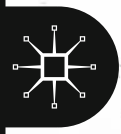

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY AND PUBLIC PURPOSE

Critical Theory Today

On the Limits and Relevance of an Intellectual Tradition

Edited by
Denis C. Bosseau
Tom Bunyard

palgrave
macmillan

Political Philosophy and Public Purpose

Series Editor
Michael J. Thompson, William Paterson University, New York, NY, USA

This series offers books that seek to explore new perspectives in social and political criticism. Seeing contemporary academic political theory and philosophy as largely dominated by hyper-academic and overly-technical debates, the books in this series seek to connect the politically engaged traditions of philosophical thought with contemporary social and political life. The idea of philosophy emphasized here is not as an aloof enterprise, but rather a publicly-oriented activity that emphasizes rational reflection as well as informed praxis.

Denis C. Bosseau · Tom Bunyard
Editors

Critical Theory Today

On the Limits and Relevance of an Intellectual Tradition

palgrave
macmillan

Editors
Denis C. Bosseau
Social & Political Thought
University of Sussex
Brighton, East Sussex, UK

Tom Bunyard
Humanities
University of Brighton
Brighton, East Sussex, UK

ISSN 2524-714X ISSN 2524-7158 (electronic)
Political Philosophy and Public Purpose
ISBN 978-3-031-07637-4 ISBN 978-3-031-07638-1 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-07638-1

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Acknowledgements

Many of the essays collected in this volume were initially produced as conference papers. They were delivered at an event titled 'Critical Theory in (a Time of) Crisis' that was held at the University of Brighton in November 2019. This event was funded by the Mind Association, and it was organised collaboratively by the Centre for Applied Philosophy, Politics and Ethics at the University of Brighton, and by the Centre for Social and Political Thought at the University of Sussex. We are very grateful to all who attended and spoke at this event, and to the Mind Association for funding it. Particular thanks are due to Sophie-Grace Chappell at Mind, and to Bob Brecher and Ian Sinclair at the University of Brighton for helping us to organise the conference. Bob's and Ian's advice and assistance were invaluable. We would also like to thank Gordon Finlayson and Darrow Schecter at the University of Sussex, and Michael J Thompson for inviting us to collect and present these essays as part of the Political Philosophy and Public Purpose book series.

About This Book

This collection of essays grew from a conference titled 'Critical Theory in (a Time of) Crisis', which was held at the University of Brighton in November 2019. The parentheses in the title were intended to capture the event's dual focus. Firstly, we wanted to ask if critical theory, in its contemporary incarnations, was genuinely capable of responding to a world that seemed to be marked with a multitude of impending and ongoing crises; and secondly, we also wanted to suggest that if critical theory proved to be limited in this regard, then it too might be faced with some kind of crisis. The questions and interests that prompted the conference ought to be contextualised. In 2019, Brexit and Trump's election were only three years in the past. 'Post-truth' was still a prominent and relatively new buzzword within the liberal media, and commentators of various kinds were busily trying to explain something called 'populism'. Demagoguery, authoritarianism and new iterations of the political right seemed to be on the rise, as were concerns regarding the ways in which new media technologies might facilitate such political phenomena. All of this was taking place against a background of gross inequalities, unsustainable economic systems, and looming environmental disaster. Taken individually, none of these issues were particularly new; but when taken together, they seemed to indicate that the various pathologies of neoliberalism had engendered a new and peculiarly fraught historical moment. It seemed reasonable to ask whether contemporary critical theory was able to address that moment with any kind of efficacy. Perhaps, we wanted to

ask, it might be limited in some ways, due to the degree to which it had evolved as a means of responding to older social formations; perhaps it might itself be marked by a crisis of relevance, due to its limited purchase on the various crises of our times.

These questions were informed by a further concern, which can be introduced by way of reference to Max Horkheimer's seminal Traditional and Critical Theory essay of 1937. Traditional theory, Horkheimer claimed, is characterised by the use of largely unquestioned theoretical structures that produce results suited to the needs and nature of a given social context; critical theory, on the other hand, addresses the naturalised assumptions and presuppositions that structure that same social context. But to what extent has critical theory, today, become just such a mode of traditional theory? If we are to consider its contemporary ability to address issues such as those noted above, should we first consider the ways in which its institutional framing might inflect that ability? After all, it now tends to reside almost solely within a university system shaped by instrumental demands (in the UK, we have the REF, the TEF, student fees, etc.), and it tends also to be produced and disseminated in a manner that accords with those demands. Moreover—and this brings us back to questions concerning its capacity to address the present—its approaches and practices have, arguably, become defined by the catchwords and paradigms of the past. That seems odd, given critical theory's history of innovation. The classical work of the Frankfurt School developed against the back-drop of rising fascism; French post-structuralism evolved in the 60s, and took on its defining forms in the aftermath of 1968; the post-Marxism of the 1990s responded to the fall of 'actually existing communism', and to the impasses of the traditional Left. All responded to their circumstances in a manner that entailed a break with the intellectual trends of their day (positivism, phenomenology, humanism, Hegelianism, classical Marxism, etc.). Does it follow that contemporary work in critical theory should follow suit? To what degree is it doing so already? Or can find newfound salience be found in older material?

As indicated above, the conference was very much of its moment, and that moment must, of course, be located prior to the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. The latter's drastic nature, the radical break from the everyday that it entailed, and the various responses that it provoked, all underscored many of the questions that informed the conference. The various responses provided by the speakers at that 2019 conference—responses that have since been developed, re-worked and expanded, and

which are presented here as book chapters—thus still serve as valuable contributions towards assessing the merits and salience of contemporary critical theory, and indeed towards assessing its ability to conceive and address its own historical moment. Some charge aspects of contemporary critical theory with having lost its critical bite. Others point out deep flaws within the entire tradition of Frankfurt School theory. Several contributors argue for the ongoing relevance of older writers within that tradition, or for new approaches to their work. Some point out shortcomings within prominent theoretical material and propose means of addressing those limits, whilst others tackle aspects of modern cultural politics, and take up some of problems and phenomena referred to in the paragraphs above.

The conference from which this book grew was an early career and postgraduate event, and most of our contributors are comparatively new figures within their respective specialist areas. We hope that the collection is thus able to provide a platform for new authors within a field that often tends to be dominated by more established voices.

The first essay in the collection is Michael J. Thompson's 'On the Crisis of Critique: Reformulating the Project of Critical Theory'. Thompson's text sets out the stakes for much of what follows in the subsequent essays. His chapter argues that contemporary critical theory has become 'domesticated', due to the degree to which it has become detached from a serious study of the ways in which social structures may impact upon conscious subjectivities in ways that render them amenable to manipulation. Thompson finds particular fault with work conducted along the lines of Jürgen Habermas' and Axel Honneth's emphases on 'discourse', 'communication', 'justification' and 'recognition'. Thompson argues that these approaches need to be periodised, insofar as attention should be paid to their emergence from the period of welfare state capitalism of the 1960s and 70s. His chapter contends that these theories can seem somewhat naïve today, given the degree to which our own context has been shaped by decades of neoliberal restructuring. Greater attention needs to be paid, he argues, to the ways in which the recognising subjectivities that these theories rely upon are shaped by the rampant commodification and new technologies that characterise the present context.

Thompson's essay is followed by Muhmmad Qasim's 'An Anticolonial Deficit in Frankfurt School Critical Theory: A Need for a Decolonial Turn'. Like Thompson, Qasim charges contemporary critical theory with being insufficiently critical, but he does so for a different reason. Despite its preoccupation with forms of domination, Qasim argues, Frankfurt

School critical theory, and indeed much of the work that continues to follow from it, has failed to address its own Eurocentric blindness towards forms of colonial domination. Qasim makes this case via an extended discussion of Amy Allen's engagement with this issue. For Allen, Adorno's work offers resources that could be used to remedy Frankfurt School critical theory's colonial shortcomings. Qasim, however, contends that this reliance on Adorno reflects an inherent conservatism, and he presents it as a Eurocentric critique of Eurocentrism. His essay then goes on to demonstrate the broader significance of such failings.

The third essay in the collection is similarly concerned with the limitations of the general field of contemporary critical theory, but it focusses on the latter's institutional setting. David Gould's 'Critical Condition' asks what impact the bureaucratic and instrumentalising nature of the modern university might have on the production of critical theory. Gould discusses the various pressures and demands that are now imposed upon academics and students and argues that critical theory's current integument within the neoliberal university poses a fundamental problem for those who work with this material.

The next chapters focus on aspects of contemporary critical social theory. In 'Critical Theory, Political Modernity and Sociological Modernity', Darrow Schecter discusses the historical overlaps and divergences between the processes of sociological modernity—a condition marked by tendencies towards the functional differentiation and decentralised steering of social systems—and political modernity, understood as a transition from personal and openly hierarchical relations of power to centralised modern nation states. Schecter uses these concepts and the periodisation that they afford to discuss the virtues and limitations of Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action. That theory, Schecter argues, was able, for a time, to articulate a political stance capable of reconciling the systemic differentiation of sociological modernity with the state-centred governance proper to political modernity; yet its ability to do so, he contends, was specific to a particular historical period that has now come to a close. Schecter makes this case via a detailed discussion of sociological and legal theory, and contends that we need to develop new, more pertinent and timely ways of thinking about social statehood.

In 'Erich Fromm and Contemporary Critical Theory', Neal Harris and Owen Brown take up Michael J. Thompson's claim that contemporary critical theory has become 'domesticated'. Their chapter argues that Axel Honneth's emphasis on intersubjective recognition entails a limited

ability to address the subjective impact and systemic operation of deeper economic logics within society. For Harris and Brown, Erich Fromm's fusion of Marxian and Freudian ideas offers a means of responding to and resolving this flaw.

Rebecca Carson's essay is titled 'The Uses of Marx's Value-Theoretical Concept of Reproduction for Social Reproduction Theory'. Social reproduction theory emerged as a means of responding to Marx's limited account of the upkeep of individual lives and the production of labour, but Carson shows that this response can be developed and furthered by drawing on elements of the second volume of Marx's *Capital*. Through a close reading of the circuits of capitalist value, Carson's essay shows that the abstract 'life' of capital, understood in terms of the operation and growth of value, is entirely dependent upon, and interwoven with, the concrete realities of reproducing and maintaining the lives of social individuals. She proposes that this approach can help to explain the relation between non-capitalist and capitalist forms of social domination, and she suggests further that it can illuminate potential spaces of resistance.

Jacopo Condò's chapter is also concerned with the maintenance of life, but he addresses the issue via medical ethics and applied philosophy, and with a focus on a very specific problem. His chapter is titled 'Abandonment or Liberation? Anorexia, Refusal of Treatment, and the Limits of Proceduralism'. It discusses failings in prominent conceptions of rational autonomy, and it uses this to highlight flaws within theories of medical ethics concerned with the treatment of anorexia. Condò finds problems in 'proceduralism'—an approach to the assessment of rational autonomy that focusses solely on processes of decision making, and which ignores the content of those decisions—and he argues for a 'value-laden' conception of autonomy that could take account of the contents of decisions. Condò's critique of proceduralism is both careful and convincing, and the value-laden approach that he advocates is clearly relevant to critical theoretical concerns regarding the distortion of rationality.

In 'Responding to Precarity: Ethics and Mediation in Butler and Adorno', Luke Edmeads identifies problems within Judith Butler's notion of ethics, and thereby indicates difficulties for her account of 'precarity'. Through a discussion of Butler's use of Levinas, Edmeads argues that her general position on ethics, despite its purportedly antifoundational characteristics, must in fact involve a kind of foundation. Edmeads shows that this is a problem for Butler, and goes on to contend that Adorno's work offers means of remedying this issue.

Lynn Roth's chapter is titled 'Re-Thinking Social Transformation: Utopian Consciousness within Critical Theory—Covid-19, "The New Normal", and Dreams of a Better Life'. Roth's chapter argues for the contemporary relevance of Ernst Bloch's ideas about utopian thought, and it does so via a discussion of public and governmental responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. Roth finds fault with first-generation critical theory's reluctance to propose concrete alternatives to the social problems that it identified, and argues further that the work of second-generation theorists suffers from a limited ability to address flawed modes of subjectivity. Bloch's work, she proposes, is capable of remedying these issues, and she demonstrates this by looking at the ways in which conceptions of normality and of possible alternatives have emerged and been managed throughout the pandemic.

In 'Beyond Post-Truth: Critical Theory and the Possibility of Radical Enlightenment', Roderick Howlett conducts a critical examination of the notion of 'post-truth'. For Howlett, liberal alarm regarding the advent of a purportedly 'post-truth' social condition is best viewed as a flawed and symptomatic response to a deeper set of social issues. Howlett draws on Horkheimer's classic distinction between traditional and critical theory, and he proposes that many of the theoretical responses to the phenomena associated with a 'post-truth' condition can be understood as instances of traditional theory. This is due to the degree to which they tacitly accept and fail to question aspects of the social whole that engenders these phenomena. On this basis, and whilst referring to Adorno, Howlett's chapter then goes on to show that elements of 'truth' lie buried and distorted within aspects of 'post-truth' discourse.

Helge Peterson and Alex Struwe's chapter takes up some of the issues and phenomena addressed by Howlett. Their chapter is titled 'Totality, Malaise and Agitation: Towards a Critical Theory of Authoritarian Politics', and it discusses the limitations of contemporary theorisations of right-wing populism. For Peterson and Struwe, these limitations demonstrate the need for a conception of totality, and for an account of the way in which it impacts upon and inflects subjective consciousness. They argue that resources towards such an approach to modern society can be found in the social-psychological studies of fascism conducted by Adorno, Löwenthal and Gutterman.

Adorno's work is also the focus of Paul Ingram's chapter. Titled 'Adorno's Exaggerations and the Limits of Social Pathology Critique', it contends that insufficient attention has been paid to the style of Adorno's

writing. Ingram holds that this has had a negative impact on the reception of his work. For Ingram, neglect of the way in which Adorno's style of writing jars with the norms of existing society serves to neutralise the radicality of his thought, and just such neglect, he holds, has become standardised within the modern university. Ingram credits Honneth with having at least addressed Adorno's style, but he holds that Honneth has done so in a very limited way. Ingram makes this point by showing that Honneth reads Adorno through the lens of his own theory of social pathology. Working against this, Ingram points not only to the salience of Adorno's work, but also to flaws in Honneth's own writings.

The final essay in the collection is Paul Ewart's 'Towards a Post-Capitalist Horizon of Possibility: Mark Fisher and the Renewal of Critical Social Theory for the Twenty First Century'. Ewart's chapter presents an account of the reception of Frankfurt School critical theory in Britain. Drawing on both cultural and intellectual history, Ewart uses this to contextualise and frame the work of Mark Fisher, placing particular emphasis on the relation between the theoretical trends and changing political climates that mark this history. Fisher's work is thereby framed as indicative of a new approach to cultural and critical theory that might be able to address contemporary concerns with greater efficacy than some of the approaches that have been employed in the past.

Denis C. Bosseau
Tom Bunyard

Contents

Editors and Contributors

About the Editors

Denis C. Bosseau is a doctoral candidate at the Research Centre for Social & Political Thought (Philosophy) at the University of Sussex (UK) and an associate Lecturer in Philosophy at Birkbeck College, University of London. His current research focuses on Marxist responses to the question of revolutionary strategy in the light of contemporary social movements and struggles.

Tom Bunyard is a Principal Lecturer at the University of Brighton. He works in the University's Humanities subject area. Much of his past research has centred around the theoretical work of Guy Debord and the Situationist International, and his most recent book is *Debord, Time and Spectacle: Hegelian Marxism and Situationist Theory (Haymarket, 2018).*

Contributors

Owen Brown is an independent scholar. His research interests include Critical Theory, technology and psychoanalysis.

Rebecca Carson is Lecturer in Critical and Historical Studies at the Royal College of Art, London in the Art Department, where she researches Marx and Philosophy. She is also Lecturer at Goldsmiths College where

she teaches Critical Studies in the Art Department. She is the author of the book *Immanent Externalities: The Reproduction of Life in Capital* forthcoming with the Historical Materialism Book Series Brill. Her chapter 'Money as Money: Suzanne de Brunhoff's Marxist Monetary Theory' appeared in Marx Inattuale, Edizioni Efesto (2019) and her article 'Fictitious Capital and the Re-emergence of Personal Forms of Domination' in Continental Thought & Theory (2017). She is co-editor of *Politics of the Many* with Bloomsbury where she contributed the chapter 'The Marxism of Post-Marxism'. Her current research looks at Marx's philosophical use of the term 'life' in relation to Hegelian philosophy, in order to understand differentiated forms of subjection within the expanded reproduction of capital.

Jacopo Condò is a Ph.D. researcher of Philosophy at the University of Brighton. His work investigates the connection between the dialogical constitution of reasons and the capacity to refuse life-saving treatment in patients suffering from anorexia nervosa. His area of research is moral philosophy (with a focus on questions of identity, pluralism, multiculturalism, oppression and vulnerability), epistemology, logic, philosophy of language and psychiatric disorders. He is particularly interested in the application of Wittgenstein's thought in ethics and in Charles Taylor's expressivist conception of language.

Luke Edmeads is a Ph.D. candidate at the Centre for Applied Philosophy, Politics and Ethics at the University of Brighton and Associate Lecturer at The Open University. My research focuses first-generation Frankfurt School Critical theory and the 'turn to ethics' in post-foundational philosophy. More broadly, my research interests include continental philosophy, contemporary critical theories, political theory, inequality and deconstruction.

Paul Ewart is Doctoral tutor and researcher at the University of Sussex working on the cultural memory of the 1970s in the present. Recent publications include: 'The Guilty Men Thesis and Labour's Route to Power' in *New Socialist*, August 25, 2020.

David Gould is a Ph.D. researcher at the University of Leeds. His thesis combines the philosophy of Adorno with the later Wittgenstein in order to develop a new method for investigating censorship.

Neal Harris is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, UK. His recent books include *Critical Theory and Social Pathology: The Frankfurt School Beyond Recognition* (MUP, 2022) and, with Gerard Delanty, *Capitalism and Its Critics: Capitalism in Social and Political Theory* (Routledge, 2023).

Roderick Howlett is a Philosophy Ph.D. student at the University of Sheffield, funded by the White Rose College of the Arts and Humanities. His main research concerns the influence of Søren Kierkegaard on the development of Theodor Adorno's critical theory.

Paul Ingram is an Associate Research Fellow in the School of Arts at Birkbeck, University of London, where he recently completed a Ph.D. on Adorno and Dada. He has written about art and aesthetics for Historical Materialism, Dada/Surrealism and 3:AM Magazine.

Helge Petersen has recently finished his Ph.D. in sociology at the University of Glasgow and currently works as a post-doctoral researcher at the Institute for Democratic Culture at Magdeburg-Stendal University of Applied Sciences.

Muhammad Qasim is currently teaching in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at the University of Management and Technology, Lahore Pakistan. Qasim's research work deals with the Frankfurt School's critical theory, decolonial theory, social movements, and the sociology of resistance and power. Currently, Qasim is working on the absence of anti-caste resistance in Pakistan and Pakistani state security practices in the everyday life of people.

Lynn Alena Roth is a doctoral candidate at the University of Sussex, Brighton, UK. She works as seminar tutor and is Convenor, Lecturer and Tutor for the Widening Participation (WP) Philosophy strand. Her doctoral research explores the ways in which literary works facilitate the philosophical question on evil. Beyond this, she researches on the study of Utopia, Political Philosophy and Critical Theory. Lynn Alena has presented material on Critical Theory and Utopian consciousness at conferences and research seminars and published another book chapter on Bloch's philosophy titled: 'There is no Place like Hope: Ernst Bloch's Utopian Consciousness'. In: Harris, N., Acaroğlu, O. (eds.) Thinking Beyond Neoliberalism. Political Philosophy and Public Purpose. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

Darrow Schecter is Professor of Critical Theory and Modern European History at the University of Sussex (Brighton, UK). His recent books include, among others: *Critical Theory and Sociological Theory: On Late Modernity and Social Statehood (2019)*, Critical Theory in the Twenty-First Century (2013), The Critique of Instrumental Reason from Weber to Habermas (2010), The History of the Left from Marx to the Present: Theoretical Perspectives (2007), Beyond Hegemony (2005).

Alex Struwe is a political theorist and editor in Berlin.

Michael J. Thompson is Professor of political theory at William Paterson University. His recent books include: *The Domestication of Critical Theory*, *The Specter of Babel: A Reconstruction of Political Judgment* as well as the forthcoming, *Twilight of the Self: The Decline of the Individual in Late Capitalism* and *Descent of the Dialectic: Critical Reason in an Age of Nihilism*.

CHAPTER 1

On the Crisis of Critique: Reformulating the Project of Critical Theory

Michael J. Thompson

A Crisis of Critical Theory

At its origins, critical theory was centrally focused on the ways that the superstructural dimensions of human life—of consciousness and culture primarily—were shaped and affected by the dynamics of capitalist society. The central concern of these thinkers was with what they saw as a novel formation of capitalism and how it brought together new social forces that deformed the subject rendering it more susceptible to control and domination, to authoritarianism and to reification, thereby dissolving any semblance of autonomy and critical reflection as the humanistic strains of Enlightenment reason were displaced by positivism and instrumental rationality. But the critical theory of today is not concerned with these issues, at least not in any substantive sense. Instead, we have been asked to look at "discourse," "communication," "justification" and "recognition"

M. J. Thompson (✉)
William Paterson University, Wayne, NJ, USA
e-mail: thompsonmi@wpunj.edu

D. C. Bosseau and T. Bunyard (eds.), *Critical Theory Today*, Political Philosophy and Public Purpose,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-07638-1_1

no less than incoherent, milquetoast treatments of alienation, progress and reification as constituting the core of critical theory. I am convinced that this is nothing more than an academic aberration of what was once a committed philosophical attempt to confront organised social power and restore critical self consciousness and enable capacities and desires for social transformation, and I contend that these various intellectual pursuits constitute a crisis of critique in modern society; a crisis that must be confronted and overcome.

This will be the thrust of the present chapter. I would like to consider how transformations of the capitalistic organisation of society have shaped the trajectory of critical theory and I argue that contemporary changes in capitalist society and culture are not adequately addressed by the second generation of critical theorists and the theoretical and philosophical paradigms they have bequeathed to us. My argument is rooted in two core theses. First, that the historicity of capitalism has altered the nature of the superstructural dynamics of modern societies to such an extent that the very ways that critique is formulated must also change with it. More specifically, I believe that whereas critical theory was initiated during the birth of the state-capitalist phase of capitalism that had by this time eclipsed the phase of *laissez faire* and craft capitalism of the late-nineteenth century, the second generation of critical theorists articulated their ideas in the context of the welfare state model of capitalism characteristic of the 1960s and 1970s. Today, however, the post-neoliberal phase of capitalism (what I call the *cybernetic society*) constitutes a third paradigm shift in the political-economic base of modern societies that fundamentally alters the relation of system and lifeworld.

As such, the grand theories of thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth and their acolytes must be understood as emerging out of this second, social-democratic welfare statist political-economic framework. Theories of enriching democracy via communication, discourse, justification and recognition perhaps had salience within a political-economic framework that secured some degree of middle-class life as well as robust public goods and democratic consensus. Today, these theories strike me as increasingly hollow and even naïve (despite their philosophical sophistication) in an age of rampant populism, democratic deficit, mass commodification, hyper-reification, oligarchic inequality and newer forms of the technological manipulation of the self.

This leads me to my second thesis: that the post-metaphysical philosophical paradigm erected in the 1970s, primarily by Habermas in

order to essentially sever its connections with Marx, must be radically rethought. The post-metaphysical paradigm shift essentially postulated that theories of social action—of communication, discourse, recognition and intersubjectivity more generally—were to be given privilege over the structural–functional mechanisms that constituted the dynamics of modern societies. As such, it was not the transformation of class power, economic structure or any other kind of objective social conditions that required the attention of critical theorists, but the intersubjective practices that could potentially lead to an enhancement of social rights and democratic consensus. But such a thesis rests on the assumption elaborated above: namely, that there was a paradigm shift from state and monopoly capitalism to a tamed, welfare state capitalism that was able to provide economic rights and access to public goods. Hence, problems of reification, alienation, class power and the like receded into the background.

It was only with the rise of neoliberalism that a concern began to emerge once more about the nature of capitalism in critical theory. Nancy Fraser's and Axel Honneth's debate over the primacy of recognition versus redistribution was a first inkling in the critical theory literature that the post-metaphysical paradigm was in some kind of trouble (see Fraser 1995, as well as Fraser and Honneth 2003). The changes in capitalism had become evident enough in places like the United States and the United Kingdom to demonstrate that a more rapacious, more exploitive form of political economy had embedded itself. My alternative to this philosophical paradigm is a *critical social ontology*: that is, a foundation for critique that takes seriously the ways that the organisational logics of our social forms (that is, our social practices, relations, processes and purposes) are constituted by forms of power, of dominance, that, in turn, shape the self's inner organisation (that is, our cognitive, affective, libidinal, cathectic and normative structures of subjectivity and selfhood). Central to this is the idea that social power has the capacity to shape and form the cognitive and intra-psychic dimensions of the self. The project of what I believe should be the next paradigm shift for critical theory dialectically unites the concerns of Marx's "material" critique of social forms under capitalism and the problems of consciousness diagnosed by the first generation of critical theorists. In addition, it also provides a corrective to the post-metaphysical insistence that there need be no foundation or ground for a critical theory of ethics and judgement. Human social being, its dynamics and properties, must be the ground for articulating a

new ethical theory united with social critique with social-transformative aims (see Thompson 2020).

Whether these two theses should be considered paradigm shifts or fault lines, I am not quite certain. What I can say is that it has become evident that critical theory's crisis is a failure to come to grips with the ways that the historicity of capitalism has shifted from the framework that engendered the post-metaphysical orthodoxy that has reigned since Habermas' reformulation of critical theory in the 1970s and 1980s. As Nancy Fraser has insightfully pointed out:

> [T]he current boom in capitalism talk remains largely rhetorical – more a symptom of the desire for systematic critique than a substantive contribution to it. Thanks to decades of social amnesia, whole generations of younger activists and scholars have become sophisticated practitioners of discourse analysis while remaining utterly innocent of the traditions of *Kapitalkritik*…. The upshot is that we are living through a capitalist crisis of great severity without a critical theory that could adequately clarify it. (Fraser 2017: 141–142)

This constitutes a real crisis for the project of critical theory by robbing it of two core features that any critical theory must have: (i) a *critical-diagnostic* capacity that can theorise the sources and processes of social domination and social pathologies that infect self and world; and (ii) a framework for *generating normative shapes of ethical life*, of an alternative social reality rooted in the phylogenetic capacities of socialised agents. Both of these facets of critical theory mediate the other. Lacking one, the other stagnates into an academic enterprise with no means of practical import.

Post-Metaphysics and Neo-Idealism

Before proceeding on to my two core theses locating the crisis of contemporary critical theory, it is important to identify what I deem to be the central philosophical concern for the political implications of contemporary critical theory. I view the post-metaphysical paradigm of critical theory to be a failed venture because it provided precisely the opposite of what it claimed to overcome. Post-metaphysics, and its concern for intersubjectivity, pragmatic forms of social interaction, recognition and so on, is in fact metaphysical in the pre-critical sense of the term.

That is, it severs our thought categories from the actual objects in the world. What passes as non- or post-metaphysical is the thesis that the overcoming of the subject/object split is achieved via social action: by pragmatic forms of reason exchange, discourse, agreement or the recognitive inclusion of others into a broader "we-consciousness." The problem with this is that it eschews the structural–functional dynamics of the socio-material world, the social structures, functional imperatives and the kinds of normative regimes that they deploy. Power is taken away from these social-ontological forms of social reality and placed within the domain of discourse and mutual recognition. I refer to this problem as neo-Idealism because it promotes representative thinking over dialectically mediated forms of conceptual thought (see Thompson 2016). Neo-Idealism is effectively a retreat from the Marxian themes of first-generation critical theory and a return to the Idealist themes in Kant while embracing the non-metaphysical reading of Hegel. I suggest that its critical *bona fides* are compromised, specifically because it is unable to generate within the subject a framework for rational critique; there is no way to secure cognitive reflection from the infiltration of the nexus of norms rooted in the structural–functional forms of social domination that pervade technical, administrative capitalism. Let me explain this point.

The most salient reason why this is a problem for critical theorists, and why I believe it is a key factor in the crisis of critique, is that it is unable to respond to what I call the "reification problem." This I define as the capacity of modern forms of social power and authority to weave themselves into our normative structures of consciousness thereby infecting intersubjective praxis with the very reified categories of thought that are in fact necessary for critique to overcome. To broaden this point, it is important to see that reification is more than a defect in consciousness itself, as thinkers such as Lukács maintained. It is more correct to view it as an *ontological* concept: as something that affects the practices of our collective activities and, as a result, the social forms and artefacts we produce and sustain—essentially, the reality of our social world (see Thompson 2021). Social power and domination are not the property of individuals alone. They are the product of the ways that social organisation is shaped and organised. These forms of social organisation are constituted by the norms and practices that form the habitus of each of us as individuals socialised into the web of norms of the community. The nature of modern social domination is that it is essentially systemic: it operates not via force and coercion but via conventions of legitimacy that are woven into the

forms of necessity that are structured for hierarchical economic purposes (i.e. of the production and maintenance of surplus value).

Individuals become subsumed by the nexus of social norms that are requisite for the maintenance of the system. Of course, this is never perfectly achieved, but it is the case that as commodification has spread beyond the confines of material production and into the realm of services, cultural and aesthetic production, as well as the identities of individuals, capitalism becomes a system that is all-encompassing. This kind of power to shape the self, to create the foundational norms (or what Hans Kelsen, in a different context, referred to as the *Grundnorm*) according to which subsequent normative webs are functionally dependent, I call *constitutive domination*—that is, the capacity for a social group to shape the dominant norms that repress or negate the capacity to shape alternative, competing normative regimes and, hence, social reality. As a result, the modern subject is so deeply constituted by the norms, practices and value-orientations of the prevailing reality that thought and experience cannot robustly expand beyond them. As a result, intersubjective praxis is itself infected by these normative background conditions; shaping our capacities for communication, discourse, recognition and other forms of social action prioritised by post-metaphysical approaches. As the power of the dominant reality bleeds through all of the pores of the society, the post-metaphysical paradigm, rooted essentially in American pragmatist ideas, becomes little more than a hall of mirrors, with no standpoint for critique possible or viable (see Thompson 2020).

For this reason, it is essential that critical theory possess a historically viable theory of capitalism. Contemporary capitalist society is a totality. I refer to it as a *cybernetic society*, in that it formats the technological, educational, political, cultural and scientific dimensions of modern society and integrates them to its purposes like no other phase of capitalism has before it. As such, neo-Idealist critical theory—the product of the social-democratic welfare state model of capitalism of the 1960s and 1970s—is incapable of coming to terms with the social pathologies engendered by our post-neoliberal context. For critique to become robust once again, for critical theory to regain its capacity *to be critical*, it will have to re-engage the relation between base and superstructure; it will have to consider the ways that modern forms of social power shape consciousness as well as the deeper structures of the self; and it will have to consider that critique is not something that can be severed from a human, social-ontological framework for practical reason that is capable of generating new values,

new norms and new forms of social reality. Only then will critical theory be able to offer some form of resistance to the totally administered world.

Paradigm Shift I: The Rise of Cybernetic Society

First-generation critical theory was well aware that capitalism was a historical phenomenon. Specifically, it was evident to them—as it had been to political economists such as Rudolf Hilferding and political theorists such as Karl Kautsky and others in the 1930s—that the bourgeois, competitive model of capitalism of the nineteenth century had been eclipsed by a new integration of corporate structures, political regulation, administrative sophistication and management techniques, a new primacy on financial capital, as well as a monopolistic market structure. Friedrich Pollock noted in his analysis of this "state-capitalist" form that it would need to perform several specific functions. He defined these as (i) the coordination of needs and resources; (ii) the direction of production; and (iii) distribution (see Pollock 1987 [1941]: 74). In his view, this meant an administrative shift towards the polity away from economic elites: "The genuine problem of a planned society does not lie in the economic but in the political sphere, in the principles to be applied in deciding what needs shall have preference, how much time shall be spent for work, how much of the social product shall be consumed and how much used for expansion, etc." (Pollock 1987 [1941]: 75).

Now, the problems of coordination and distribution that were previously left to the market were functions to be taken over by that state. Administration was now the key to the management of large-scale production processes and monopolistic market structure. This meant, according to Pollock, "the transition from a predominantly economic to an essentially political era" (Pollock 1987 [1941]: 78). The problem, however, was that economic and political power were merged. Control over the polity was now essential for the control of economic management: "Within the controlling group, however, the will to political power becomes the center of motivation. Every decision is at bottom oriented to the goal of maintaining and expanding the power of the group as a whole and of each of its members. New industrial empires are being built and old ones expanded with this goal in mind" (Pollock 1987 [1941]: 81). For Frankfurt School theorists, this meant that a new political-economic paradigm was being erected where administration was "total" in that it wove together economic and political spheres and

logics. A new redistributive state was being set up, a decline in class conflict was inevitable, and, they believed, a kind of stagnation of critical consciousness was the fate of Western culture. Indeed, in his other work, Pollock also saw the consequences of new forms of automation and "cybernetic" forms of production (see Pollock 1957). Problems with administrative rationality, cultural and psychological conformity, the devolution of autonomous rationality into instrumental reason, and the new phenomenon of commodified mass culture, all became the purview of Frankfurt School theorists through the post-war decades.

But as the 1950s and 1960s unfolded, so too did a democratic deepening of welfare state capitalism. The project of creating a middle-class society that would be impervious to the excesses of fascism and communism was a central concern of the political classes of western democracies after World War II, especially in the context of the Cold War. This new middle-class society was buttressed by social policies that regulated production and global trade, placed high taxes on corporate profits and high-income earners and supported unions and home ownership through government-backed loans and mortgages as well as a basket of robust public goods such as university education and health care. What T. H. Marshall saw at the time as the emergence of "social rights" meant a new kind of citizenship where there existed "an implicit belief that society should, and will, guarantee all the essentials of a decent and secure life at every level, irrespective of the amount of money earned" (Marshall 1964: 132). Although the express purpose of the beginnings of the welfare state was meant to counter any form of socialist impulses that remained after the war, the gradual reality was that working class and other social movements were able to expand the parameters of the welfare state and increasingly socialise it or, as Gøsta Esping-Andersen describes it: "substitute for the characteristics dominant in either a liberal or conservative regime a comprehensive, universalistic, 'de-commodifying,' full-employment welfare state" (Esping-Andersen 1990: 110).

This constituted an acute departure from the model of state capitalism outlined by Pollock and, indeed, some members of critical theory—such as Marcuse and Fromm—saw in different aspects of the culture of the 1960s a nascent sense of change and desire for new experience and more humane culture. But it is the way in which this phase of capitalist development shaped the second generation of critical theorists that is of much more significant interest here. Class was seen as a declining force in social conflict now that it was being absorbed into the administrative powers

of the state and new interests in widening democratic life were taking hold. For thinkers such as Habermas, critical theory had to respond to the negativism and cynicism towards reason that he saw inherent in the late work of Adorno and Horkheimer specifically. Defending a rational public sphere, Habermas advocated a democratic form of life that could respond to the reifying tendencies of capitalism as well as the administrative welfare state. The fear now was more Weberian than Marxian: how could a democratically responsive, critical public be preserved now that administration had overcome the problems of distribution? The move towards communicative action, discourse ethics, and, in time, to Axel Honneth's research into recognition, all took for granted this robust welfare state, and highlighted new interests in democratic inclusion and in the pragmatist, symbolic-interactionist themes that still dominate their work.

Neoliberalism, however, would come to dismantle this second phase of capitalist development. In the United Kingdom and United States, this new model of capitalism witnessed the stripping of redistributive mechanisms and the re-assertion of class power by economic elites (Harvey 2006). "Free" markets now transitioned what were previously public goods and public rights to private assets as a new inequality began to emerge. This also resulted in a new set of cultural and political values. Whereas the height of social-democratic welfare state saw the expansion of non-capitalist values (such as of competition, growth, commodification and consumption), neoliberalism wedded consumption with growing desires for personal expression and identity that blur the lines between self and commodity, person and object. But even more essential to this story is the fact that part of the crisis of capitalism in the 1970s was due to the lapse of consumption, mainly from market saturation (see Streeck 2017). Capitalism saw a decline of profitability through the 1960s and 1970s as domestic consumption waned and the redistributive pressures from the welfare state ate deeper into profits (see Streeck 2014). In this sense, the neoliberal counter-revolt against the social-democratic welfare state sought to re-commodify every aspect of human life as well as dismantle the redistributive mechanisms of the welfare state in order to restore profit rates.

What has therefore emerged from the social tumult of neoliberalism is a new phase of capitalist society that has been able to absorb the dynamics of mass commodification, technological innovation, new forms of psychological management, cultural impulses for self-expression and

identity, in order to expand global chains of production and consumption. Whereas state capitalism absorbed the administrative and planning tasks of capitalism in order to avoid excesses that would lead to economic crisis, neoliberalism de-coupled the state and private management's roles in administering and regulating corporate activity. But it also learned from the rise of the cultural sensibilities of the 1960s that impulsive reactions to the system would also need to be captured within the system itself: culture and self would need to be given substitutes for anti-system desires and impulses. Now, administration of institutional logics was dictated not according to a general redistributive social plan, but according to the imperatives and interests of capital's need for agglomeration and the maximisation of surplus value. Gradually, as taxation policy was neoliberalised, formerly public institutions—such as educational, artistic and cultural, as well as local public policy—were tied to the needs of attracting capital. Add to this the increasing need for universities to wed themselves to corporate needs and interests, and we can see how the administrative logics of capitalism re-asserted themselves within the public realm.

Add to this new shifts in technological thinking and machinery. New modes of management and worker discipline went hand in hand with new, smaller and personalised forms of technology such as the smart phone and other personalised small-screen devices. These, in addition to the corporate takeover of the internet, meant a wholesale immersion of the self into the schemes of capitalist mentality and the logic of the commodity form. Gradually, these became the *Grundnormen* for what were previously differentiated spheres of social life, such as the economy, polity and culture (broadly speaking). What has emerged is a new phase of capitalist development that is defined by its capacity to absorb other non-economic spheres of life and institutions as well as the inner subjectivity of the self. This I call the *cybernetic society* because it has the capacity to steer and shape the fundamental background nexus of norms and patterns of praxis that essentially constitute our psychic and our social world. I use the term "cybernetics" to denote that kind of sociality where the individual is so embedded in cohesive logics of activity that their own agency is hyper-reified; in which such individuals can only find their own identity within the parameters of the system itself, and are essentially steered by the system. The self's ontogenesis comes under the deeply constitutive dynamics of a system now organised around and rooted within the logic of the commodity form as well as the logics of extraction, exploitation and consumption that it entails. The more globalisation exported