

Critical Theory, Poststructuralism and the Philosophy of Liberation

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In a 1986 article, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," Fredric Jameson concludes his study by contrasting the "situational consciousness" of first and third worlds in terms of Hegel's master/slave dialectic. On Hegel's theory, the slave "whats what reality and the resistance of matter really are" while the master "is condemned to idealism. Elaborating on this analysis, Jameson writes:

"It strikes me that we Americans, we masters of the world, are in something of that very same position. The view from the top is epistemologically crippling, and reduces its subjects to the illusions of a host of fragmented subjectivities ... This placeless individuality, this structural idealism which affords us the luxury of the Sartrean blink, offers a welcome escape from the 'nightmare of history,' but at the same time it condemns our culture to psychologism and the 'projections' of private subjectivity. all of this is denied to third world culture, which must be situational and materialist" (Jameson 1986, p. 85).

This passage strikes me as providing a useful opening to discuss the relationship between modern Western philosophy and the new Philosophy of Liberation which has emerged above all from Latin America. One of the insights of the Philosophy of Liberation is that Western Philosophy is the philosophy of the center, of the metropolises, of white European males. **Its** concepts, problems, and problematics are identified with philosophy itself and other perspectives, other positions, are condemned to the margins (Dussel, pp.). On this view, Western Philosophy is the philosophy of the masters of the world, of the dominant countries, cultures, and class. Is the Philosophy of Liberation, then, -- pursuing Hegel's master-slave metaphor -- the philosophy of slaves, of the dominated, of the oppressed and if so what particular insights does this perspective reveal that is lost to western philosophy?

Perspectivalism itself emerges as one particular insight open to the oppressed, to the Philosophy of Liberation. The oppressed have at least the possibility of coming to know that the views of the masters rationalize and serve their interests of domination, that dominant philosophical positions are those of a particular class with its interests, specific perspectives, and limitations. In short, the oppressed *know* that dominant ideas, the ideas of the ruling class, the dominant ideas of a culture, Western Philosophy, are *ideology*. In this way, the oppressed and the Philosophy of Liberation gain critical perspectives on the thought of the center, on the master discourses of the West, that may not be accessible to those of the center -- or which are accessible only with great difficulty (i.e. Marx came to formulate the concept of ideology and Nietzsche developed a perspectival philosophy).

Secondly, the Philosophy of Liberation argues that Western Philosophy is idealist and subjectivist, is the articulation of a region and a class which wants to idealize its system of domination, which wants to denigrate and occlude material needs, suffering, oppression, and is thus not sufficiently or correctly *materialist*. The Philosophy of Liberation suggests that Western Philosophy is the philosophy of a dominating subjectivity, of a subjectivity that wants to

dominate nature, other people, and in its more extreme versions the totality of being itself. Once again, the situational perspectives of the PL allows them to gain powerful insights into the idealism and subjectivism of WP. When one experiences oppression and material deprivation one more easily grasps the importance of material needs, of the material dimension, and can more easily detect the rationalizing, idealizing, and ideological functions of idealist discourse. When one is reduced to an object of DD one can more easily grasp the dialectics of subjectification and perceive the dynamics of dominating subjectivity which might help produce critical opposition to the PP of subjectivity itself as an imperialist attempt of the subject to dominate the world.

Critical Theory and PL

Now, at this point, I want to suggest that there are interesting similarities as well as differences between a specific current of contemporary Western Philosophy and the Philosophy of Liberation. In particular, I want to delineate some of the similarities and differences between the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School and the Philosophy of Liberation developed in Latin America by Enrique Dussel and others. I argue that both traditions center on a dialectic of domination and liberation. Both criticize mainstream philosophy and social theory and both offer progressive alternatives to established modes of thought and discourse. Critical Theory, however, tends to be somewhat ethnocentric and projects the perspectives of white European males. Philosophy of Liberation, by contrast, explicitly centers theory on the perspectives of the oppressed and give voice to groups and individuals usually excluded from Western philosophy. They sacrifice, however, the universal dimension secured by Critical Theory which is arguably necessary for the project of liberation. I conclude with some reflections concerning a possible synthesis between Critical Theory and philosophy of liberation.

Dialectics of Domination and Liberation

Critical Theory and Philosophy of Liberation both operate with a dialectic of domination and liberation. Both specify forces of domination and strategies of liberation. The differences in their particular perspectives, I would submit are primarily a product of the differences in their historical situation and the differing forces of domination which they faced, while the similarities result from similar threats to human well-being faced by both tendencies.

Critical Theory: liberation from state and monopoly capitalism; from fascism; from consumer capitalism

Philosophy of Liberation: liberation from imperialism; from domination of the center; frequently from fascism and capitalism but more imperialist capitalism, capital as colonializing force than consumer capitalism -- though this too is arguably a force of domination in the TW as well different focus in terms of critique of domination: imperialism/ consumer capitalis

Similarities: both attack domination of nature; both attack instrumental rationality and instrumental modes of thought as instruments of DD; both attack the PP of Subjectivity; both put a major emphasis on needs and suffering; both

In short, both are materialist, critical, and emancipatory theories which attack Western Philosophy as part of an apparatus of domination.

This leads me to make some critical remarks on the critique of Western Philosophy developed by Philosophy of Liberation.

excerpt from my review of Dussel's *Philosophy of Liberation*

One of the more provocative, and problematical, features of the Philosophy of Liberation review is its privileging of the experiences, perceptions, and struggles of the periphery and those oppressed within the center. For instance, Dussel writes: "It is only in the periphery--in Asia, Africa, and Latin America--that a regeneration of the person-to-nature relationship can begin to take place--if it is not already too late" (116). Or throughout he argues that the ethics and aesthetics and popular culture of the oppressed should be taken as the foundation and point of departure for a philosophy of liberation (124ff.).

This raises the question of the scope and universality of a philosophy of liberation. If a philosophy of liberation is only an expression of a particular region of the world and a particular class of people, then it is obviously a partial, limited, and restrictive philosophy, thus surrendering philosophy's attempt to provide universal perspectives on human beings, their needs and situation, and potential liberation. To be sure, the universality of Western philosophy is for the most part a false universality that takes the cultural experience, categories, and theories of one part of the world which are generalized and projected onto a universal truth, beauty, goodness, godhead, etc. But is not the project of liberation essentially tied to universality? Are not the fundamental features of the utopia of justice, equality, freedom, well-being, etc., that they apply to all human beings regardless of race, sex, nationality, etc.? To be sure, liberal rights have often served as ideologies for oppressive societies (indeed: where has this not been the case?), or as masks for existing inequalities and injustice, but do they not at least point to universal ideals of a good society and human liberation?

Dussel uses terms like justice and freedom in this more universalist discourse and might well argue for the potential universality of a philosophy of liberation. Indeed, Dussel's philosophy is cosmopolitan and draws liberally on European philosophy. His own work shows that creative syntheses between the thought of the center and periphery are possible. But it is not clear if the philosophy of liberation does strive for the status of universal philosophy or is content to remain the expression of a specific culture and class of the oppressed. Now Dussel might argue that it would be premature to call for universality or universal philosophy, and that the oppressive existence of currently hegemonic societies and discourses and the need for their overthrow do not yet permit such a project. But it seems to me that one of the tasks of a philosophy of liberation is precisely to mediate between the legitimate claims that discourses be historically specific and of immediate political relevance and more traditional demands for universality. It seems to me that Dussel, at least in the book under review, has not paid sufficient attention to this dilemma.

In this regard, I would suggest that claims that philosophy should be a universal discourse of truth as opposed to claims that it can only be an expression of a particular people, or class, within a particular culture can and should be deconstructed. That is, in some contexts and for some tasks philosophy *should* strive for universality, whereas in other contexts it is perfectly appropriate for

philosophy to be informed by a (politically partial and ideally progressive) particularity. Perhaps in the current world-historical context, it is more important that regions like Latin America develop philosophies that do express their particularly experiences, needs, perceptions, and struggles for liberation against the imperialist and neo-imperialist domination that has been their fate for centuries. In this context, one hesitates to criticize the philosophy of liberation from the perspectives of the center, as philosophy in other parts of the world may have quite different tasks, social functions, and goals than in the U.S. or European countries.

Indeed, certain objections raised to Dussel's theorizing, and to the project of the philosophy of liberation, by philosophers in the United States seem to me purely ideological. For example, a report on an American Philosophical Association panel on Dussel's philosophy of liberation published in a bulletin from the Association for Philosophy and Liberation indicates that philosophers in the U.S. argued that Dussel's method of deriving categories was circular and complained that he combined metaphysics and ethics in a supposedly objectionable way. Other questions included whether the voice of the oppressed should have special authority in metaphysics, and one cited an alleged "prejudice against 'blonde faces'" and wondered why he neglected to discuss oppression in places like Northern Ireland or the Middle East.

Such criticisms appear to me dubious on both philosophical and political grounds. The conceptual structure of Dussel's thought is systematic and rather Hegelian, so naturally his concepts will be interconnected and implicated in each other (such thought is only "circular" for one who knows nothing of dialectics). And it is fundamental to a philosophy of liberation that boundaries between metaphysics, ethics, and politics be broken down. Is the desire of Western philosophers to retain such traditional boundaries related to the desires of multinationals and imperialist politicians to keep the boundaries of their markets and political spheres of influence intact? Is the logic of domination characteristic of much Western thought related to the structures and needs of systems of domination in the West? Such are the sort of questions that a philosophy of liberation attempts to pose and which we would be well advised to consider ourselves.

And criticisms that Dussel is prejudiced against "blond faces" fails to perceive his desire to carry through a transvaluation of the categories of ethics, aesthetics, and politics of the oppressed. But in defending Dussel here against his critics, I do not intend to uncritically affirm Dussel's theses or ideas. All philosophy is an expression of a particular person's experience and history, and is limited by the experiences and history of that person. For instance, in the section on erotics, Dussel seems to me to root human sexuality in a *natural* relation between man and woman and to ground institutions like heterosexuality, marriage, procreation, and child-raising in a discourse of nature, even suggesting that abortion is against nature (84ff.). These views strike me as the expression of experiences in a certain culture and not as universal truths--though Dussel's attacks on patriarchy, on macho culture, and commitment to women's liberation is no doubt an extremely enlightened stance within masculinist Latin American cultures.

Others within the center may find his claim for the primacy of politics within philosophy objectionable or may object to his use of marxist categories like totality, dialectics, ideology, class, and the primacy of the economic. But I myself find the articulations and mediation between theory and practice the most unsatisfactory part of *Philosophy of Liberation*. Here Dussel's book bears the traits of exile philosophy, cut off from an actual political movement of

which s/he is an active participant. That is, the fact that a philosopher is in exile, cut off from political movements of their own countries, often forces one to write at a more abstract and theoretical level and to eschew the pleasure of relating one's thought to immediate political struggles in which one is involved. Thus, Dussel's *Philosophy of Liberation* is highly expository, didactic, often scholastic, and extremely systematic--though it is also informed by passion and full of extremely acute insights and challenging ideas. But it is not really a political tract or primer on liberation. Perhaps a philosopher should not really be expected to write such books. Perhaps the practice of liberation should be the product of those oppressed struggling for their freedom and dignity. Perhaps all the philosopher of liberation can and should do is to struggle with, to support, and defend those in struggle, as well as to attack their enemies and the system of bondage and domination that must be eradicated if humanity is to live a life of freedom and dignity.

But revolutionary philosophy has frequently done more. Dussel, incorrectly in my view, attacks Ernst Bloch and Herbert Marcuse as philosophers of negativity whose dialectic is primarily critical. In fact, both of these philosophers not only developed categories of hope, liberation, and revolution but projected visions and sketches of what Bloch called "concrete utopia" and Marcuse described as "alternatives" (See my book *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism*). Should not a philosophy of liberation concern itself more with the alternative, the new society, that is the other of the existing society of domination? Or is this the task of people in struggle, of revolutionary practice, and not the philosopher who perhaps should content her/himself with the more modest task of articulating the goals of people in struggle and defending these struggles against criticism and attack. What, indeed, is the role of philosophy in the practice of liberation? I think that those of us in the advanced capitalist metropolises must confess that we do not really have good answers to these questions and that attempts in both the center and periphery to address these questions point to the relevance and importance of the kind of philosophy of liberation that Dussel and others are attempting to develop.

Philosophy of Liberation and Critical Theory: A New Synthesis?

At this point, and to conclude, I think that the possibilities for a productive synthesis of Critical Theory and Philosophy of Liberation emerge. Critical Theory and Philosophy of Liberation share critical perspectives on existing systems of domination and share as well a passion for liberation, for delineating emancipatory alternatives to existing societies. As I mentioned earlier, their critiques of domination supplement each other, bringing in complementary focuses: Philosophy of Liberation provides a more macrological critique of imperialism, of systems of world domination -- inexplicably absent from most of Critical Theory with the exception of occasional comments by Marcuse in the 1960s -- whereas Critical Theory provides more micrological focus on the ways that the culture industries, patriarchal socialization, and the hegemony of capital produce commodification, reification, and the end of the individual.

Yet they also provide complementary perspectives on liberation. Philosophy of Liberation articulates a dimension of liberation neglected for the most part by Critical Theory: liberation from racial oppression, from oppression and domination from a Western --capitalist, patriarchal, racist, and imperialist -- system of domination. Although Critical Theory opposes such phenomena as well, it tends to be somewhat ethnocentric focusing on liberation within Western

capitalist societies, liberation from the specific forms of domination within these capitalist societies and though the more radical Critical Theorists, like Adorno and Marcuse, called for the abolition of the capitalist system and wanted total social restructuring, they rarely focused on the

One obvious way to articulate the differences in perspective between Critical Theory and Philosophy of Liberation is to indicate that one, Critical Theory, projects a "first world" perspective while Philosophy of Liberation assumes a "third world" perspective. This distinction is not completely desirable, however, for such generalizations occlude the fact that in both the FW and third world there is many conflicting differences of perspective and are differences within the FW and third world that might be as fundamental as differences between the spheres in general. Moreover, in another sense, we do all live in one world and while we certainly want to articulate differences we also want to explore commonalities and this strikes me as a potential beneficial contribution of Western Philosophy's universalizing project.

The brings me to my conclusion. I would submit that both the Philosophy of Liberation and Critical Theory has powerful emancipatory perspectives and a discourse of liberation which can easily be synthesized. I would certainly like to discuss further differences in the perspectives on liberation and hear my colleagues criticisms of Critical Theory but I tend to believe that the perspectives of Critical Theory and the Philosophy of Liberation are compatible and might produce a new synthesis which could advance the cause of liberation in both the center and the periphery, in the first, second and third world and might well help produce one world where we can live together in peace and mutual respect and understanding. Thank you.