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CRITICAL THEORY

Adorno, Marcuse,
and Angela Davis

Arnold L. Farr

Critical Theory, Class, and Race

Like most forms of Western philosophy, Frankfurt School critical theory belongs to a literary canon that is completely racialized by the very absence of race. That is, in the Western philosophical tradition white males have been presented as the bearers of philosophical knowledge. It is the white male who best understands and describes the human condition. The absence of race as a serious topic for philosophical discussion in the midst of race-based brutalization of people of African descent produces a discourse that by its very attempt to conceal the centrality of race in Western society makes it all the more visible.

In this chapter I do not plan to offer a critique of racism in philosophy or of the racialized philosophical canon. Indeed, as I have done elsewhere, I will avoid the term racism, as it tends to suggest a conscious commitment to racial animus and discrimination. Instead, my focus is on one movement within Western philosophy that has fallen prey to the *racialized consciousness*—or consciousness that is shaped by racist social structure (Farr in Yancy 2004: 144–145)—perpetuated by traditional Western philosophy. That is, this form of philosophy represents a struggle with itself regarding the role of race in society and in philosophy. This philosophy is Frankfurt School critical theory.

Herbert Marcuse claimed that like Marxism and Marxian theory, critical theory is a historical theory. That is, if the objective of critical theory is to provide a critical theory of society for the sake of liberating the oppressed, then critical theory must always reassess itself in light of historical developments. Therefore, critical theory is not merely a theory about struggle; it is itself a form of struggle. It is a theory that must reinvent itself if it is to respond to the needs of the oppressed. This is precisely what Marcuse's version of critical theory was able to do and Adorno's could not. This is also where Angela Davis plays a major role in reshaping critical theory.

The very context of the development of early Frankfurt School critical theory was limiting. Critical theory began as an inquiry by white male Germans into the problem of gross economic inequality. Hence, early critical theory was driven by class-based inequality and oppression and did not develop as a response to the many other forms

of oppression from which a very large portion of the human species suffers. One of the main concerns of the Frankfurt School was the persistence of capitalism even after Marx and many Marxists claimed that the contradictions of capitalism would lead to its destruction. Not only did the Marxist revolution not take place, it was the case that those who would most benefit from revolution of social change were more likely to resist it. Debate about how to explain the persistence of capitalism and various levels of resistance to it informed the direction of the Frankfurt School and its leadership.

The first director of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research was Kurt Albert, who died in 1922 before the Institute was officially established. His replacement was Carl Grünberg (Jay 1973: p. 9). Grünberg's vision for the Institute was not only framed within the Marxian critique of political economy, it was characterized by a certain deterministic view. According to this view, the economic base determines the development of all other social institutions in capitalist societies. Economic laws shape social life. Understanding social life simply requires understanding the function of these economic laws. This is a view that other members of the Institute questioned. Martin Jay writes:

The prescription for social explanation offered by Grünberg was not, however, adhered to by the central figures of critical theory; they rejected the idea that all social phenomena were in essence a mere "reflex" of the economic. Likewise a certain optimistic determinism which often found expression in his work, suggesting a progression in the development of social institutions from "the less perfect to the more perfect," was not shared by most of those who later became critical theorists. But the strong emphasis Grünberg placed on historically oriented empirical research, carried out in the context of Marx's insights into political economy, was to become a crucial part of their frame of reference. (Held 1980: 31)

Max Horkheimer became the new director of the Institute in 1930 and was officially installed in 1931 after Grünberg's retirement (Jay 1973: 25). Like Grünberg, Horkheimer, at least for his first decade of leadership, attempted to carry out historically oriented empirical research (Abromeit 2011). The key difference between the direction in which Horkheimer took the Institute and Grünberg's direction is that under Horkheimer, emphasis was placed on the role of culture in maintaining and perpetuating capitalism. The Frankfurt School found it necessary to develop a critique of culture that would aid the critique of political economy (Adorno 1991; Marcuse 1969). Although the critique of culture opens the door for a broader critical theory, it remains confined to a critique of political economy and class-based oppression and fails to shed light on other forms of oppression. However, as we will soon see, the theoretical tools developed by critical theory for a critique of economic inequality can also be applied to other forms of oppression. It would be Marcuse and Angela Davis who would expand critical theory in new directions.

Marcuse and New Subjects of Social Change

Within the Marxian or Marxist framework, social change is to be the product of a proletarian revolution or a revolution on behalf of the proletariat. It is the failure of this revolution to materialize that gave birth to critical theory. One of the most import-

ant contributions of early Frankfurt School critical theory to social/political theory is the fusion of Marxian social theory and Freudian psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis would enable members of the Institute to understand the social and psychological mechanisms that prevented the development of revolutionary consciousness in the working class. It would also help them understand the rise of fascism. The empirical studies carried out by the Institute revealed to them the interconnectedness of the individual psyche and certain social and historical developments.

In its next major empirical project, the 1936 *Studies on Authority and Family*, the Institute would devote more time to historical analysis, as would Horkheimer in his individual explorations of the “anthropology of the bourgeois epoch” in the 1930s. Nonetheless, the study of German workers in 1929 had clearly demonstrated that unconscious character structures played a crucial role in the reproduction of society as a whole, a role that any serious critical theory of society could not afford to ignore. The study had confirmed Fromm’s arguments from “The Origins of the Dogma of Christ” that the drives of concrete individuals were bound up in and formed by larger historical and social processes, and that they in turn played a decisive role in the further development of these processes.

(Abromeit 2011: 225)

What the Frankfurt School discovered was that members of the working class had identified with the society that oppresses them. They had internalized the values of that society in such a way that a revolution against that society was unthinkable. The will of the ruling class is internalized and then reinforced by the working class.

A critical theory of society must discover and disclose this process of the internalization of oppressive and alienating values. At this level, Marcuse is in agreement with his Frankfurt School colleagues. It is worth quoting Marcuse at length here. He writes:

The idea of “inner freedom” here has its reality: it designates the private space in which man may remain “himself” as against the others, with himself in his being with and for others. Now precisely this private space has been invaded and whittled down in the technological reality: mass production and mass distribution claim the *entire* individual, and industrial psychology has long since ceased to be confined to the plant. The manifold processes of introjection seem to be ossified in almost mechanical reactions. The result is, not “adjustment” but *mimesis*: an immediate identification of the individual with his society, and, through his part of society, with the society as a whole. This immediate, “spontaneous” identification (which, according to an influential sociological doctrine, distinguishes “community” from “society”) reappears at the stage of high industrial civilization; however, in contrast with the primitive identification with the “community,” the new “immediacy” is the product of a sophisticated and scientific process of organization and manipulation. In this process, the “inner” dimension of the mind is whittled down: the dimension in which protest and opposition to the status quo can take roots, in which the power of negative thinking is at home—Reason as the critical power of negation.

(Marcuse 2001: 53–54)

This passage captures the major thesis of Marcuse's famous book *One-Dimensional Man*. In an interview with Brian Magee, Marcuse takes issue with the claim made by Marx that "the working class has nothing to lose but its chains" (Marcuse in Magee 1978). Marcuse claims that today they have considerably more to lose. He means by this that the system is designed to give the worker enough satisfaction to keep him pacified. It is enough to just have a job. The worker and her employer feel a bond between them because they watch the same TV shows. If the worker and his boss pull for the same football team they identify with each other. Hence, the sharing of trivial interests puts under erasure real important differences in social status between those who benefit from the present order of things and those who are the victims of the present order of things.

Although Marcuse sounds pessimistic from time to time, his work is far from pessimistic. This is what ultimately distinguishes him from Horkheimer and Adorno. What Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse had in common was the awareness that the working class may not develop the kind of critical consciousness that would lead to revolutionary social change. What distinguishes them is that while Horkheimer and Adorno looked no further for revolutionary possibilities, Marcuse never gave up the search for radical subjectivity. Marcuse would also use psychoanalysis to not only examine ways in which critical consciousness is whittled down; he would also use it to look for new possibilities for the development of critical consciousness.

The crucial move made by Marcuse is his reinterpretation of Freud's theory of instinctual repression. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud rightly claims that the development of civilization requires more and more repression. It is as if we are trapped in an oppressive system that leaves no room for emancipation. This attitude is consistent with the kind of critique that the Frankfurt School provides of Western industrial society. Adorno and Horkheimer will talk about the totally administered society, Marcuse will develop a theory of one-dimensional man, and so forth. However, while Freud, Adorno, and Horkheimer never move beyond this pessimism, Marcuse finds the tools for a theory of emancipatory possibilities in Freud's theory. That is, Marcuse will use Freud against Freud. Freud's 1915 essay titled "Repression" reveals that repression can never be complete. The instincts never give up their struggle against the mechanisms of repression. Therefore, it is always possible to develop critical, revolutionary consciousness.

There is no space here for following Marcuse's development and the arguments that he offers. For present purposes it is enough to know that Marcuse was always open to the development of new forms of revolutionary consciousness even if this consciousness did not develop in the working class. The many different forms of repression made possible many forms of resistance. It is this awareness that allowed Marcuse to connect with different social groups who were engaged in emancipatory struggle. Instead of looking to one group for revolutionary activity, Marcuse began to focus on what he called catalyst groups. These catalyst groups are groups of individuals who suffer from various forms of oppression, repression, and domination. As a result of their suffering they develop oppositional attitudes and practices toward the social system that oppresses them. Marcuse uses examples such as the Civil Rights movement, feminism, and student revolts. These sites of opposition provide hope for social change.

From Adorno to Marcuse: Angela Davis, Critical Theory, and Race

The fourth biennial meeting of the International Herbert Marcuse Society was held October 27–29, 2011, at the University of Pennsylvania. On the second day, Angela

Davis delivered the keynote address. Lucius Outlaw offered some reflections on critical theory during our dinner/reception on the final day. Professor Outlaw gave an insightful reflection on what distinguished Marcuse from his colleagues Adorno and Horkheimer. The difference is that Marcuse was a teacher and mentor who was also a student. It was in the activism of his students that Marcuse saw the potential for social change. Although he did not always agree with their tactics, he still took their cause seriously and tried to learn and participate as much as he could. Adorno and Horkheimer, on the other hand, seemed to clash with their activist students. Adorno resisted the application of critical theory to political activism (Farr, Kellner, Lamas and Reitz 2015).

Adorno continued to refuse the students' request that, as the leading representative of critical theory, he should declare his solidarity with their political goals. It was clear to him that he ran the risk of being used, and he made desperate efforts to preserve his independence as a theoretician.

(Müller-Doohm 2005: 460)

The fact that Adorno would not declare his solidarity with the students' political goals did not mean that he was unsympathetic. For the most part he agreed with them. However, there were two areas of concern that led Adorno to keep his distance from student protest. First, he was skeptical of the students' understanding of their own situation. That is, how well had they examined the forces that they were up against? How well did they understand the mechanisms of their own oppression? How well did they understand the weapons that were at the disposal of the Establishment? Revolutionary action requires serious theoretical work. Second, Adorno was worried about the premature application of theory to practice. He thought that in the minds of the students, the unity of theory and practice became the dominance of practice. If this is the case, then the theoretician becomes the servant of the activist. Adorno was afraid that he would be forced to conform to the wills of the activists for the sake of activism. If theory is to be correct and helpful, it must be independent.

Marcuse had some of these same worries and did not always agree with student activists. It seemed that Adorno was focused on getting theory right first, while Marcuse allowed theory and practice to work together and inform each other. This view would be reinforced by Angela Davis. Before her study of critical theory Angela Davis was already very political. Her political orientation was forced on her by her social situation. Davis's situation was that of being born in the racially segregated American South where she was forced to experience various forms of dehumanization, brutality, alienation, and so forth. She knew personally the four girls who were killed in Birmingham in 1963 when the 16th Street Baptist Church was bombed by white racists (Davis 2006: 128). Liberation was not just a nice idea or a theoretical concept; it was a necessity.

As a college student Davis was drawn to French literature and philosophy. As she was working toward a degree in French literature, she decided to devote more of her time to philosophy. This would lead to her encounter with the Frankfurt School. Davis had already read Marx at a very young age. Therefore, she was already prepared for Frankfurt School critical theory. Although she encountered Marcuse first while she was studying at Brandeis University, she would journey to Frankfurt to study with Adorno, who had returned to Germany with Horkheimer to reopen the Institute after the war. Marcuse was very supportive of Davis's move to Frankfurt. He believed that it was the

best place to get a good philosophical education. However, as the civil rights struggle in the United States intensified, Davis became restless and felt a need to be back home with her people in the struggle. She writes:

The more the struggles at home accelerated, the more frustrated I felt at being forced to experience it all vicariously. I was advancing my studies, deepening my understanding of philosophy, but I felt more and more isolated. I was so far away from the terrain of the fight that I could not even analyze the episodes of the struggle. I did not even have the knowledge or understanding to judge which currents of the movement were progressive and genuine and which were not. It was a difficult balance I was trying to maintain, and it was increasingly hard to feel a part of the collective coming to consciousness of my people.

(Davis 2006: 144–145)

Although Adorno had agreed to direct her doctoral dissertation, Davis could not resist the desire to go back to the United States and join the black liberation movement (Davis 2006: 145).

Having decided to leave Germany after two years of study, Davis corresponded with Marcuse who agreed to work with her at his new academic home, the University of California, San Diego. Davis recalls the difference between Adorno and Marcuse as follows:

Studying with both Adorno and Marcuse allowed me to think early on about the relationship between theory and practice, between intellectual work and activist work. Adorno tended to dismiss intellectual work that was connected with political activism. He argued that the revolution failed, not so much because of problems presenting themselves in the practical implementation of revolutionary theory, but rather because the theory itself was flawed, perhaps even fundamentally flawed. He therefore insisted that the only sure way to move along a revolutionary continuum was to effect, for the present, a retreat into theory. No revolutionary transformation was possible, he said, until we could figure out what went wrong in the theory.

(Davis 2004a: 316–317)

She continues: “Marcuse, of course, called for a very different relationship between intellectual work and political practice” (Davis 2004a: 317). For Marcuse, social transformation required the cooperation of theory and practice. One could not wait to get theory right first. Right theory developed alongside practice and vice versa. In fact, Marcuse’s own theory benefited from his observation of student activism in the ’60s and ’70s. Marcuse learned from people who were engaged in struggles for liberation the importance of not separating intellectual work from activism. It is here that Marcuse becomes the student of Angela Davis.

What separates Marcuse and Adorno is the ability to empathize with those in struggle. Marcuse learned from the experience of others. Davis says of Adorno: “In Frankfurt, when I was studying with Adorno, he discouraged me from seeking to discover ways of linking my seemingly discrepant interests in philosophy and social activism” (Davis 2005: xi).

Davis felt drawn back to the United States after the formation of the Black Panther Party in 1966. The situation of blacks in the United States created in her a sense of urgency. Unlike Adorno, Marcuse was much more supportive of activism. In the case of Angela Davis and the black struggle for freedom, Marcuse's support was based on his recognition of his own limitations. That is, he knew that he was in no position to fully understand the extent of black suffering. It is here that he learned from Davis; the teacher became the student. In a 1970 letter from Marcuse to Davis, he expresses a type of humility that one would not expect from Adorno. Marcuse admits to being a bit uneasy about introducing the publication of two lectures on Frederick Douglass given by Davis in 1969. He goes on to reflect on his reading of her prospectus for her thesis on Kant. It was in the reading of this thesis that Marcuse began to understand Davis's own attempt to unite theory and practice. He began to understand the urgency of the situation of blacks in the United States.

Marcuse sees in Davis an example of his own critique of abstract philosophical notions of freedom that permeates Western philosophy (Marcuse 2007). Marcuse writes in his letter:

The abstract philosophical concept of freedom which can never be taken away suddenly comes to life and reveals its very concrete truth: freedom is not only the goal of liberation, it *begins* with liberation; it is there to be "practiced." This, I confess, learned from you! Strange? I don't think so.

(Marcuse 2005: 49)

Marcuse makes this statement after mentioning what he learned from Davis's lectures on Frederick Douglass. The fight between Douglass and his master, the slave breaker Mr. Covey, is a critical moment because it reveals that freedom has to assert itself in a real, physical form if it is to exist at all. Even the freedom to do theory demands a certain degree of physical freedom. Compare Marcuse's statement to the following statement by Davis:

We have to talk about a complete and total change in the structures of the society because that's the only way for the concept like academic freedom to remain relevant. We have to go to the streets.

(Davis 2014: 212)

The point made by Davis and Marcuse is that if there is to be real freedom among human beings then social structures must change so that freedom is possible. A change in social structures demands activism or practice as well as theory. Even the freedom to do theory must be fought for.

In his letter to Davis, Marcuse acknowledges that he and Davis grew up in different worlds and that the world which Davis inhabited was one of violence and cruelty against her people. Her struggle was to make the philosophical concept of freedom a reality that would counter this violence and cruelty. Given the absence of real freedom for blacks in the world inhabited by Davis, it is no mystery that she would try to connect her philosophy (which theorized freedom) to her activism. Marcuse states:

I feel that no sophisticated explanation is needed to understand how Angela became a black militant, a revolutionary. Precisely because she was a true

“intellectual,” precisely because she was a true philosophy student—and because she was a human being, she took seriously what she read in the works.
(Davis 2014: 214)

Critical Theory, Intersectionality, and Angela Davis

Today critical theory still suffers from the appearance of being irrelevant to people of African descent (Outlaw 2005). With the exception of the work by scholars such as Lucius Outlaw, literature on critical theory is still dominated by white males, with the exception of a few white feminists who are a part of what we call third generation critical theorists. Second generation critical theory is dominated by the discourse ethics of Jürgen Habermas, while third generation critical theory is dominated by Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition. Neither Habermas nor Honneth adequately theorizes race. For some reason Davis is omitted from histories of critical theory. There are at least two possible reasons for this. First, critical theory, following Adorno, has become bogged down by theory and has sidelined political activism. Second, critical theory has never properly acknowledged the problem of race. Therefore, critical theory reflects the racialized structure of the society that it critiques. My position is that another story must be told if critical theory is to remain relevant. The story of Angela Davis and her engagement with critical theory must be included in the history of critical theory as well as in its future development.

In my view, Angela Davis represents an unrecognized side of Frankfurt School critical theory. As slightly older than Honneth and younger than Habermas, she belongs to a group between second and third generation critical theorists. As a woman and African American, Angela Davis belongs to two groups that have to some degree been overlooked by critical theory. While Habermas and Honneth have given some attention to feminism and their work has been widely used by feminists, their engagement with the struggle of women has been somewhat thin, and their engagement with black people has been even thinner.

Overall, students of critical theory have failed to properly recognize the problem of racism and its centrality in American society and have overlooked Davis and her contribution to critical social engagement (Outlaw 2005). Davis is an example of a critical theory in the interests of black folk as well as in the interests of all oppressed people. Her unique contribution to critical theory is the actual lived unity of theory and practice. We saw earlier Marcuse’s praise for Davis’s ability to bring the philosophical concept of freedom to life, to give it material existence through political struggle. In addition to uniting theory and practice, Davis also unites a multiplicity of struggles. This is one of her main contributions to critical theory, and it should be a guide for present and future critical theorists, who following Marx’s eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, seek to change the world and not merely interpret it.

According to Lucius Outlaw, one of Marcuse’s main contributions to a critical theory in the interests of black folk and others was his ability to think in term of the social whole. Thinking in terms of the social whole requires more than theory. While theory is a necessary component, since we are also engaged in a struggle over ideas, it must develop in tandem with practice. That is, theory must always inform and be informed by real concrete struggle for liberation. These struggles take on a multiplicity of forms but they are not disconnected, isolated, self-contained struggles. While each

struggle for liberation is against a specific form of oppression which each has its own distinct logic, each form of oppression and its corresponding struggle is a part of a system or network of oppressive mechanisms. For example, we must examine the way in which race-based oppression supports class-based oppression while not being identical to class-based oppression. This holds true in reverse. Marcuse and Davis both seem to embody the view held by Martin Luther King Jr. when he wrote that “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” (King 1986: 290). This is why Davis and Marcuse both advocated a radical transformation of the entire society. This is why Marcuse called for solidarity between all groups who were engaged in a struggle for liberation no matter what form of oppression they struggled against and no matter where that struggle takes place.

The critical theory of Angela Davis is not only informed by Frankfurt School critical theory and Marxism, it is equally and perhaps more informed by real concrete struggles in the street. This includes the civil rights movement, the black power movement, feminism, black feminist thought, prison abolition, and so forth. One of the key ideas that connect Davis to Marcuse’s notion of solidarity is the black feminist concept of intersectionality. However, the concept of intersectionality is a bit more complex and goes a bit deeper than the notion of solidarity. The notion of solidarity suggests that various groups engaged in the struggle for liberation support each other in their respective struggles. However, these struggles may still be taken to be separate from each other. If this is the case, then the deep underlying relationship between forms of oppression are never addressed. This allows a fragmentation that hinders the possible success of these movements. In connecting the recent Occupy Movement to other contemporary struggles for liberation, Davis writes:

The fact that relations among movements—the antiwar movement, the Black movement, the women’s movement—were framed as coalitional was indicative of the inability to grasp the organic interrelationships of these issues. Today, many of us effortlessly speak of intersectionality, thanks primarily to the work of women of color feminism. We can conceptualize these issues not as discrete, disconnected issues whose relationship we have to mechanically orchestrate but, rather, as issues that are already in crosshatched, overlaid, intersectional patterns. Class, race, gender, sexuality, ability, and other social relations are not simplistically separate. They can never remain uncontaminated by each other.
(Davis 2015: 435–436)

The concept of intersectionality has its origins in black feminism (Collins 1998). Black feminism distinguishes itself from what is often called white middle-class feminism by bringing to feminist conversations the issues of race and socio/economic class (Davis 1990: 30). Black feminists criticize those white feminists who have ignored the intersection of gender, race, and class (Davis 1990: 30) Davis, however, takes intersectionality beyond the terrain marked out by most black feminists, as she has engaged issues of war and prison abolition. In a Marcusean way, she has called for the total transformation of our society. Marcuse was aware of and supportive of Davis’s call for total social transformation. In some comments made about Davis in 1972, Marcuse seems to highlight Davis’s view of intersectionality (Marcuse 2014).

In her publications over the years, Davis has tirelessly demonstrated the connection between the US prison system and gender, class, and race. In a society built on the oppression of certain social groups, the institutions of that society will reflect the goals of the dominant group. This is a point that Marcuse and Davis share. The liberation of individuals demands the liberation of all of our institutions. The project of human liberation must be thorough in its critique of contemporary institutions and their visible and invisible mechanisms of oppression. The concept of intersectionality developed by Davis and other black feminists reflects a refusal to reduce oppression to one sort. Instead, the focus is on the overall social structure that is designed to maintain and perpetuate systems of domination and oppression.

While the critical theory of Angela Davis is informed by Marxian theory and early Frankfurt School critical theory, she has made much broader use of these theoretical tools than others in this tradition. She is one of the few critical theorists who has her focus on the whole social system and the multiple forms of oppression generated by this system. For this reason, it is my view that survival and relevance of critical theory requires a new look at the work of Angela Davis.

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