

Critical Theory

Developed by European theorists committed to progress, emancipation and democracy

These theorists were influenced by Marx and focused on the dynamics and effects of capitalism. However, they were critical of Marxism's economic determinism. Instead, they focused on society's "superstructure" of cultural and political processes. These processes, not just economic ones, are essential to capitalist reproduction.

Critical theory also draws upon Weber because of its focus on rationality as a major force in capitalist society. Critical theory contrasts Weber's formal rationality with reason, which "involves the assessment of mean in terms of the ultimate human values of justice, peace, and happiness" (Ritzer 2000).

Critical theory also focuses on the role of technology, such as television, as it is employed by capitalism.

Critical theorists were also critical of sociology for its emphasis on the scientific method, its failure to criticize society, and its lack of attention to the individual in society.

Jürgen Habermas (b. 1929)

“Jürgen Habermas is arguably not only today’s leading social theorist, but also the leading defender of modernity and rationality in the face of the assault on those ideas by postmodernists (and others)” (Ritzer 2000).

Received his doctorate from U. of Bonn in 1954. Associated with Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt for much of his career.

Habermas draws from Marx, Weber, Schutz, Parsons and others for his theorizing.

Habermas argues that communication, not work (as Marx would have it), is the most important human phenomenon. He criticizes communication that is distorted by social structures. He believes that undistorted communication is possible and we should work toward it.

In the “ideal speech situation,” speech is uncoerced. The best arguments win, not those backed by power.

Habermas believes the life-world (micro-world of interaction and communication, society from perspective of acting subject) has potential to resist the economic structure of society and the state (“system”). He sees two possible directions for society: (1) colonization of the life-world or (2) a democratic solution.

The “colonization of the life-world” refers to the encroaching of formal or instrumental rationality into the substantive rationality (reason) of the life-world.

Marcuse's One Dimensional Man

Two assumptions of critical theory:

Human life is worth living, or ought to be worth living.

Possibilities exist in any society for making life better.

However, advanced industrial society seems to be able to contain social change that would create “essentially different institutions, a new direction of the productive processes, new modes of human existence.” (p. 402)

“The fact that the vast majority of the population accepts, and is made to accept, this society does not render it less irrational and less reprehensible.” (p. 402)

Advanced capitalist society is “totalitarian” in that it “operates through the manipulation of needs by vested interests.” Two types of needs:

False needs are “superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice.... The result then is euphoria in unhappiness. Most of the prevailing needs to relax, have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to this category of false needs. (p. 406)

True needs: “The only needs that have an unqualified claim for satisfaction are the vital ones—nourishment, clothing, lodging.” However, it is unclear what all true needs are because people aren't really free to give their own answer.

Marcuse's One Dimensional Man, continued

Advanced capitalism produces needs for “the production and consumption of waste; the need for stupefying work where it is no longer a real necessity; the need for modes of relaxation which soothe and prolong this stupefication; the need for maintaining such deceptive liberties as free competition at administered prices, a free press which censors itself, free choice between brands and gadgets.” (p. 407)

“Free election of masters does not abolish the masters or the slaves. Free choice among a wide variety of goods and services does not signify freedom if these goods and services sustain social controls over a life of toil and fear—that is, if they sustain alienation.” (p. 408)

Advanced capitalist society limits the possibility of having “an individual consciousness and an individual unconsciousness *apart from* public opinion and behavior.” Thus reality is “one dimensional.”