in the early decades of the twentieth century. It has often been said that Postmodernism is at once a continuation of and a break away from the Modernist stance. Critical theory (also capitalized as Critical Theory) is an approach to social philosophy that focuses on reflective assessment and critique of society and culture in order to reveal and challenge power structures. With roots in sociology and literary criticism, it argues that social problems stem more from social structures and cultural assumptions than from individuals. Maintaining that ideology is the principal obstacle to human liberation, critical theory was established as a school of thought primarily by the Frankfurt School theoreticians Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, and Max Horkheimer. Horkheimer described a theory as critical insofar as it seeks "to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them."

Key Words: *critical theory, culture, global, post-colonial, post modernism, western world*

Postmodernism shares many of the features of Modernism. Both schools reject the rigid boundaries between high and low art. Postmodernism even goes a step further and deliberately mixes low art with high art, the past with the future, or one genre with another. Such mixing of different, incongruous elements illustrates Postmodernism's use of lighthearted parody, which was also used by Modernism. Both these schools also employed pastiche, which is the imitation of another's style. Parody and pastiche serve to highlight the self-reflexivity of Modernist and Postmodernist works, which means that parody and pastiche serve to remind the reader that the work is not "real" but fictional, constructed. Modernist and Postmodernist works are also fragmented and do not easily, directly convey a solid meaning. That is, these works are consciously ambiguous and give way to multiple interpretations. The individual or subject depicted in these works is often decentred, without a central meaning or goal in life, and dehumanized, often losing individual characteristics and becoming merely the representative of an age or civilization, like Tiresias in *The Waste Land*. In short, Modernism and Postmodernism give voice to the insecurities, disorientation and fragmentation of the 20th century western world. The western world, in the 20th century, began to experience this deep sense of security because it progressively lost its colonies in the Third World, worn apart by two major World Wars and found its intellectual and social foundations shaking under the impact of new social theories and developments such as Marxism and Postcolonial global migrations, new technologies and the power shift from Europe to the United States. Though both Modernism and Postmodernism employ fragmentation, discontinuity and decentredness in theme and technique, the basic dissimilarity between the two schools is hidden in this very aspect.

Modernism projects the fragmentation and decentredness of contemporary world as tragic. It laments the loss of the unity and centre of life and suggests that works of art can provide the unity, coherence, continuity and meaning that is lost in modern life. Thus Eliot laments that the modern world is an infertile wasteland, and the fragmentation, incoherence, of this world is effected in the structure of the poem. However, *The Waste Land* tries to recapture the lost meaning and organic unity by turning to Eastern cultures, and in the use of Tiresias as protagonist.

In Postmodernism, fragmentation and disorientation is no longer tragic. Postmodernism on the other hand celebrates fragmentation. It considers fragmentation and decentredness as the only possible way of existence, and does not try to escape from these conditions. This is where Postmodernism meets Poststructuralism—both Postmodernism and Poststructuralism recognize and accept that it is not possible to have a coherent centre. In Derridean terms, the centre is constantly moving towards the periphery and the periphery constantly moving towards the centre. In other words, the centre, which is the seat of power, is never entirely powerful. It is continually becoming powerless, while the powerless periphery continually tries to acquire power. As a result, it can be argued that there is never a centre, or that there are always multiple centres. This postponement of the centre acquiring power or retaining its position is what Derrida called *differance*. In Postmodernism's celebration of fragmentation, there is thus an underlying belief in *differance*, a belief that unity, meaning, coherence is continually postponed.

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 1972b [1992, 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 for its object [human beings] as producers of their own historical form of life" (Horkheimer 1972b [1992, 244]). 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 1972b [1992, 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 1972b [1992, 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 1972b [1992, 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. In the third section, I will consider its empirical orientation in practical social theory and practical social inquiry that aims at promoting democratic norms. 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.

Conclusion

During the 1980s Jürgen Habermas and other theorists associated with the critical theory of the Frankfurt School emerged as key critics of postmodern theory.¹ Habermas carried out polemics against Derrida, Foucault, and postmodern theory, while his associates polemicized against Lyotard (Honneth 1985; Benhabib 1984), Foucault (Honneth 1986), Derrida (McCarthy 1989), and other postmodern theorists. The polemics have often obscured some interesting similarities, in addition to important differences, between the postmodern theories and critical theory. Both critical theory and much postmodern theory agree in important ways in their critiques of traditional philosophy and social theory. Both attack the academic division of labour which establishes fixed boundaries between regions of social reality, and both utilize supradisciplinary discourses. Both carry out sharp critiques of modernity and its forms of social domination and rationalization. Both combine social theory, philosophy, cultural critique, and political concerns in their theories and, unlike more academic theories, some versions of both attempt to orient theory toward practice, and discourse toward politics. Both critical and post-modern theory have engaged in heated polemics against each other, and have been synthesized with feminist theory.

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