
Review

The domestication of critical theory

Michael J. Thompson

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The Frankfurt tradition of critical theory (henceforth Critical Theory/CT) has been enduring a crisis. Many are trying to renew its once-compelling emancipatory impetus. Michael J. Thompson's *The Domestication of Critical Theory* is no exception to this burgeoning trend. Thompson is not only suspicious of Habermas's linguistic–pragmatic turn but also dissatisfied with the aporetic CT introduced in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). Instead, he assigns enduring critical power to earlier first-generation Critical Theory scholarship for it took seriously the critique of political economy, not just the critique of superstructures, as constitutive of the larger framework within which emancipation is sought.

Furthermore, Thompson's book/project runs contrary to most other present attempts, which target specific conceptual formations within CT's edifice. It seeks no less than to lay the ground for 'a *critical metaphysics* understood as an attempt to grasp the nature of social reality... as well as grant the individual cognitive access to a more rational form of sociation in order to define the higher purposes and ends that social life can yield for the development of the individual and the collective interest of the community as whole' (p. 4, emphasis in original).

I understand the book's overall statement as embodying three related claims: (1) the hermeneutic–pragmatic CT falters in confronting the socio-structural domination produced by (post-)neoliberal capitalism; (2) the conceptual assemblage of first-generation CT does not suffice for reinvigorating the enterprise; and (3) the way forward for CT passes through integrating 'structural–functionalist' premises and arguments into a rearticulated Hegelian–Marxian conceptual framework.

The book is effectively composed of four parts. The outer chapters (the Preface–Introduction; Part III/chapter 7) preach more than problematize or unlock CT's domestication puzzle. The inner chapters, however, suggest a thoughtful reconstructive arc. Their argumentative strategy juggles between the introduction of new terms/devices and subsequent alterations of their perspectives and emphases. That



being said, the narrative maintains a high, and at times counter-productive, level of abstraction.

The bulk of Chapter 1 is devoted to distinguishing two paradigms of critical theories: (i) Marx–Weber’s and the (ii) idealist–pragmatist. Thompson identifies the onset of the Frankfurt tradition’s paradigm shift from the former to the latter with Habermas, and associates Honneth and Forst with it as well. Forthrightly, Thompson classifies the aforementioned theorists in the ‘neo-idealist’ camp as ‘[t]heir theories stem from an account of reason, of social practices and noumenal capacities that are divorced from the distorting potency of social power ... to shape norms, values and cognition (p. 15). Thompson contends that ‘neo-idealist’ theories reproduce existing power relations as they lack a ‘dialectical conception of consciousness ... able to grasp the actual source of norms: their attachment to functionalist properties of hierarchical social systems and goals’ (p. 36).

In contrast, the Marx–Weber’s paradigm is premised on the idea that concrete forms of ‘economic/extractive power’ pervade not only economic relationships, but also rationalized social relations of ‘noneconomic’ and functionally differentiated spheres of life (p. 17). Accordingly, Thompson holds that once the ‘economic embeddedness of social relations is displaced and subjects are ... seen as capable of constructing critical reasons and sensibilities outside of the structural–functional pressures of administered economic life’ (p. 21) *social action* loses its *social structure*. Hence, Marx–Weber’s thesis postulates that ‘epistemological processes are dialectically linked to socialization processes infected by rationalized value-orientations rooted in the logic of capital agglomeration’ (p. 24). To claim otherwise is to commit ‘the neo-idealist fallacy.’

In addition, Thompson claims (though does not sufficiently demonstrate) that the values underlying the operative mechanisms of Marx–Weber paradigm are principally maintained by highly rationalized and heteronomous forms of institutional indoctrination (p. 29). Nevertheless, he neither explicates at the outset his conceptions of social structure and social action, nor clarifies his notion of the ‘social,’ which alternates continually between individualist and collectivist conceptions. Besides, Thompson does not discuss the Hegelian or Marxian ontology of ‘objective’ understanding of the ‘structure of reality itself’ (p. 21). Instead, he resorts to Durkheim and his notion of social fact as an ontological corollary to Rousseau’s metaphysical stance on social power, which he buys into (pp. 30–31). Social facts are external to the individuals (despite being realized only through them). This stance is arguably incompatible with Marx’s stance on reality and praxis as reflected in the *Theses on Feuerbach* or *The German Ideology* (which are espoused in chapter 6). For Marx, ‘*reality is not identifiable within an ontology of objectivity*’ (Henry, 1983: 12, emphasis in original).

In Chapter 2, Thompson marshals Marcuse’s critique of one-dimensional, reified, discourse for critiquing the idealist–pragmatist paradigm’s neglect of the ‘desiccation of consciousness [which] is a basic consequence of the structural and



functional dynamics of modern, administered, capitalist society' (p. 39). Thompson's analysis, however, is imbued with a belief in historical progress, whereby capitalist modernity 'is coordinated according to a liberation of identities even as the organization of society as a whole fulfills the interests and needs of a single class' (p. 40). Conversely, Chapter 3 advances a plausible argument. Thompson argues, 'recognition ... fails as a critical theory of society because it emphasizes social action at the expense of the distorting influence of social structure and function' (p. 65). Further, he contends that Honneth's conception of CT as 'ethics of recognition' only prescribes a prototype of good, just society. Yet, the key for CT 'is to provide us with a theoretical vantage point that allows us to see the distortions of an "inverted world" and that can provide us with critical categories for social criticism and judgment' (p. 78). Thompson's discussion, however, channels an understanding of justice and injustice as 'logically inverted' concepts, and thus does not deliver on the dissimilar logics of justice-driven and injustice-curtailing emancipation.

Part II (Chapters 4–6) embarks on reconstruction of the operational logic of CT. It starts with a reconsideration of the base-superstructure hypothesis in order to rectify CT's insufficient treatment of how capitalist institutions constitute subjectivity. It claims that the hypothesis should be seen as the core of CT because the project of the critique of consciousness (*Ideologiekritik*) was always the 'main concern' thereof (p. 92). By rejecting the metaphor of *mechanistic* causality as an explanans of the base-superstructure model, Thompson sets to show the *deterministic* nature of 'social structure and consciousness through modern theories of values and of form of collective intentionality' (p. 92), and argues that it is the result of 'a structural-functional adaptation of subjects to social structures' (p. 98). Moreover, by incorporating Parsons's theory of value-acquisition and a modified version Searle's account of 'social ontology as collective intentionality,' he demonstrates that the determinative authority of the base over superstructure 'requires and includes the shaping of subjective mental states ... and other elements of the personality system' (pp. 104–107). Even so, *Ideologiekritik* is not the only indispensable pillar of CT – critique of the political economy of capitalism is the other one. A relevant account of the workings of contemporary capitalism (i.e. the base) and the changes that effectuated its operational logics over time is absent from the analysis (cf. Azmanova, 2014).

Chapter 5 exemplifies an interrogation of the legitimacy of the capitalist social order from a functionalist perspective. Social power operates through the work norms as they 'organize not only cognitive forms of knowledge but also the evaluative and judgmental capacities of subjects as well' (p. 123). Thompson assumes that capitalism promotes a consensus of value-orientations, and that aprotic CT has an anthropological presupposition according to which the aforementioned is facilitated because it rests on 'certain passivity of ethical agency' (p. 124). To that end, Thompson aims to show that the reification of the



sphere of values is itself ‘a problem of value-orientation’ (p. 126). Despite its blanket-like stretch, this account of reification enables Thompson to unravel Parsons’s socialization (of Weber’s concept) of value-orientation as ‘the self-regulating mechanism of the social order’ (p. 138) corresponding to ‘the needs of the particular institutional goals that one inhabits or functions within’ (p. 132). Lastly, the fusing of this understanding of socialization processes to Marx–Weber’s paradigm permits Thompson to counterpose the radical subjectivity of aporetic CT, as well as the intersubjective theories of democratic will formation (p. 135 ff).

In Chapter 6, Thompson turns to CT’s epistemological framework and the eminent division between fact and value/norm. He argues, *contra* Arendt and Habermas, that ‘any true knowledge of the world and its objects is simultaneously descriptive and prescriptive knowledge’ (p. 151). His ambitious argument draws on Fromm’s ‘normative humanism’ to extract ‘a critical epistemology that dialectically sublates the fact-value split into a coherent critical theory of society ... to provide a critical-cognitive foundation for ... an *objective ethics*, based on ontological principles’ (p. 152, emphasis in original). Eventually, Thompson’s effort to secure an objective normative critique of society grounded in the life processes of individuals remains insufficiently substantiated. Still, this discussion prepares the ground for his ultimate claim in Chapter 7, where his proposed ontological reasoning purports ‘the capacity to articulate a *theory of judgment* based on the objective characteristics of any object’ (p. 200, my emphasis).

The dialectical synthesis of critique and judgment leads us to critical rationality (ontology) and grants us access to the objective world. Thompson perceives this ostentatious thesis as the cornerstone of the critical social ontology of future CT. Despite navigating the contentious stakes of Hegelian metaphysics to vindicate this thesis, the final chapter does not take the reader round the multifarious fronts they elicit.

In conclusion, one could say that the book’s greatest virtue is also its greatest vice. Bracketing the contemporaneous produce of critical theory writ-large and the current formation of (post-)neoliberal capitalism proves a double-edged sword (cf. Azmanova, 2010; Fraser, 2014; Streeck, 2016). While staging much-needed conceptual investigation, the intervention’s contextual specificity and empirical concreteness stand vague, which in turn undermines the book’s pertinence.

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