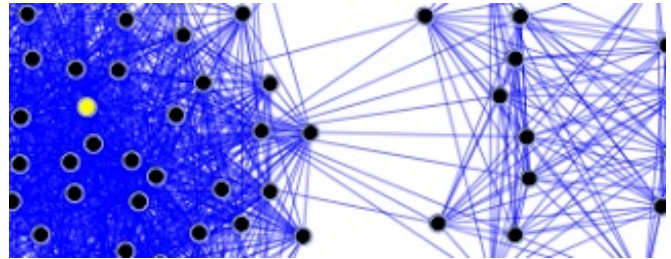


What is Critical theory ?

 criticaltheorylibrary.blogspot.com/p/what-is-critical-theory.html

Critical theory is an examination and critique of [society](#) and [culture](#), drawing from knowledge across the [social sciences](#) and [humanities](#). The term has two different meanings with different origins and histories: one originating in [sociology](#) and the other in [literary criticism](#). This has led to the very literal use of 'critical theory' as an [umbrella term](#) to describe theoretical critique.



Critical theory, in the sociological context, refers to a style of [Marxist theory](#) with a tendency to engage with non-Marxist influences (for instance the work of [Friedrich Nietzsche](#) and [Sigmund Freud](#)).^[1] This tendency has been referred to pejoratively by stricter Marxists as '[revisionism](#)'. Modern critical theory arose from a trajectory extending from the [nonpositivist](#) sociology of [Max Weber](#) and [Georg Simmel](#), the [neo-Marxist](#) theory of [Georg Lukács](#) and [Antonio Gramsci](#), toward the milieu associated with [Frankfurt Institute of Social Research](#).

It is with the so-called "[Frankfurt School](#)" of theorists that the term is most commonly associated: [Herbert Marcuse](#), [Theodor Adorno](#), [Max Horkheimer](#), [Walter Benjamin](#), and [Jürgen Habermas](#). With the latter, critical theory shed further its roots in [German idealism](#) and moved closer to [American pragmatism](#). The theoretical concern for a cultural "[superstructure](#)" derived from a material "base" often stands as the only central Marxist tenet remaining in contemporary critical theory.^[2]

Two primary definitions

The two meanings of critical theory—from different intellectual traditions associated with the meaning of criticism and critique—derive ultimately from the Greek word *kritikos* meaning judgment or discernment, and in their present forms go back to the 18th century. While they can be considered completely independent intellectual pursuits, increasingly scholars are interested in the areas of critique where the two overlap.

To use an [epistemological](#) distinction introduced by [Jürgen Habermas](#) in *Erkenntnis und Interesse* [1968] (*Knowledge and Human Interests*), critical theory in literary studies is ultimately a form of [hermeneutics](#), i.e. knowledge via interpretation to understand the meaning of human texts and symbolic expressions—including the interpretation of texts which are themselves implicitly or explicitly the interpretation of other texts. Critical social theory is, in contrast, a form of self-reflective knowledge involving both understanding and theoretical explanation to reduce entrapment in systems of domination or dependence, obeying the emancipatory interest in expanding the scope of autonomy and reducing the scope of domination.

From this perspective, much literary critical theory, since it is focused on interpretation and explanation rather than on social transformation, would be regarded as positivistic or traditional rather than critical theory in the Kantian or [Marxian](#) sense. Critical theory in literature and the humanities in general does not necessarily involve a [normative](#) dimension, whereas critical social theory does, either through criticizing society from some general theory of [values](#), norms, or "oughts," or through criticizing it in terms of its own

espoused values.

In social theory

Critical theory was first defined by [Max Horkheimer](#) of the [Frankfurt School](#) of sociology in his 1937 essay *Traditional and Critical Theory*: Critical theory is a social theory oriented toward critiquing and changing [society](#) as a whole, in contrast to traditional theory oriented only to understanding or explaining it. Horkheimer wanted to distinguish critical theory as a radical, emancipatory form of [Marxian](#) theory, critiquing both the model of science put forward by [logical positivism](#) and what he and his colleagues saw as the covert positivism and authoritarianism of orthodox [Marxism](#) and [Communism](#).

Core concepts are: (1) That critical social theory should be directed at the totality of society in its historical specificity (i.e. how it came to be configured at a specific point in time), and (2) That critical theory should improve understanding of society by integrating all the major social sciences, including geography, economics, sociology, history, political science, anthropology, and psychology.

This version of "critical" theory derives from [Kant's](#) (18th-century) and [Marx's](#) (19th Century) use of the term "[critique](#)", as in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and Marx's concept that his work *Das Kapital* (*Capital*) forms a "critique of political economy." For Kant's [transcendental idealism](#), "critique" means examining and establishing the limits of the validity of a faculty, type, or body of knowledge, especially through accounting for the limitations imposed by the fundamental, irreducible concepts in use in that knowledge system. Early on, Kant's notion associated critique with the disestablishment of false, unprovable, or dogmatic philosophical, social, and political beliefs, because Kant's critique of reason involved the critique of dogmatic [theological](#) and [metaphysical](#) ideas and was intertwined with the enhancement of ethical autonomy and the [Enlightenment](#) critique of superstition and irrational authority. Marx explicitly developed this notion into the critique of ideology and linked it with the practice of social revolution, as in the famous 11th of his *Theses on Feuerbach*, "Philosophers have only interpreted the world in certain ways; the point is to change it."^[3]

One of the distinguishing characteristics of critical theory, as Adorno and Horkheimer elaborated in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), is a certain ambivalence concerning the ultimate source or foundation of social domination, an ambivalence which gave rise to the "pessimism" of the new critical theory over the possibility of human emancipation and [freedom](#).^[4] This ambivalence was rooted, of course, in the historical circumstances in which the work was originally produced, in particular, the rise of [National Socialism](#), [state capitalism](#), and [mass culture](#) as entirely new forms of social domination that could not be adequately explained within the terms of traditional Marxist sociology.^[5]

For Adorno and Horkheimer [state intervention](#) in the economy had effectively abolished the tension in capitalism between the "[relations of production](#)" and "material [productive forces](#) of society," a tension which, according to traditional critical theory, constituted the primary [contradiction](#) within capitalism. The market (as an "unconscious" mechanism for the distribution of goods) and [private property](#) had been replaced by [centralized planning](#) and socialized ownership of the [means of production](#).^[6]

Yet, contrary to [Marx's](#) famous prediction in the *Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, this shift did not lead to "an era of [social revolution](#)," but rather to [fascism](#) and [totalitarianism](#). As such, critical theory was left, in [Jürgen Habermas](#)' words, without "anything in reserve to which it might appeal; and when the forces of production enter into a baneful symbiosis with the relations of production that they were supposed to blow wide open, there is no longer any dynamism upon which critique could base its hope."^[7] For Adorno and Horkheimer, this posed the problem of how to account for the apparent persistence of domination in the absence of the very contradiction that, according to traditional critical theory, was the source of domination itself.

In the 1960s, [Jürgen Habermas](#) raised the [epistemological](#) discussion to a new level in his *Knowledge and Human Interests*, by identifying critical [knowledge](#) as based on principles that differentiated it either from

the [natural sciences](#) or the [humanities](#), through its orientation to self-reflection and emancipation. Though unsatisfied with Adorno and Horkheimer's thought presented in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Habermas shares the view that, in the form of [instrumental rationality](#), the era of [modernity](#) marks a move away from the liberation of [enlightenment](#) and toward a new form of enslavement.^[8]

His ideas regarding the relationship between modernity and [rationalization](#) are in this sense strongly influenced by [Max Weber](#). Habermas dissolved further the elements of critical theory derived from [Hegelian German Idealism](#), though his thought remains broadly Marxist in its epistemological approach. Perhaps his two most influential ideas are the concepts of the [public sphere](#) and [communicative action](#); the latter arriving partly as a reaction to new [post-structural](#) or so-called "[post-modern](#)" challenges to the discourse of modernity. Habermas engaged in regular correspondence with [Richard Rorty](#) and a strong sense of philosophical [pragmatism](#) may be felt in his theory; thought which frequently traverses the boundaries between sociology and philosophy.

Postmodern critical theory

While [modernist](#) critical theory (as described above) concerns itself with "forms of authority and injustice that accompanied the evolution of industrial and corporate capitalism as a political-economic system," [postmodern](#) critical theory politicizes social problems "by situating them in historical and cultural contexts, to implicate themselves in the process of collecting and analyzing data, and to relativize their findings" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 52). Meaning itself is seen as unstable due to the rapid transformation in social structures and as a result the focus of research is centered on local manifestations rather than broad generalizations.

Postmodern critical research is also characterized by what is called, the *crisis of representation*, which rejects the idea that a researcher's work is considered an "objective depiction of a stable other" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 53). Instead, in their research and writing, many postmodern scholars have adopted "alternatives that encourage reflection about the 'politics and poetics' of their work. In these accounts, the embodied, collaborative, dialogic, and improvisational aspects of qualitative research are clarified" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 53).

Often, the term "critical theory" is appropriated when an author (perhaps most notably [Michel Foucault](#)) works within sociological terms yet attacks the social or human sciences (thus attempting to remain "outside" those frames of enquiry). [Jean Baudrillard](#) has also been described as a critical theorist to the extent that he was an unconventional and critical sociologist; this appropriation is similarly casual, holding little or no relation to the Frankfurt School.

In literary criticism

The second meaning of *critical theory* is the theory used in literary criticism and in the analysis and understanding of literature. This is discussed in greater detail under [literary theory](#). This form of critical theory is not necessarily oriented toward radical social change or even toward the analysis of society, but instead focusses on the analysis of texts. This term was first used by literary scholars in the 1960s and 1970s, and the term has only come into broad use since the 1980s, especially as theory used in literary studies has increasingly been influenced by European philosophy and social theory.

This version of "critical" theory derives from the notion of literary criticism as establishing and enhancing the understanding and evaluation of literature in the search for [truth](#). Some consider literary theory merely an aesthetic concern, as articulated, for example, in [Joseph Addison](#)'s notion of a [critic](#) as one who helps understand and interpret literary works: "A true critic ought to dwell rather upon excellencies than

imperfections, to discover the concealed beauties of a writer, and communicate to the world such things as are worth their observation."^[9] This notion of criticism ultimately goes back to Aristotle's *Poetics* as a theory of literature.

In the 1940's and 50's, [New Criticism](#) had tried to analyze literary texts purely internally. Starting in the 1960s, literary scholars, reacting against this, began to use analytical tools from critical social theory - initially [semiotic](#), [linguistic](#), and interpretive theory, then [structuralism](#), [Lacanian psychoanalysis](#), [post-structuralism](#), and [deconstruction](#) as well as [Continental philosophy](#), especially [phenomenology](#) and [hermeneutics](#), and various other forms of [neo-Marxian](#) theory.

Thus literary criticism became highly theoretical and some of those practicing it began referring to the theoretical dimension of their work as "critical theory" - a philosophically inspired theory of literary criticism. And thus incidentally critical theory in the sociological sense also became, especially among literary scholars of left-wing sympathies, one of a number of influences upon and streams within critical theory in the literary sense.

With the expansion of the mass media and mass/popular culture in the 1960s and 1970s and the blending of social and cultural criticism and literary criticism, the methods of both kinds of critical theory sometimes intertwined in the analysis of phenomena of popular culture, as in the emerging field of [cultural studies](#), in which concepts deriving from [Marxian](#) theory, [post-structuralism](#), [semiology](#), [psychoanalysis](#) and [feminist theory](#) would be found in the same interpretive work. Both strands were often present in the various modalities of [postmodern theory](#).

Language and construction

The two points at which there is the greatest overlap or mutual impingement of the two versions of critical theory are in their interrelated foci on language, symbolism, and communication and in their focus on social construction.

Language and communication

From the 1960s and 1970s onward, language, symbolism, text, and meaning came to be seen as the theoretical foundation for the [humanities](#), through the influence of [Ludwig Wittgenstein](#), [Ferdinand de Saussure](#), [George Herbert Mead](#), [Noam Chomsky](#), [Hans-Georg Gadamer](#), [Roland Barthes](#), [Jacques Derrida](#) and other thinkers in linguistic and analytic philosophy, [structural linguistics](#), [symbolic interactionism](#), [hermeneutics](#), [semiology](#), linguistically oriented psychoanalysis ([Jacques Lacan](#), [Alfred Lorenzer](#)), and [deconstruction](#).

When, in the 1970s and 1980s, [Jürgen Habermas](#) redefined critical social theory as a theory of communication, i.e. communicative competence and communicative rationality on the one hand, distorted communication on the other, the two versions of critical theory began to overlap or intertwine to a much greater degree than before.

Construction

Both versions of critical theory have focused on the processes by which human communication, culture, and [political consciousness](#) are created. This includes:

- Whether it is through universal pragmatic principles through which mutual understanding is achieved ([Habermas](#)).
- The [semiotic](#) rules by which objects obtain symbolic meanings ([Barthes](#)).
- The psychological processes by which the phenomena of everyday consciousness are generated ([psychoanalytic](#) thinkers).

- The *episteme* that underlies our cognitive formations (*Foucault*),

There is a common interest in the processes (often of a linguistic or symbolic kind) that give rise to observable phenomena and here there is some mutual influence among the different versions of critical theory. Ultimately this emphasis on production and construction goes back to the revolution wrought by *Kant* in philosophy, namely his focus in the *Critique of Pure Reason* on synthesis according to rules as the fundamental activity of the mind that creates the order of our experience.

Footnotes

1. ^ Outhwaite, William. 1988. *Habermas: Key Contemporary Thinkers* 2nd Edition (2009). p5. [ISBN 9780745643281](#)
2. ^ Outhwaite, William. 1988. *Habermas: Key Contemporary Thinkers* 2nd Edition (2009), p.5-8 ([ISBN 9780745643281](#))
3. ^ "Theses on Feuerbach". [Marxists Internet Archive](#). <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>. Retrieved 2008-08-22.
4. ^ Adorno, T. W., with Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002. 242.
5. ^ "Critical Theory was initially developed in Horkheimer's circle to think through political disappointments at the absence of revolution in the West, the development of Stalinism in Soviet Russia, and the victory of fascism in Germany. It was supposed to explain mistaken Marxist prognoses, but without breaking Marxist intentions." "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Horkheimer and Adorno." in Habermas, Jürgen. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*. trans. Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987. 116. Also, see Helmut Dubiel, *Theory and Politics: Studies in the Development of Critical Theory*, trans. Benjamin Gregg (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1985).
6. ^ "[G]one are the objective laws of the market which ruled in the actions of the entrepreneurs and tended toward catastrophe. Instead the conscious decision of the managing directors executes as results (which are more obligatory than the blindest price-mechanisms) the old law of value and hence the destiny of capitalism." *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. p. 38.
7. ^ "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment," p. 118.
8. ^ Outhwaite, William. 1988. *Habermas: Key Contemporary Thinkers* 2nd Edition (2009). p6. [ISBN 9780745643281](#)
9. ^ Addison, Joseph (1712-02-02). "Literary Criticism". *Spectator* **291**. <http://www.ourcivilisation.com/smartboard/shop/fowlerjh/chap20.htm>. Retrieved 2008-08-22.

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- A survey of and introduction to the current state of critical social theory is Craig Calhoun's *Critical Social Theory: Culture, History, and the Challenge of Difference* (Blackwell, 1995) [ISBN 1-55786-](#)

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