✇ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

Critical Theory

First published Tue Mar 8, 2005

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, "to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them" (Horkheimer 1982, 244). 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 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" (Horkeimer 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 1982, 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 1982, 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 1982, 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.

1. Critical Theory as Metaphilosophy: Philosophy, Ideology and Truth

The best way to show how Critical Theory offers a distinctive philosophical approach is to locate it historically in German Idealism and its aftermath. For Marx and his generation, Hegel was the last in the grand tradition of philosophical thought able to give us secure knowledge of humanity and history on its own. The issue for Left Hegelians and Marx was then somehow to overcome Hegelian "theoretical" philosophy, and Marx argues that it can do so only by making philosophy "practical," in the sense of changing practices by which societies realize their ideals. Once reason was thoroughly socialized and made historical, historicist skepticism emerged at the same time, attempting to relativize philosophical claims about norms and reason to historically and culturally variable forms of life. Critical Theory developed a nonskeptical version of this conception, linking philosophy closely to the human and social sciences. In so doing, it can link empirical and interpretive social science to normative claims of truth, morality and justice, traditionally the purview of philosophy. While it defends the emphasis on normativity and universalist ambitions found in the philosophical tradition, it does so within the context of particular sorts of empirical social research, with which it has to cooperate if it is to understand such normative claims within the current historical context. After presenting the two main versions of this conception of philosophy, I turn to an illuminating example of how this cooperative relation between philosophy and the social sciences works from the point of view of the main figures in Critical Theory who sought to develop it: the critique of ideology, a form of criticism which if generalized threatens to undermine the critical stance itself as one more ideology. Even if Critical Theorists are united in a common philosophical project, this example shows the large differences between the first and second generation concerning the normative justification of social criticism.

In the modern era, philosophy defines its distinctive role in relation to the sciences. While for Locke philosophy was a mere "underlaborer," for Kant it had a loftier status. As Rorty and others have put it, transcendental philosophy has two distinct roles: first, as the tribunal of Reason, the ultimate court of appeal before which disciplines stand and must justify themselves and secondly, as the domain for normative questions left out of naturalistic inquiry. In light of this ability to judge the results of the sciences, philosophy can also organize knowledge, assigning to each of them their proper sphere and scope. The Kantian solution denies the need for direct cooperation with the sciences on issues related to normativity, since these were determined independently through transcendental analysis of the universal and necessary conditions for reason in its theoretical and practical employment. Echoes of the subsequent post-Hegelian criticisms of Kantian transcendental philosophy are found in the early work of Horkheimer and Marcuse. Indeed, Horkheimer criticizes "traditional theory" in light of the rejection of its representational view of knowledge and its nonhistorical subject. Echoing Marx in *The German Ideology*, Horkheimer insists that for a critical theory "the world and subjectivity in all its forms have developed with the life processes of society" (Horkheimer 1982, 245). Much like certain naturalists today, he argued

that "materialism requires the unification of philosophy and science," thus denying any substantive distinction between science and philosophy (Horkheimer1993, 34). As Horkheimer understood the task of Critical Theory, philosophical problems are preserved by taking a role in defining problems for research, and philosophical reflection retains a privileged role in organizing the results of empirical research into a unified whole.

This understanding of the relation of philosophy and the sciences remains broadly Kantian. Even while rejecting the role of philosophy as transcendental judge, he still endorses its normative role, to the extent that it still has the capacity to organize the claims of empirical forms of knowledge and to assign each a role in the normative enterprise of reflection on historically and socially contextualized reason. This unstable mixture of naturalism with a normative philosophical orientation informed much of the critical social science of the Frankfurt School in the 1930s.

According to this conception of materialism, Critical Theory could operate with a theoretical division of labor in which philosophy's normative stance could criticize the embodiments of reason and morality according to their internal criteria. At least for modern societies, such an enterprise of "immanent critique" was possible (see, for example, Horkheimer 1993, 39). However, Horkheimer and Marcuse saw the skeptical and relativist stance of the emerging sociology of knowledge, particularly that of Karl Mannheim, as precisely opposed to that of Critical Theory. As Marcuse puts it, "sociology that is only interested in the dependent and limited nature of consciousness has nothing to do with truth. While useful in many ways it has falsified the interest and goal of any critical theory" (Marcuse 1969 152). As opposed to merely debunking criticism, "a critical theory is concerned with preventing the loss of truth that past knowledge has labored to attain." Given Critical Theory's orientation to human emancipation, it seeks to contextualize philosophical claims to truth and moral universality without reducing them to social and historical conditions. Horkheimer formulates this skeptical fallacy that informed much of the sociologically informed relativism of his time in this way: "That all our thoughts, true or false, depend on conditions that can change in no way affects the validity of science. It is not clear why the conditioned character of thought should affect the truth of a judgment—why shouldn't insight be just as conditioned as error?" (Horkheimer 1993, 141). The core claim here is that fallibilism is different from relativism, suggesting that it is possible to distinguish between truth and the context of justification of claims to truth.

Faced with a sociological naturalism that relativized claims to truth and justice are necessary for social criticism, the challenge could be answered by detranscendentalizing truth without losing its normativity (Horkheimer 1993, 6; McCarthy, in McCarthy and Hoy 1994, 10). Indeed it is relativism that depends on an implausible and ahistorical form of detachment and impartiality, especially expressed in its methodological commitments to "reverential empathy and description." The skepticism offered by historicism and the sociology of knowledge is ultimately merely theoretical, the skepticism of an observer who takes the disengaged view from nowhere. Once the skeptic has to take up the practical stance, alternatives to such paper doubt become inevitable. Indeed, the critic must identify just whose practical stance best reveals these possibilities as agents for social transformation of current circumstances. As I point out in the next section, the Frankfurt School most often applied ideology critique to liberal individualism, pointing out its contextual limitations that lead to reductionist and pernicious interpretations of democratic ideals.

Despite the force of these antirelativist and antiskeptical arguments, two problems emerge in claims made by Horkheimer and Marcuse to underwrite some "emphatic" conception of truth or justice. First, philosophy is given the task of organizing social research and providing its practical aims even in the absence of the justification of its superior capacities. A more modest and thoroughly empirical approach would be more appropriate and defensible. Second, the source of this confidence seems to be practical, that critics must immanently discover those transformative agents whose struggles take up these normative contents of philosophy and attempt to realize them. But once this practical possibility no longer