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Tackling the Crises (with and within Critical Theory)

Hannes Kaufmann
Justus Liebig University Giessen

Contact: hannes.kaufmann@gcsc.uni-giessen.de

Abstract:

The volume *Critical Theory in Critical Times. Transforming the Global Political & Economic Order*, edited by Penelope Deutscher and Cristina Lafont, re-emphasizes the link between critical theory and crisis. Eleven contributions by prominent scholars of critical theory show how political, economic or legal crises make critical theory necessary and how it can serve to explain and critically address the current multiple crises. In doing so, critical theory is undergoing a self-critique. That, in order to provide accurate diagnoses and responses to current crises, critical theory has to open for different approaches, such as feminist or postcolonial theory, is one outcome of several essays in the volume. At the same time there is a plea for sticking to the core concepts of materialist critique that should not be replaced but rather complemented by these “newer” approaches.

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Hannes Kaufmann

Justus Liebig University Giessen

Deutscher, Penelope and Cristina Lafont (eds.): *Critical Theory in Critical Times. Transforming the Global Political & Economic Order*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017. 290 pages, 30 USD. ISBN: 978-0-231-18151-8.

Abstract:

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Critical theory has not solely been developed as a reaction to a political crisis, namely the failed revolution and the rise of national-socialism in Germany; but furthermore, critical theories (in the wider sense) are in general bound to certain problems and crises that arise in certain times. In the Marxian sense, they do not aim to construct a theory of an ideal society, but rather develop a critique of a society that necessarily tends towards crises due to its inherent deficiencies. Therefore, there is a twofold treatment of crisis in critical theory: on the one hand the scrutiny of particular recent crises, on the other hand the enduring analysis of basal social structures that repeatedly bring up these various crises.

The volume *Critical Theory in Critical Times. Transforming the Global Political & Economic Order*, edited

by Penelope Deutscher and Cristina Lafont, brings together different perspectives in current critical theory that each start from one of those two streams in tackling crises or broach the issue of the crisis and self-critique of critical theory itself. Prominent voices in current critical theory in Europe and North America have contributed to this volume. To the five sections on the topics of democracy, human and political rights, capitalism, and postcolonialism, scholars such as Jürgen Habermas, Wendy Brown, Nancy Fraser and eight more have written critical interventions.

In this constellation, the volume succeeds in showing that critical theory is not a homogeneous stream of theory, but rather a variety of different premises and foci – presented not only thematically but also methodologically and formally. This might be a strength but could just as well be part of critical theory's own crisis, as Nancy Fraser puts it in her essay: "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*" (p. 141 f.). In total, Fraser's contribution delineates an important self-critique of critical theory. It emphasizes the necessity of materialist analysis in the outcome of Marx, but at the same time points out blind spots in this tradition. With and in excess of him, Fraser shows how Marx' theory of original accumulation can be used to scrutinize the current "multiple crisis" and include aspects of gender, ecology, and political power that not just go along with, but are preconditions for capitalist production and exploitation (p. 148).

A (formally) similar approach can be found in Amy Allen's essay. She identifies a problematic silence on the topics of racism and colonialism in critical theory that is bound to a notion of progress, especially in later critical theory (p. 184). Against Habermas' or Honneth's teleological optimism she tries to show that Adorno and Foucault offer fragments for a more appropriate theory, one that is conscious of the breakdown of and inherent irrationality in reason in modern times. Although they don't explicitly work out a postcolonial theory, their emphasis on progress as a merely counterfactual norm, while taking up a sceptical stance towards progress as a historical fact, can be used to surmount the allegation of "eurocentrism". Hence, this differentiation and their emphasis on a negativistic theory and difference problematizes how progress for one group is based on violence towards others.

In a comment that especially addresses Allen's paper, Charles W. Mills welcomes the link of critical theory and postcolonial theory, claiming that European and North American critical theory must learn from e.g. critical race studies. He concedes that the relevance of difference in the theories of Adorno and Foucault can be used for unifying the 'self' and those who are made the 'others' in the realms of class or gender, though he sees a difficulty when it comes to race and racism. Here, people of color are not even seen as 'the other', but are completely excluded from the discourse. Against a radical

critique of bourgeois society and its set of rights, he thus promotes a trend of emphasizing corrective justice, as he sees it in later critical theory (p. 246f.).

That not only a promotion of rights is necessary, but also their critical evaluation, is shown in the third section. Here, Wendy Brown theorizes how economization and neoliberal politics alter rights and with this transform the whole political realm (p. 112). By marketization of politics, rights increasingly lose their power as instruments for opposing domination. Christoph Menke even radicalizes this problematization by following Marx in the diagnosis that law is always just a “different form” of domination. To Marx’ critique of private law Menke adds a political critique of social law. With Foucault, he shows governance and normalization through social law, which leads him to an interesting dialectical figure of law’s self-critique. Both private and social law are at the same time critical to and constitutive of domination and are criticizing each other (p. 128). This figure then is made subject to a genealogical critique that unveils the contradictory character of subjective rights as basic form of bourgeois law.

The volume excellently presents critical interventions in political, economic or legal crises and ways to grasp them. Especially valuable are the self-critical parts of the volume, where the contributors promote not just an opening to different streams of theory, such as postcolonial or feminist critiques, but at the same time re-emphasize the relevance of materialist and economic critique. The strategies, here, range from normative critiques to materialist analyses. Thereby, there is sometimes a lack of communication between the single contributions. Certainly, there are several links, such as Mills’ comment on Allen, but in other parts it rather bears the character of previews. This is nevertheless quite valuable – especially as many of the contributions developed into monographs recently published, such as Allen’s *The End of Progress* (2016) or Menke’s *Kritik der Rechte* (2015). Presenting teasers, the book will certainly augment the academic’s reading list with several books and is especially recommended to scholars who are already working in the field and are interested in its new streams and approaches.

German Abstract:

Wider die Krisen (mit und in Kritischer Theorie)

Der von Penelope Deutscher und Cristina Lafont herausgegebene Sammelband *Critical Theory in Critical Times. Transforming the Global Political & Economic Order* ruft die Verbindung von Kritischer Theorie und Krisen in Erinnerung. Elf Beiträge prominenter Protagonist_innen Kritischer Theorie zeigen auf, dass und wie politische, ökonomische oder rechtliche Krisen Kritische Theorie notwendig machen und wie diese eine Grundlage zur Erklärung und Bekämpfung der aktuellen mehrdimensionalen Krise bereitstellen kann. Dabei wird Kritische Theorie auch einer Selbstkritik unterzogen. In mehreren Aufsätzen zeigt der Band, dass diese sich gegenüber anderen Ansätzen, wie etwa feministischer oder postkolonialer Theorie öffnen muss, um angemessene Diagnosen für und Antworten auf aktuelle Krisen darstellen zu können. Ebenso plädiert der Band dafür, an dem Kernanliegen einer materialistischen Kritik festzuhalten und diese mit „neueren“ Ansätze zu ergänzen, gleichwohl nicht durch sie zu ersetzen.

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