

Critical Theory

Mark Olssen
University of Surrey

Critical theory emerged in Germany in the 1920s with the establishment of the Institute for Social Research at Frankfurt-am Main in 1923. The term 'critical theory' was originally coined and used by Max Horkheimer in 1937 to describe the theoretical programme of the school. Known as the 'Frankfurt School' the group became exiled to France then to the United States in the early 1930s until 1941 when it closed down. According to Löwenthal (1989: 141) the decision to emigrate from Germany was made as early as 1930 as a consequence of the rise of the Nazi's to political power and the increasingly difficult situation faced by a group of intellectuals that was predominantly Jewish. Amongst its members were Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Frederick Pollock, Franz Neumann, Leo Löwenthal and Erih Fromm. In 1934 the group were given permission to establish their Institute at Columbia University in New York. After the war, in 1950, it was reestablished in Frankfurt where it attracted new members such as Jürgen Habermas and Alfred Schmidt.

Although informed by multiple perspectives, the work of the Frankfurt School began primarily as a Marxist critique of capitalist society. In 1930 Horkheimer became director of the school, and directed its emphasis away from its initial emphasis on orthodox, scientific Marxism to become the mouthpiece for a more humanistic, philosophical Marxism, shifting the frame of reference away from a focus on the economy and exploitation towards a critique of culture and a concern with alienation. In his article 'Traditional and Critical Theory', first published in 1937, Horkheimer (1972) explains that the term derives from the critical function

of Marxist theory as a form of opposition to bourgeois society. Whereas traditional theory sought to reproduce the relations of capitalist society, critical theory sought to subvert or undermine them. In addition, critical and traditional theory embodied two different *Erkenntnisweisen* or modes of cognition. While the modes of cognition of traditional theory derived from the natural sciences, those of critical theory focussed on “men as producers of their own historical way of life in its totality” (Horkheimer, 1972: 244). The methods of the natural sciences thus misrepresented the human world by absolutizing knowledge. Science thus failed to understand both the reflexivity and contingency of social truths. In addition, because it was based upon an atomistic metaphysic, it failed to theorize the holistic, or contextualized character of social existence. Critical theory, for Horkheimer on the other hand, sought to explicate the nature of the relations between part and part, and parts and whole, revealing in addition its own embeddedness in the social matrix from which it arises, and operates. In an epistemological sense, Horkheimer maintained that an interest in the improvement of the human conditions of existence was intrinsic to the very capacity of reason, and the ability to utilize its capabilities.. In this sense, the driving force of critical theory was practical, and linked as a moral-political system to the improvement of the human condition and, as with Kant, the realization of freedom through reason.

In relation to method, Kellner points out that from the beginning to the present critical theory has disregarded divisions between existing disciplines of knowledge stressing the interconnectedness between them. In Keller’s words:

Critical Theory is distinguished from traditional mainstream social science through its multidisciplinary perspectives and its attempts to develop a dialectical and material social theory. This project represents a collective, supradisciplinary synthesis of

philosophy, the sciences and politics, in which critical social theory is produced by groups of theorists and scientists from various disciplines working together to produce a Critical Theory of the present aimed at radical socio-political transformation (Kellner, 1989: 7)

This 'supradisciplinary' approach, says Kellner (1989: 7), involves not just collaboration between researchers from different disciplines but the criticism of "the validity claims of the separate disciplines". Fundamentally this is an educational approach, conceiving education as unbounded by disciplinary affiliations. In this sense critical theory provides an over-arching approach to the present age which links the study of educational institutions and processes to philosophy, politics, and economics in its critique of culture and philosophy. Linking theory and practice, it seeks to isolate and expose the relationships between cultural elements, economic and social processes, and the historical context.

From Marxism to poststructuralism and pluralism

Although initially conceived as a Marxist critique of capitalist society, the theoretical base of critical theory was soon to broaden incorporating ideas drawn selectively from Nietzsche, Marx, Weber, Heidegger, Lukács, Korsch and Hegel. These influences were increasingly incorporated as critical theory sought to challenge the traditions of modernity, a core theme which it had been concerned with from the start in its opposition to the forces of modernisation and representations of modernity which saw it as a purely positive force linked to the development and progress of science, technology and industry, and instrumental conceptions of education.

Much of Horkheimer's early approach can be saddled with a totalizing concern with the realization of reason through history carrying, expressing as Hoy and McCarthy (1994: 13) have put it, a number of "left-Hegelian formulae...[which] have a disagreeably totalizing ring to them". These emphases include:

[h]is tendency to conceptualize society as at least potentially a unified subject with a unified will and, hence, to marginalize considerations of social, cultural, and political pluralism; his over-reliance on Marxian political economy, particularly class analysis, in identifying the causes and conditions of injustice in existing social orders; his subscription to a philosophy of history or "grand metanarrative" that underplayed the roles of contingency, locality, and identity in struggles against oppression (ibid)

Hegel's emphasis on oneness, unity and the dialectical possibility of achieving truth in history, were themes increasingly criticised, first by Adorno (1973), stressing the 'non-identical' relationship of discourse to the world which manifested itself in fragmentation, diversity, and multiplicity of perspectives. Historical necessity is thus replaced by an emphasis upon discontinuity, pluralism, contingency and chance, representing as Hoy and McCarthy (1994: 119) put it "a partial critique of Hegel, one that is inspired initially by Nietzsche and practiced later by Michel Foucault".

Foucault's more pluralist form of critique manifests its profound educational relevance in that critique becomes manifested as a general educational and epistemological approach to knowledge, and practical politics. For Foucault knowledge and change are achieved not through collection of the data positivistically, or the rational discussion and implementation of

policy, but through *criticism*. Criticism is practical in that it leads to a transformation of structures and helps to demystify the ideological fog surrounding contemporary historically contingent conceptions of the real. Rather than promoting a utopia of truth, critique as an educational tool becomes:

Not a matter of saying things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought, the practices that we accept rest...Practising criticism is a matter of making facile gestures difficult. (Foucault, 1988: 154)

Critique, for Foucault, aims at identifying and exposing the unrecognised forms of power in people's lives, to expose and move beyond the forms in which we are entrapped in relation to the diverse ways that we act and think. Thus, the primary function of education is in teaching the skills, the *technē*, and the strategies of criticism. In this sense, critique aims to free us from the historically transitory constraints of contemporary consciousness as realised in and through discursive practices. His commitment is to a form of 'permanent criticism' which must be seen as linked to his broader programme of freedom of thought. It is the freedom to think differently than what we already know. In this sense, Foucault's conception differs profoundly from Kant's conception of critique. In Foucault's (1984: 46) own words, criticism involves a 'limit-attitude':

Criticism indeed consists of analysing and reflecting upon limits. But if the Kantian question was that of knowing what limits knowledge must abstain from transgressing it seems to me that the critical question today has to be turned back into a positive one: in what is given to us as universal, necessary or obligatory, what part is taken up by things

which are actually singular, contingent, the product of arbitrary constraints? The point, in brief, is to transform critique conducted in the form of necessary limitations into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression.

This is Foucault's way of saying that everything can be an object of critique – knowledge, practices, and even science. Critique in this sense is not a 'pure' method which is free-floating in history, but a series of practices that arise from specific historical struggles. As there can be no final transcendence, or absolute enlightenment, however, any progress through criticism can be only provisional. It is always a question of beginning again. For Foucault, then, education as criticism is thus a permanent interrogation of limits. Today, Foucauldian-inspired research in education is interrogating a whole range of phenomena, ranging from concepts such as autonomy to neoliberal models of governmentality.

REFERENCES

- Adorno, T. W. (1973) *Negative Dialectics*. New York: Seabury Press.
- Foucault, M. (1984). What is Enlightenment? (trans. C Porter). In P. Rabinow (Ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (pp. 31-50). New York: Pantheon.
- Foucault, M. (1988). Practicing criticism (trans. A. Sheridan et al.). In L.D. Kritzman (Ed.), *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984* (pp. 152-158). New York: Routledge.
- Hoy, D.C. and McCarthy, T. (1994) *Critical Theory*, Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers.
- Horkheimer, M (1972) 'Traditional and Critical Theory', in Max Horkheimer, *Critical theory: Selected Essays*, (trans. Matthew J. O'Connell), New York: The Seabury Press.
- Kellner, D (1989) *Critical Theory, Marxism and Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Löwenthal, L. (1989) *Critical Theory and the Frankfurt Theorists: Lectures, correspondence, conversations*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.