Critical Theory

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In the humanities, the term critical theory has had many meanings in different historical contexts. From the end of World War II through the 1960s, the term signified the use of critical and theoretical approaches within major disciplines of the humanities such as art history, literary studies, and more broadly, cultural studies. From the 1970s, the term entered into the rapidly evolving area of film and media studies. Critical theory took on at the same time a more specialized sense describing the work of the Frankfurt School that itself rapidly spread through many disciplines of the humanities and social sciences in the English-speaking world from the 1970s on.

While critical theories were entering the humanities in throughout the world, a proliferation of new theoretical approaches from France, often associated with structuralism and then poststructuralism and postmodern theory, generated new discourses that were also assimilated to the cover concept of critical theory. Moreover, different groups such as women, gays and lesbians, and people of color developed as well specific critical theories within a wide range of disciplines from the 1970s to the present. The situation was further complicated when many of the theoretical discourses (such as deconstruction) were associated with philosophy, which in turn gave rise in the humanities to a tendency to speak of Theory with a capital T when describing the proliferation of critical theories and methods and to privilege them as a necessary instrument of criticism.

To sort out this complex trajectory of the concept of "critical theory," I will first broadly sketch the role of critical theory in the various fields of the humanities, then present the Frankfurt School version of critical theory, and finally engage the mutations of critical theory from the theory proliferation of the 1960s and 1970s, the rise of the posts, the interconnection of critical theory with groups associated with new social movements, its connection with philosophy, and the emergence of Theory as a privileged discourse. While this narrative is partly historical, it is mainly analytical, for in the contemporary context, different people use the term critical theory in diverse and contested ways following various of the models and stages of the discourse that I delineate. Thus there is not one single or dominant understanding of critical theory in the university today.

I.   Critical Theory in the Disciplines

As Jurgen Habermas has documented (1989), during the Enlightenment various modes of political, literary, and cultural criticism emerged from the salons, public houses, and other sites of the bourgeois public sphere, leading to the production of journals and books that discussed the latest cultural fashions and political trends. Major 18th and 19th century writers like Swift, Pope, Baudelaire, and Poe practiced forms of criticism, as did 19th century novelists like Jane Austin, Charlotte Bronte, Charles Dickens, and George Elliot.

Critical discourse in a broad range of cultural criticism developed from philosophical and critical responses to genres of art and evaluative responses to specific art works (see Literary Criticism). From Aristotle's "Poetics" through Matthew Arnold and F.R. Leavis in the literary arts, critical aesthetic theories attempted to define the key features of genres and to distinguish what constituted artistic excellence and experience.

Critical approaches in literature, art, music, dance, and the arts began emerging as a specific discipline in the 19th century throughout the Western world. In the first decades of the 20th century, critics like Georg Lukacs, Ernst Bloch, and Walter Benjamin began applying Marxist theory to a broad range of the arts. Freudians like Ernest Jones began using psychoanalytic theory to study culture, while Herbert Read deployed Jungian theory. By the 1950s, a variety of schools of critical theory began using major theoretical discourses of the period to discuss, analyze, interpret, and critique the arts. There was a reaction against the theory turn, however, from both those who wanted a more scientific approach to the aesthetic work such as I.A. Richards, or from those who wanted a more empathetic immersion in cultural artifacts such as some members of North American "new criticism," who advocated close readings of literary texts without what they saw as the blinders of theory.

Some critical theories and methods like Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, and semiotics were taken up in the new disciplines of film and media theory in the 1960s, which also developed its own autonomous discourses and methods. Critical approaches to mass communication and culture were first, however, developed by the Frankfurt School that generated its own concept of critical theory.

II. The Frankfurt School and Critical Theory

"Critical theory" stood as a code for the quasi-Marxist theory of society of a group of interdisciplinary social theorists collectively known as the Frankfurt School. The term "Frankfurt School" refers to the work of members of the *Institut für Sozialforschung* (Institute for Social Research) that was established in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1923 as the first Marxist-oriented research centre affiliated with a major German university. Max Horkheimer became director of the institute in 1930, and gathered around him many talented theorists, including Erich Fromm, Franz Neumann, Herbert Marcuse and T. W. Adorno. Under Horkheimer, the Institute sought to develop an interdisciplinary social theory that could serve as an instrument of social transformation. The work of this era was a synthesis of philosophy and social theory, combining sociology, psychology, cultural studies and political economy, among other disciplines.

In a series of studies carried out in the 1930s, the Institute for Social Research developed theories of monopoly capitalism, the new industrial state, the role of technology and giant corporations in monopoly capitalism, the key roles of mass culture and communication in reproducing contemporary societies, and the decline of democracy and of the individual. Critical theory drew alike on Hegelian dialectics, Marxian theory, Nietzsche, Freud, Max Weber, and other trends of contemporary thought. It articulated theories that were to occupy the centre of social theory for the next several decades. Rarely, if ever, has such a talented group of interdisciplinary intellectuals come together under the auspices of one institute. They managed to keep alive radical social theory during a difficult historical era and provided aspects of a neo-Marxian theory of the changed social reality and new historical situation in the transition from competitive capitalism to monopoly capitalism.

During the Second World War, the Institute split up due to pressures of the war. Adorno and Horkheimer moved to California, while Lowenthal, Marcuse, Neumann and others worked for the US government as their contribution in the fight against fascism. Adorno and Horkheimer worked on their collective book Dialectic of Enlightenment (1947 [trans. 1972]), which discussed how reason and enlightenment in the contemporary era turned into their opposites, transforming what promised to be instruments of truth and liberation into tools of domination. In

their scenario, science and technology had created horrific tools of destruction and death, culture was commodified into products of a mass-produced culture industry, and democracy terminated into fascism, in which masses chose despotic and demagogic rulers. Moreover, in their extremely pessimistic vision, individuals were oppressing their own bodies and renouncing their own desires as they assimilated and made their own repressive beliefs and allowed themselves to be instruments of labor and war.

After the Second World War, Adorno, Horkheimer and Pollock returned to Frankfurt to re-establish the institute in Germany, while Lowenthal, Marcuse and others remained in the USA. In Germany, Adorno, Horkheimer and their associates published a series of books and became a dominant intellectual current. At this time, the term "Frankfurt School" became widespread as a characterization of their version of interdisciplinary social research and of the particular critical theory developed by Adorno, Horkheimer, and their associates. They engaged in frequent methodological and substantive debates with other social theories, most notably "the positivism dispute," where they criticized more empirical and quantitative approaches to theory and defended their own more speculative and critical brand of theory.

The Frankfurt School eventually became best known for their critical theories of "the totally administered society," or "one-dimensional society," which analyzed the increasing power of capitalism over all aspects of social life and the development of new forms of social control. During the 1950s, however, there were divergences between the work of the Institute relocated in Frankfurt and the developing theories of Fromm, Lowenthal, Marcuse and others who did not return to Germany, which were often at odds with both the current and earlier work of Adorno and Horkheimer. Thus it is misleading to consider the work of various critical theorists during the post-war period as members of a monolithic Frankfurt School. Whereas there were both a shared sense of purpose and collective work on interdisciplinary critical theory from 1930 to the early 1940s, thereafter critical theorists frequently diverge, and during the 1950s and 1960s the term the "Frankfurt School" can really be applied only to the work of the institute in Germany under Horkheimer and Adorno.

III. From Structuralism to Poststructuralism and Beyond

The development of structuralism and poststructuralism in France in the 1950s and 1960s and rapid global transmissions contributed to development of an interdisciplinary mode of theory that became prevalent in the humanities. Structuralism is often associated with French anthropologist Levi-Straus whose studies of myth, culture, and language discerned a binary structure in myth, for example, between nature and culture or the raw and the cooked. For Levi-Straus, culture was articulated into systems that could be described with the precision and force of a science.

Structuralism spread through the human sciences in the 1960s and 1970s moving from Levi-Straus' anthropology and study of myth, to structuralist theories of language (often combined with semiotics), to structuralist Marxism that produced structuralist accounts of the capitalist economy (Althusser) and state (Poulantzas).

The human sciences were conceptualized by structuralists as self-contained systems with their own grammar, rules, and structuring binary oppositions. Texts were seen as a structured network of signs determined not by what they referred to so much as through their differential relation to other signs. Structuralist critical theory thus focused on detecting the system of binary oppositions through which textual systems were structured, and delineated oppositions between

synchronic and diachronic arrangements, or <u>langue/parole</u>, with the former referring to the synchronic social system of language and the latter referring to specific speech at a particular time (see structuralism).

Whereas structuralism had ambitions of attaining the status of a super science, which could arbitrate among competing truth claims and provide a foundational discipline, poststructuralism challenged any single disciplines' claim to primary status and promoted more interdisciplinary modes of theory. Poststructuralism turned to history, politics, and an active and creative human subject, away from the more ahistorical, scientific, and objectivist modes of thought in structuralism.

The poststructuralist moment was a particularly fertile one as important theorists like Barthes, Lyotard, and Foucault, wrote new poststructuralist works and younger theorists like Derrida, Baudrillard, Virilio, and others entered into productive periods. The poststructuralist turn was evident in the famous 1966 conference on "Critical Languages and the Sciences of Man" at Johns Hopkins University, which featured an important intervention by Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (in Derrida 1978: 278ff). Rejecting structuralist theories of language, Derrida stressed the instability and excess of meaning in language, as well as the ways that heterogeneity and difference were generated. Derrida also questioned the binary opposition between nature and culture upon which Levi-Strauss had erected his system, thus undermining a certain glorification of the human sciences in the humanities and opening the discipline for more appreciation of philosophy, literature, and less scientific modes of discourse.

Derrida became one of the most prolific writers of his generation and generated great interest in philosophy throughout the humanities, but also crossed boundaries between disciplines and contributed to both a proliferation of critical theories and more interdisciplinary humanities. Derrida's deconstruction took apart philosophical and closed scientific systems, showing that their foundational beliefs affirmed one side or another of the binary oppositions, say nature as with Rousseau, or culture as with cultural anthropologists who described the constructed nature of society and culture (a theme that would move into poststructuralism and many of the humanities).

Poststructuralism stressed the openness and heterogeneity of the text, its embedded in history and desire, its political and ideological dimensions, and its excess of meaning. This led critical theory to more multilevel interpretive methods and more radical political readings and critique. Foucault described how texts and discourses are embedded in power; Edward Said articulated the "orientalism" of western-centric ideology and construction of non-western cultures in both colonial and postcolonial discourses; and feminists described how patriarchy and relations of totalitarianism and subordination are inscribed in texts.

Following the poststructuralist moment of the late 1960s and 1970s, there were a proliferation of new theoretical moments of critical theory that connected with new social movements, producing a proliferation of "posts" and theory wars from the 1970s to the present. Poststructuralism and deconstruction were taken up in idiosyncratic ways by French theorist Jean Baudrillard. His early work analyzed the "system of objects" and "political economy of the sign" in the media and consumer society (1968) and (1973), showing how the system of commodities and consumer values were organized in a hierarchal system. Yet by the mid-1970s, Baudrillard entered a deconstructive and poststructuralist phase taking apart in sequence the claims of Marxism and political economy, Freud and psychoanalysis, Foucault, and other forms of theory. For Baudrillard, the consumer and media society was generating novel forms of sign and

signification, technology and cultural spaces, which produced a break with modernity itself. While modern societies, he argued, were organized around production and political economy, postmodern societies were organized around technology and generated new forms of culture, experience and subjectivities.

In Le Differend (1978), Jean-Francois Lyotard valorized those voices that had been suppressed or muted in social and academic spheres. He advocated "the end of grand narratives" in the humanities and politics, and the production of small "minor narratives" and microanalysis. This theme was also taken up by Deleuze and Guattari who multiplied a dazzling range of critical theories to engage salient cultural, social, economic, and political phenomena of the day (1978).

French poststructuralist critical theory is extremely hard to categorize as it combines social theory, cultural and political commentary, philosophy, literary stylistics, and many social and human sciences in their work, crossing boundaries between academic disciplines and fields. This interdisciplinary focus links French critical theory to Frankfurt School critical theory and to certain types of feminism and other cultural theories that practice "border crossing" (i.e. cross the borders between disciplines and traditional division of topics and academic labor).

The proliferation of theories also produced a tendency to use the term "Theory" (with a capital T) to describe the wealth of conflicting critical theories. In this sense, Theory replaces philosophy as the most abstract and general mode of theoretical discourse. Theory has emerged as an autonomous enterprise in many academic disciplines, giving rise to a tendency to do work in Theory, which engages various critical theories, problems, and concepts, or provides diagnosis of the nature and function of theory itself in the academic disciplines.

Critical theory turned to a "politics of representation" during the 1960s and 1970s. This enterprise involved analysis of the ways that images, discourses, and narratives of a wide range of cultural forms from philosophy and the sciences to the advertising and entertainment of media culture were embedded in texts and reproduced social domination and subordination. British cultural studies, for instance, showed how problematic representations of gender, race, class, sexuality, and other identity markers were found throughout cultural forms. Cultural studies developed different critical theories and methods to analyze the production of texts, their polysemic meanings, and their complex uses and effects.

Critical theories were also developed within feminism, critical race theory, gay and lesbian theory, and other groupings associated with new political movements, making critical theory part of political struggle inside and outside the university. Feminists, for instance, demonstrated how gender bias infected disciplines from philosophy to literary study and was embedded in texts ranging from classics of the canon to the mundane artifacts of popular culture. In similar ways, critical race theorists demonstrated how racial bias permeated cultural artifacts, while gay and lesbian theorists demonstrated sexual bias.

These critical theories also stressed giving voice to groups and individuals marginalized in the dominant forms of Western and then global culture. Critical theory began going global in the post-1960s disseminations of critical discourses. Postcolonial theory in various parts of the world developed particular critical theories as a response to colonial oppression and to the hopes of national liberation. Frantz Fanon in Algeria, Wole Soyinka in Nigeria, Gabriel Marquez in Latin America, Arrundi Roy in India, and others all gave voice to specific experiences and articulated critical theories that expanded its global and multicultural reach.

The past decades has thus witnessed a proliferation of critical theory to the extent that the very concept is a contested terrain. At present, conflicting models of critical theory are utilized

by different individuals and groups in various fields of inquiry in different parts of the world. There is also a tendency to combine critical theories in one's work, following a recommendation by Foucault in the 1970s that many have taken up. Others who took up the anti-theory discourse of Rorty and various critics of Theory have called for rigorous empirical and contextual engagement with topics and subject matter. Critical theory is thus a multidimensional term that continues to take on differing connotations and uses and is embedded in many different disciplines and debates in the contemporary moment.

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