

“Critical Theory”

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Since its professional inception as an academic field during the latter part of the nineteenth century, anthropology has been influenced by a progressivist tendency to understand and defend the integrity, significance, and viability of human cultures in alternative world areas. Though crosscut by competing influences, orientations, and historical conditions, the anthropological impetus to vouchsafe the value of cultures and of cultural diversity has continued to the present.

During the first decades of the 20th century, anthropologists such as Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Margaret Mead were critical of a common tendency for Western scholars to theorize individuals, society, and their relationship in terms heavily based in and uncritically biased by Western frames of reference. During the 20th century, anthropologists intertwined this sensibility increasingly with explicit developments in anthropological theory. In a weaker form, which has been common in much of cultural anthropology, "critical theory" may be taken to indicate theorizations of cultural and social relativity that throw into question the naturalness (or the correctness) of Western orientations. In a stronger form, "critical theory" can be taken to refer more specifically to the theorization of how cultural, social, and status differences are created and developed to generate, reinforce, and maintain relations of dominance, inequality, or disenfranchisement -- either within societies and cultures, or between them.

This latter sense of "critical theory" is reflexively historical and is itself best described in historical context. The term "critical theory" itself derives from the so-called Frankfurt school, which included erudite German scholars strongly influenced by Marxism but disillusioned by the way Karl Marx's ideas had been narrowly applied and politically twisted and made dogmatic, including via the spread of Communism, during the early decades of the 20th century. As against this, they wanted the deeper potentials of Marx's own thought, and of social and cultural theory generally, to work against approaches that tended to justify, maintain, and reinforce social and political inequality. The Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, inaugurated in 1923, was the first Marxist-oriented research center at a major German university. With the rise of German nationalist socialism and Nazism, the Institute fled to Geneva and then in 1935 moved to

New York City, where it associated with Columbia University. The Institute remained in the U.S. until the end of World War Two and finally re-established itself at Frankfurt, Germany in 1953. Though the members of the Frankfurt School were not anthropologists, they tended to be brilliant interdisciplinary scholars and theorists influenced by the intellectual sensibilities of Marx and with wide-ranging interests that spanned – and interconnected -- history, culture, philosophy, art, sociology, and psychology.

In 1937, the head of the Institute, Max Horkheimer, published a paper entitled “Traditional and Critical Theory,” which effectively coined the latter term. On Horkheimer’s characterization, critical theory was designed to galvanize, crosscut, and integrate the social sciences by critically going beyond, and against, theories that assumed the propriety and functional value of Western structures of politics, economy, and social organization. In the work of Horkheimer and his colleagues, such Theodor Adorno (see Horkheimer and Adorno 1969), culture was not ancillary but central to inequality. This was the case since cultural ideologies, including modern ones such as propaganda and advertising, easily skew social, political, and economic organization to promote the interests of elites at the expense of those who are penalized but at the same time not in a position either objectively or in their subjective orientation to effectively oppose or resist inequality or disempowerment. As against this, critical theory was critically reflective or “reflexive” in considering the historically bequeathed workings of power and domination in the casting of ideas and of theories themselves.

In opposition to “pure” theory in an academic sense, critical theory in the Frankfurt School was intended, following Marx, to provide understandings that could ultimately change conditions in the world for the better -- and not simply to understand or justify them on existing terms. Finally, critical theory according to Horkheimer was against the academic detachment of topical specialization, in which diverse social phenomena were considered separately; instead, it viewed these amid larger or totalizing patterns and structures of domination or inequity.

Drawing variously on the preceding philosophy and social theory of Immanuel Kant, Georg Hegel, and Max Weber – in addition to Marx -- Horkheimer argued that ideas and subjectivity in general, including Western culture, had to be continually pushed by critical theorization to provide for the possibility of material and social betterment for all in society and in the world. As such, critical theory was concerned with material forces and factors in relation to subjective understanding, and it employed conceptual and theoretical rigor – often at a high or abstract level -- to provide intellectual tools that could expose and in principle be used to ameliorate or abolish social injustice.

Putting this formulation in larger context, critical theory in its stronger form can be seen to connect Marx's notion of historical materialism with current conceptualizations of culture that have been highly germane to anthropologists. Marx's materialism tended to posit that tensions and ultimately contradictions between forces of material production and relations of inequality provide conditions for social transformation – and the potential for disempowered peoples and classes to recast society for the benefit of all. Since Marx's work in the mid-19th century, however, Leftist political revolutions in France, Russia, and other countries seldom produced such optimistic results. Increasingly, then, intellectual Marxists of the 1920s, 1930s, and since have considered how culture and ideology operate amid political and economic inequality to reinforce class and status inequity through dominating systems of belief despite social upheaval and change. The 1930s and onward also saw the publication and dissemination of Marx's early writings of the 1840s, which explored in greater depth issues of human subjectivity and consciousness.

These issues remained largely refractory to and outside of anthropology until the mid-20th century, though they have impacted the discipline strongly since that time. In Anglo-American and French anthropology from the late 19th through the mid-20th century, critical theory in its strong form was typically absent. During this period, anthropologists' pragmatic concerns to appreciate, vouchsafe, or appreciatively support alternative ways of cultural life were seldom able to be explicitly addressed or theorized

in professional academic terms. Instead, desire to make anthropology objectively scientific and perceived as free of predisposing values coupled with strong Western stigma against Communism, Marxism, and associated theories of inequity to keep the theorization of disempowerment – including the domination of Western imperialism and colonialism -- largely out of anthropology through the early 1950s.

During the 1960s and the 1970s, however, more explicit awareness of critical theorization, drawing upon the writings of Marx (e.g., McLellan 2000), increasingly influenced a range of anthropological concerns. American, English, and French anthropology were significantly influenced during this period by activist social movements, including civil rights and political opposition to the US war in Vietnam and to Western imperialism generally. Social and cultural awareness were heightened by the civil rights movement, feminism and the women's movement, the Watergate scandal, and increasing awareness of issues such as environmental pollution, the growth of urban ghettos, racism, and wealth and health disparities between rich and poor. In the mix, students and faculty of anthropology, especially in the US, increased greatly in numbers, and many new departments of anthropology were established at American colleges and universities.

During the 1960s and 70s, intellectual figures such as Marx and Max Weber began to be central to anthropology's sense of its own theoretical ancestry -- though these thinkers had not themselves been anthropologists. As evident in the work of prominent anthropologists such as Eric Wolf (1959, 1969, 1982, 1999), anthropologists since the 1960s have taken significant interest in critically and explicitly theorizing the relationship between material, economic, and political inequality -- and culture. More recently, the early writings of Marx – and of Marxist critical cultural theorists from the first half of the 20th century such as Antonio Gramsci, Walter Benjamin, Georg Lukacs, Mikhail Bakhtin, and others – have exerted significant influence among professional anthropologists.

Sometimes associated with designations such as “political economy,” or “culture/history/theory,” explicitly critical theorizations in anthropology have

proliferated large literatures since the 1970s and 1980s. These have prominently and variously addressed issues of class inequality, gender domination, racial inequality, colonialism, sexual inequity and discrimination, and regional or global patterns of political and economic imperialism, both historically and in the present. Critical theorizations have also addressed issues such as disparities of health and medical care, education, environmental quality, and employment or employability. These interests in anthropology have been diversely influenced and broadened by international and interdisciplinary influences that are likewise theoretically “critical” but developed by scholars who are not necessarily anthropologists. Prominent exemplars during the 1960s through 1980s include the work of critical theorists such as Immanuel Wallerstein in the area of world economic development and underdevelopment, Pierre Bourdieu concerning the politics and culture of everyday practices, and Michel Foucault with respect to large-scale and intimate regimes of Western knowledge, power, and subjectivity. More generally, critical theories in anthropology have been strongly influenced by interdisciplinary trends of the 1970s, 80, and 90s that have been variously developed through post-structuralism, cultural studies, post-colonial studies, subaltern studies, feminism, Black cultural criticism, post-Marxism, and practice theory, among others (see overviews vis-à-vis anthropology in Knauff 1996).

Amid these myriad developments, what counts or may be designated as “critical theory” has become diffuse rather than well defined, including within anthropology. So, too, in a number of humanities fields, less explicit forms of critical theorization have intertwined with literary or hermeneutic orientations concerned with “the nature of literature and the problems of critical discourse about it” (Adams 1992:v). More poignantly, transdisciplinary critiques beginning especially during the 1970s and 80s have criticized the idea of “theory” in general, including in anthropology. These critiques suggest that theory harbors a general tendency to over-generalize and essentialize its own terms -- and that it is uncritical of its own conceptual rigidity and pretence to scholarly authority. Along

with a critique of so-called “master narratives” within Western scholarship generally, critiques of “high theory” or modernist theory have been strongly evident in so-called postmodern orientations, including in anthropology, since the 1980s and 1990s. At the same time, as described and analyzed by critical theorist David Harvey (1990), the postmodern condition can itself be seen in significant part as a cultural product of political, material, and economic conditions and crises of inequality bequeathed by Western capitalism. In this view, postmodernity is itself a manifestation or symptom of Western political economy during the late 20th century -- its inequities, excesses, and failure of self-justification.

In the wake of these developments, theoretically and otherwise, anthropology since the 1990s has continued to be informed by many aspects of critical theory, including as originally set forth by Horkheimer and as more generally informed by Marxist-influenced forms of critical analysis. At the same time, “critical theory” – like other theoretical designations in social and cultural anthropology – is less often used as an explicit label to categorize a particular school of contemporary anthropological thought or scholarship. This is consistent with a general tendency in social and cultural anthropology in recent years to use less grandiose or “middle level” terms and topics of designation, rather than “high theory” labels, to describe its orientations and fields of study (see discussion in Knauft 2006 and in press).

More recently, since about 2000, the legacy of critical theory has informed an increasing and increasingly explicit emphasis in anthropology on what is alternatively called “engaged anthropology,” “practicing anthropology,” “activist anthropology, or “public anthropology.” While these terms and their respective approaches and practitioners admit of various definitions and distinctions, they emphasize in different ways the link between the scholarly work of anthropologists and the exposition, understanding, critique, and amelioration of human inequity, discrimination, domination, and disempowerment. This trend and its sensibilities are in significant ways consistent with strains that have been evident in

anthropology since its professional inception during the 19th century. Since that time, the ability of anthropologists to openly describe and conceptualize the linkage between their scholarship, their activism, and their theorization of inequality has grown, including in relation to our own cultural and conceptual suppositions. The degree to which that these developments are explicitly linked to “critical theory” is variable. But the sensibilities of critical theorization that inform them arguably continue to be important, including the refusal, as Horkheimer emphasized, to let the important power of conceptual thinking and theoretical formulation become detached from our awareness of social injustice and our commitment to expose and help alleviate it.

Amid its key and continuing contributions, activist or applied anthropology faces difficulties that critical theorization helps identify and resist or counteract. This includes the risk of practical anthropology becoming influenced or co-opted by organizational or commercial interests with vested interests that take precedence over those of the people who are being studied or ostensibly served. As such, practical initiatives by anthropologists and others benefit from critical conceptualization and theoretical analysis of the larger context of political economy and cultural influence within which the effects of this practice are located. In this sense, intellectual independence of academic thought and critical theorization help make contemporary anthropological engagement more effectively reflexive as well as exposing how culture and power – even when well intentioned -- easily work to the detriment of disempowered peoples. Arguably these strands of anthropology – the critically theoretical and the engaged or activist -- are best served by being linked together rather than separated or divorced from each other. In this and other regards, the past and present legacy of critical theory has a key practical as well as conceptual role to play in anthropology, and more generally, in engaging problems of human inequity and social injustice in the 21st century.

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