

Feminist Theory and the Frankfurt School: Introduction

Feminism is a revolt against decaying
capitalism.
—Marcuse

*T*here is a quaintness to Herbert Marcuse's manifesto on behalf of "feminist socialism," here reprinted for the first time since its appearance thirty years ago in *Women's Studies*. It is not only an openhearted and hopeful little effort at theoretically codifying the expansive revolutionary promise of the second wave of the Women's Movement, a promise that would soon be dashed from within and without. Marcuse's political and philosophical assumptions were also vulnerable to emerging postfoundational critiques of the humanist subject, progressive historiography, and their entailments: essentialized identities, totalizing identities, undeconstructed binary oppositions, faith in emancipation, and revolution.

Openhearted, hopeful, vulnerable, imaginative, revolutionary: precisely the qualities Marcuse thought feminism brought to the unyielding and ultimately unemancipatory rationality of a masculinist radical politics, on the one hand, and a dreamless liberal egalitarianism, on the other. This unemancipatory rationality was the terrain that the Frankfurt School worked from every direction, as it upturned the myth of

Enlightenment reason, integrated psychoanalysis into political philosophy, pressed Nietzsche and Weber into Marx, attacked positivism as an ideology of capitalism, theorized the revolutionary potential of high art, plumbed the authoritarian ethos and structure of the nuclear family, mapped cultural and social effects of capital, thought and rethought dialectical materialism, and took philosophies of aesthetics, reason, and history to places they had never gone before.

The wondrously rich constellation of inquiry and ideas known as the Frankfurt School (or sometimes just “Critical Theory”), which only by dint of common origins in Weimar and the itinerant institutional associations and intellectual arguments that followed can be made to stand as a body of thought rather than disparate streams of it, has been largely treated with indifference and ignorance in recent years. There have been revivals and recuperations of particular thinkers—especially Adorno and Benjamin—but for many left theorists today, including feminists, the Frankfurt School signifies anachronistic rather than still fecund post-Marxist thought. To the extent that feminist theory does engage this tradition today, it is primarily through Jürgen Habermas; and within Habermas’s extensive oeuvre, it is his theorization of the public sphere and communicative rationality—his later, markedly Kantian and more liberal thinking—that feminist theory has taken up. And whatever the value of Habermas’s work on communicative ethics, it cannot be said to bear the philosophical reach or political radicalism represented by the early Frankfurt School. So also, then, has something in feminist thinking been tamed.

The tendency of Anglo-American feminist theory to make occasional use of the later Habermas but not Adorno, Horkheimer, Bloch, Benjamin, or Neumann suggests that the eschewal of Critical Theory by feminism is not simply consequent to its absorption with French rather than German thought or its contingent coming of age with poststructuralism rather than a Hegelian-Marxist tradition. Nor is it consequent merely to Critical Theory’s archaisms, its sustained belief in truth and social totality, or emancipation. Instead, this eschewal would seem to be commensurate with an abandoned radicalism on the part of feminist theory itself and especially its replacement of ambitions to overthrow relations of domination in favor of projects of resistance, reform, or resignification, on the one hand, and normative political theory abstracted from conditions for its realization, on the other. Of course, this “abandonment” may be regarded as mature reconciliation to the limits of political transformation

or at the very least to a dramatically foreshortened horizon of political possibility in the final decades of the twentieth century. But, and this is the crucial point, to rescind an investment in revolutionary change does not require revoking the elaborate commitment to *critique* represented by Critical Theory and animating the essays that follow.

For Critical Theory, the commitment to critique involved, first, extending the Marxist impulse to reach past conventional domains of political analysis (public policy, law, and other elements of state-centered public life) and economic analysis (supply/demand, prices, and other elements of the realm of exchange) to grasp the orders of power constitutive of these domains. It is a reach into what Marx called the “hidden abodes” of social power, which for Critical Theory exceeded the Marxist emphasis on the realm of production to include language, the psyche, sexuality, aesthetics, reason, and thought itself.

This leads to a second important aspect of critique as the Frankfurt School conceived it. In contrast with Kant and the Kantians, the Critical Theorists understood the social world to impress itself upon thinking and regarded new forms of thinking as essential to grasping new historical circumstances. If the Kantians proceeded by discerning what they took to be the invariant and necessary structures of thought and then asked what objects could be constituted by such thinking, the Critical Theorists, drawing on Hegel, Weber, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, asked what external and historical realities take up residence in and as thought, how thought is partially formed by the objects it thinks, and how critical theory can take the measure of these features of thought in order to critically apprehend the world and its own production. In short, for Critical Theory, thought becomes historical, political, and nonautonomous in ways that Kantianism cannot avow or allow, and thought that is “critical” must struggle for self-reflexivity vis-à-vis its historical production.

Critical Theory’s insistence on the historical and social character of thought means, of course, that philosophy loses all pretense to purity. Indeed, Horkheimer suggested that critical theory should become a kind of social theory with empirical referents and that “philosophy” as such should be left behind. Adorno was less willing to jettison philosophy and called instead for it to grasp its own historical conditions and contours. Marcuse probed the relationship between, on the one hand, the ascendance of ordinary language philosophy, analytic philosophy, and intellectual positivism in the human sciences, and on the other hand, the legitimation requirements of a capitalist order. All three thinkers, and

Walter Benjamin too, sought to reconceive dialectics to apprehend the relationship between thought and world, philosophy and history. Similarly, Enlightenment promises of emancipation through reason were upturned by the Critical Theorists' analyses of the dominating properties of instrumental rationality, the false opposition between reason and myth, and modernity's problematic faith in science.

If Critical Theory broke with Kantian conceits about purity in thought and abstraction, it also reworked Marxist formulations of capital. What particularly distinguished Critical Theory from other forms of twentieth-century Marxism was its refusal of orthodox forms of economic causality, its tracing of capital's cultural and social effects, its attention to subjectivity, and its attention to forms of power that exceeded the capital-labor relation. Again, as Critical Theory rendered thought itself as historical and political, it opened left inquiry into the powers of consciousness, ideology, culture, subjectivity, and varieties of rationality and reason, and cast these phenomena into the domain of the political. Not only did Critical Theory thereby avoid the economism of other Marxisms, it changed the very meaning of political economy and especially of what was contained in and generated by the social, cultural, and political relations of "capitalism."

What I have sketched here as the intentionally complex and polymorphous intellectual terrain occupied by the Frankfurt School offers both a model for feminist thinking and a set of heuristics for it, neither of which need be adopted wholesale to be useful. Critical Theory represents a practice of self-reflexive thought and a prolix notion of materiality. In its attempt to comprehend a broader range of social relations than its predecessors, it draws from a crowded armoire of intellectual approaches (from psychoanalysis to German idealism, political economy, organization theory, and literary criticism), and it insists on radical theory's proliferation of analytic objects. And in its reckoning with the postwar problematic of an aborted progressive historiography and thwarted emancipatory impulse, Critical Theory explored the containment, vexation, and deformation of the very desire that animated the project of left political theory.

Feminism enters through all of these ports. First, feminism's object of thought—gender—is at the same time impressed *in* thought; gender takes shape in and as thinking and forms of rationality. Second, the material life of gender comprises multiple elements, is only intermittently palpable, and is constituted as much by culture, psyche, and language as by the sexual division of labor or the circulation of capital. Third, feminist

theory has foundered whenever it has aimed at producing intellectual orthodoxy, monocausal accounts, or “final instances” of determination; it has necessarily multiplied rather than consolidated its objects, analytic frames, and venues of analysis. And feminist theory in an era of postfeminism may well face no more important question than what produces ready compliance with prevalent gender norms, including those that circulate women’s subordination.

Critical Theory is thus a model both for the complexity and self-reflexivity feminist theory requires and also offers elegant insights for contemporary work. The essays in this volume make clear that feminist theory can partake of the intellectual expanse and riches of Frankfurt School thought in a variety of ways and on its own terms, leaving the anachronisms aside, or in certain cases, revisiting them to unsettle our own intellectual complacencies. Even where two essayists have mined the same text for their work (Robyn Marasco and Elisabeth Bronfen each return to *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* to plumb aporias in contemporary political thought), both the political purposes and the interpretations vary in exciting ways. The different appropriations of Critical Theory for a common field of inquiry (Jessica Benjamin’s examination of the problematic of recognition and “the intersubjective third” in Kleinian psychoanalysis and Rebecca Comay’s juxtaposition of Adorno and Lacan to reflect on the Kantianism of Sadean practice) also hints at the range in Critical Theory’s potential contributions to contemporary explorations of the relationship of the psychic and the social. Karyn Ball’s enlistment of Benjamin to address her own “longing for the material” in the wake of poststructuralism and her struggle with and against “trauma studies” models a call and response to theoretical self-reflexivity between Critical Theory then and now. Together, these essays revisit this rich body of thought not to ground a new feminist theory in the questions of a critical theory gone by, but to renew those questions in light of the present and at the same time to open the present by way of revisiting and refiguring the past. Nothing less has been the historical task of critical thinking, and the critical task of historical thinking, from Marx through Adorno and Benjamin.

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