



## The gender of critical theory: On the experiential grounds of critique

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Since its origins in interwar Germany, critical theory associated with the Frankfurt School has foregrounded the notion that philosophical thought needs contact with sociologically ascertainable and materially palpable experiences of suffering and domination to become critically reflective. In *The Gender of Critical Theory*, Lois McNay takes sober measure of just how far the early Frankfurt School's signature 'humility' (p. 174) about reason's prowess has receded among recent thinkers who carry the tradition's standard: Rainer Forst, Axel Honneth, Alessandro Ferrara, Nancy Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi. Reading this excellent book, one senses that critical theory has reached a pivotal juncture where a determined effort must be mounted to counteract these thinkers' swoon toward normative foundationalism. Yet McNay not only seeks to revive critical theory's lapsed appreciation for direct experience: she also projects a novel path forward that would engage avidly with oppressed people's everyday lives and discernments. Viewing post-Habermasian writings through lenses supplied by feminist critical race theories, McNay offers an exciting new agenda for critical theory to re-centre situated experience within the force-fields of radical social critique.

McNay argues that the Frankfurt School's latter-day leaders embrace in principle but ignore in practise the need to anchor normative and institutional critiques of power in the experiences of those subjected to the harshest forms of domination. Each thinker foregoes imagining a genuinely interactive relation between theoretical concepts and direct experiences, opting to preserve the supposedly transcendental status of a 'monist', 'totalizing' 'paradigm' (pp. 38-39) meant to illuminate structures of social domination and immanent sources of transformation. The philosopher's anxious desire to be read as objective, and self-arrogation as uniquely competent to think this way, thus keeps at arm's length the experiences of pain, exclusion

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and exploitation that critical theory depends on to evade reification and gather capacious social knowledge. What these theories lack is a properly ‘dialogical’ relation with oppressed people, which would attune theorists to forms of power occluded by their own privilege, unearth normative values subsisting within dominated groups’ ‘practices, beliefs, and struggles’ (p. 30), and express ethically and politically ‘the practical implication of the theorist in the field of study’ (p. 32).

McNay presents the book’s main argument in the introduction and first chapter. The latter consults a range of Black feminist critical-race and anticolonial authors, notably bell hooks, Patricia Collins, and Angela Davis, to expose problems with ‘paradigm-led theory’. Putting these writers in conversation with Theodor Adorno, Maeve Cooke and Pierre Bourdieu adds leverage and signals that the book aims to trouble rather than reinscribe the boundaries of ‘critical theory’.

Forst heads McNay’s line-up, and his theory of the right to justification provides a glaring example of the tendency to profess a dialogical sensibility but to proceed monologically. Forst defines his principle of justification as a ‘universal constant’ (p. 68), thereby exempting this core idea from critique on any historical or empirical basis, even though he also claims to derive the principle from the practical realities of reasoning processes (p. 65). The problem is that ‘insufficient attention is given to the ways in which justificatory processes are always historically situated and, therefore, must inevitably confront discrepancies of power between interlocutors’ (p. 76). As McNay notes, racially and sexually marginalised persons routinely face sceptical demands to justify themselves from privileged people whose own actions and positions are simply presumed to be valid (p. 79).

Endgame fidelity to a monist paradigm likewise thwarts Honneth’s effort to heighten the historical sensibility of his theory of recognition. Attempting to fashion a ‘context-transcending vantage point’ (p. 94) from within the shifting contexts of human intimacy, Honneth posits a dynamic of ‘progress’ that establishes increasingly positive recognition-relations within the family as history advances. Yet as McNay shows, marshalling feminist empirical and theoretical resources, violence and unequal care-work among family members endanger and disadvantage women no less egregiously today than in previous times. With Honneth, as with her other targets, McNay underscores features of the theorist’s thought that she sees as worthwhile: in this case, the ‘key role’ that Honneth grants ‘to the lived suffering of subordinated groups in guiding unmasking critique’ (p. 93). This is a virtue of McNay’s book, and it reflects her feel for immanent critique even as she delivers unsparing criticisms grounded in close readings.

Ferrara, McNay explains, contends that certain phenomenologically tangible experiences function as ‘exemplars’ in the sense of disclosing ‘previously unarticulated experiences, meanings, and values...and new possibilities for democratic thought and action’ (p. 129). Pressed to distinguish exemplary from non-exemplary jolts to the imagination, however, Ferrara posits a concept of exemplarity based ‘in the speculative construct of *sensus communis* defined as a set of non-naturalized, transcultural intuitions about human flourishing’ (p. 125). Once more, critical theory deprives itself of the encounters with concrete ‘suffering and other negative experiences’ (p. 138) that could catalyse a genuinely social-critical perspective with a self-neutralising gesture.



McNay sees more promise in Jaeggi's reconstruction of theory's mission as the effort to formulate 'inchoate or misunderstood' negativities as concrete 'problems' to be addressed collectively (p. 202). For McNay, Jaeggi's grounded approach to normative inquiry aligns her work with feminist preferences for fighting oppression 'through a range of contextually indexed practices of empowerment rather than through a single grand theory of emancipation' (p. 192). Jaeggi, too, however, skips her theory to the sheltered shores of philosophical objectivism: she proposes that 'a "formal" account of successful learning or progress' allows the theorist to render 'context-transcending' judgments on the emancipatory status of any given 'problem'-solving process. McNay finds this formal notion 'depoliticizing', 'sociologically underspecified' and prone to misrepresent 'structural inequalities and abstract forms of domination as situationally specific blockages' (p. 207).

Fraser breaks from paradigm-led theorizing by advocating a model of moral-political communication guided by 'participatory parity', which she identifies as a 'principal idiom of popular deliberation about social justice' and hence a socially immanent source of normative orientation (p. 163). Yet she ultimately shares her crowd's inclination to privilege the academic philosopher's self-imputed ability to adjudicate what "'really merits the title of injustice'" (p. 179) over "'notoriously unreliable'" (p. 171) situated expressions of experience. Still, McNay sees the conceptual architecture of Fraser's theory as better attuned to the concerns of feminist critical-race and anti-colonial theorists because it aims to spark attention to plural accounts and stories from below.

At times I wished McNay's discussions of feminist critical-race and decolonizing authors were less glancing. The book shares a fault for which Amy Allen's *The End of Progress* has been criticised: citing such theorists to raise fundamental questions about European critical theory, but then devoting most close reading to texts by 'major' European thinkers and hence re-confirming their dominance. Why not a full chapter, for instance, on Davis, whom McNay cites as instructively construing densely interactive theory-experience relations?

McNay nonetheless extracts enticing intimations of more dialogical ways of conducting critical theory from the critiques of her main authors. Dialogical knowledge-creation, McNay suggests, should be a 'cooperative endeavour' premised on 'a methodological equality between theory and experience' and recognising the need for both to improve each other (pp. 180-181). Oppressed people should take an 'active' part in 'the process by which knowledge is verified or legitimated', not just supply 'the empirical content of the theory' (p. 32). To develop a fully fledged notion of dialogism, one could splice such passages together with McNay's idea of a pragmatist practice of 'problematization' in response to Jaeggi, her call *contra* Fraser for a more diverse palette of normative exercises apart from 'adjudicating' claims about justice, and the notion of 'politicized exemplarity' that she advances as a riposte to Ferrara.

McNay's intervention, however, also should direct attention to thinkers far from Frankfurt who conceptualise dialogical relations of social interpretation and world-transformation in explicit terms. Paulo Freire's conception of popular education, for example, involves an understanding of dialogue which embodies McNay's insistence that 'lived experience is an indispensable resource for critique, and that the



knowledge that oppressed groups have of the world is central to the production of unmasking critical theory' (p. 227). As I argue elsewhere (2019, pp. 37–71), Freire challenges critical theory to incorporate intellectual exchanges with marginalised people into the formulation of theoretical concepts from the ground up, going beyond roles that McNay affirms of correcting a theory's 'bias', in-filling its 'blinds-pots' or 'checking' the 'validity and continuing relevance' of an 'initial starting point' (pp. 182, 228). Such statements appear to approve a lingering endorsement of epistemic hierarchy: the academic devises and proposes the theory while the interlocutor responds and adjusts.

Nevertheless, critically scrutinizing this way of framing critical theory's ethical and political relations with oppressed subjects would be wholly in the spirit of this book, which goes further than any recent text to raise such pressing issues of method. *The Gender of Critical Theory* should be read by all who are eager learn where Frankfurt-based critical theory has moved in the post-Habermasian period and how critical theory more generally could realize its potential for immanent critique that fights domination and changes the world.

## References

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