

From Frankfurt to Fox

The Strange Career of Critical Theory

Malloy Owen

Spare a thought for the critical theory cognoscenti, who have lately been forced to watch the ideas they cherish kicked around in a highly public and undignified manner. The slap fight over so-called critical race theory is the first case that comes to mind. The critical theorists are full of scorn for the conservative activists who have adopted the term as a scare word. But some of them may also feel a certain unease over the development of industrial-scale diversity training like that practiced by “whiteness studies” scholar Robin DiAngelo. Are PowerPoints telling Goldman Sachs employees how racist they are really opening the way to “a state of civilization...in which human needs are fulfilled in such a manner and to such an extent that surplus-repression can be eliminated,” to quote Herbert Marcuse’s utopian vision?¹ One can imagine an argument to this effect, but formulating it would be a heavy task. Diversity training’s entanglement with bureaucracy is just one attribute that would seem to disfavor it from the point of view of critical theory, at least of the Frankfurt School variety. Yet rightly or wrongly, it is diversity training that today carries forward the banner of critical theory in public. Confusing times indeed.

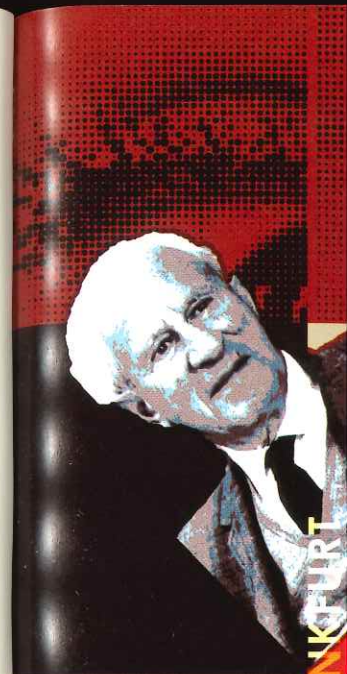
Similar points could be made about critical theories of sex and gender, of disability, and so on. On the one hand, these developments have spurred conservatives to devise ever more absurd caricatures of critical theory itself. On the other, the suspicion lingers that critical theory has somehow betrayed itself, sold out to power, eaten away at the very solidarity that its founders had hoped to recover.

If all that is not enough, the critical theorists also have to reckon with the strange allure the Frankfurt School and French theory have in certain corners of the right. Michel Foucault, never a reliable ally of the left, was taken up anew by conservatives during the COVID pandemic, when the concept of biopower seemed eerily apt. Giorgio

Malloy Owen, a PhD student in political science at Stanford University, is a contributing editor of *The Hedgehog Review*.

Right: THR illustration; Shutterstock background.

Is critical theory in service of omnipotent bureaucracy critical theory at all?



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Agamben, an heir to Foucault's account of biopower, has alienated large parts of the left and won new friends on the right through his power analysis of the global pandemic response. The critical theory journal *Telos*, along with some of its regular contributors, was never averse to thought from outside the left but is now seen in some quarters as positively right-wing. One of the intellectual godfathers of the latest incarnation of the New Right is Nick Land, who was once a leading figure in a cutting-edge school of digital media studies influenced by the French theory luminaries Georges Bataille and Jean Baudrillard.

A new generation of conservative writers, almost wholly severed from the old ecosystem of *National Review* and the American Enterprise Institute, regularly invoke twentieth-century critical theory against institutional progressivism; many of them have gathered around the slick new online journal *Compact*, which was founded with the explicit intention of marrying the critical theories of left and right against the despised liberal center. And as *Compact's* managing editor, Geoffrey Shullenberger, has pointed

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out, a number of influential figures in and around Steve Bannon's Trumpist circle were initiated into the mysteries of the Frankfurt School and French postmodern thought.² Shullenberger argues that even as figures such as Andrew Breitbart condemned "cultural Marxism" outwardly, they were putting into practice lessons learned from the critical-theoretical account of how power works in liberal modernity. Like Breitbart before him, Fox News

star Tucker Carlson is now bringing this most popular and accessible expression of the critical style before a right-wing public. Fretting about hostile elites is nothing new on the right, but Carlson's attacks on what he calls the "ruling class" and its subtle uses of the market and the culture industry to manipulate preferences and shape the sense of the possible are several degrees more sophisticated and more suspicious than the populist yelps of his predecessors on conservative cable and talk radio. The reactionary blogger Curtis Yarvin, a 2021 guest on Carlson's show, refers to this form of order "the Cathedral"—a decentralized but omnipotent system of information production and control that is often hard to distinguish from the culture industry as described in the critical theory canon. *and this is fair enough*

All in all, it is not as clear as it once seemed how the project of critical theory maps onto the practical politics—institutional and insurgent—of our moment. More serious is the looming sense that critical theory is somehow near the center of the crisis of our time. While something called "critical theory" is animating a new culture war playing out in schools, universities, government agencies, and corporate human resource departments, something else, also called "critical theory," appears to have played an important part in the formation of the present-day New Right, which has generated such acute anxiety among progressives and Reagan-Bush conservatives alike. Critical theory certainly never claimed to be on the side of the healthy, sensible centrists who are most appalled by these developments. Still, the worse things get, the more we want to know: What role has critical theory played in getting us into something resembling a democratic crisis?



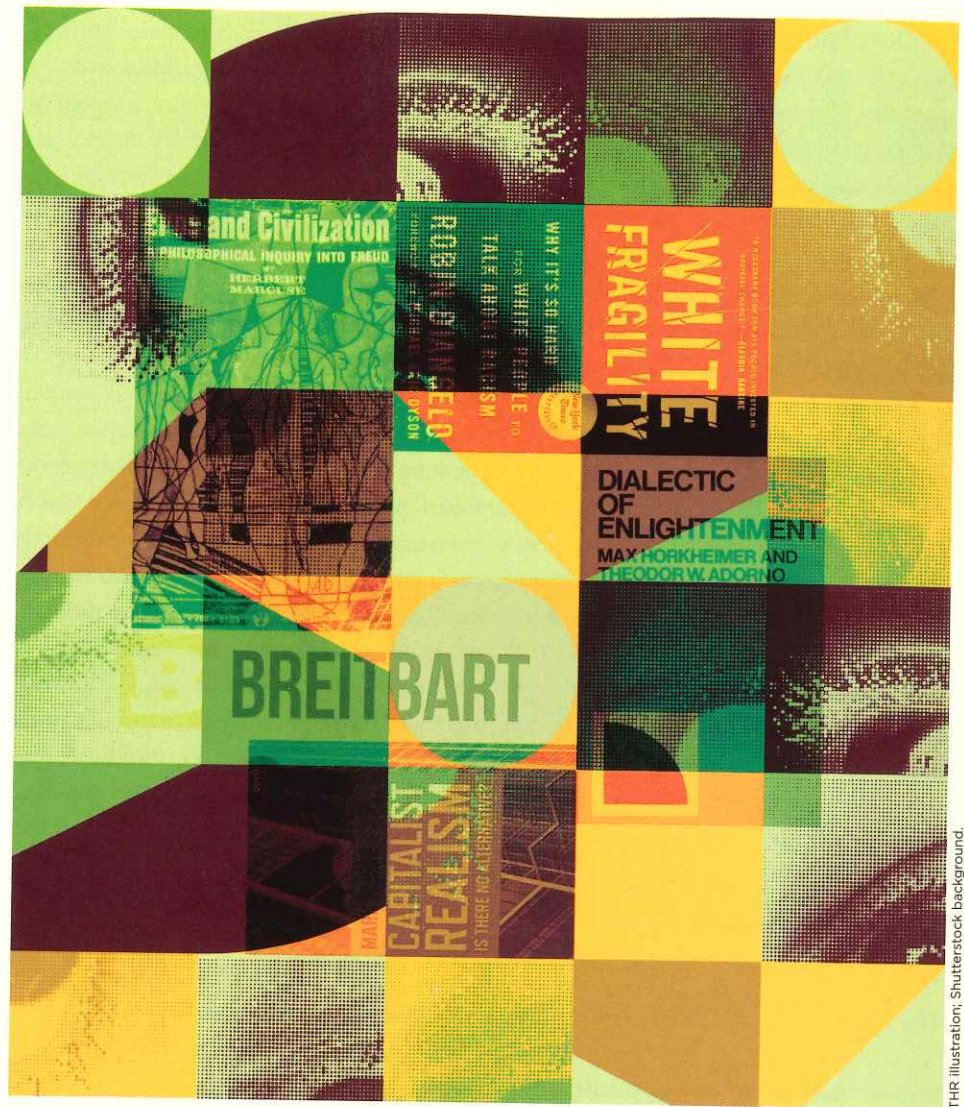
Critical Theory

Here I should pause to use the term *Critical Theory* for some purposes, that is, at the cost of excluding some elements in Marx's thought that they believed Enlightenment's genealogical line of thought to DiAngelo's *White Fragility* only a minor influence.

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Critical Theory as a Style

Here I should pause and define my terms. A purist might insist on limiting the scope of the term *Critical Theory*—capital C, capital T—to the work of the Frankfurt School. For some purposes, that is surely the right way to go. Applying the term more broadly comes at the cost of exegetical precision: Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer understood themselves as working out a very specific diagnosis, drawing on particular elements in Marx and Freud, of the “new barbarism” or “disaster triumphant” into which they believed Enlightened modernity had descended.³ While it is possible to trace a genealogical line of descent from Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to DiAngelo’s *White Fragility*, the path is a tortuous one, and the Frankfurt School has only a minor influence on much of what is called critical theory today.

exactly
right

Yet the problem we are considering here is not really an exegetical one. “Critical Theory” is not just a historically situated school of thought; it is also a *style*, a mode of thinking, and in particular of thinking as political action. Its progenitors understood this; they knew that the turn from traditional to critical theory meant changing the way theory was done, its aims, its expectations, and not just substituting good ideas for bad. It is the fate of that style—which has proven to be available to groups far beyond the left-pessimist circle of the Frankfurt School—that we are now compelled to investigate. Critical theory as practiced by this circle had its heyday of direct influence in the 1960s, and now persists as one analytic instrument among many in academic circles. Critical theory as a style appears to be setting the terms of our politics.

However, reducing critical theory to a mode of political practice is too simple, because critical theories have always justified their turn away from traditional abstract theory by making recognizably analytic claims about the way power works here and now. Differences on that question are at the heart of critical theory’s critique of non-critical political philosophy, sociology, and political science; such differences also motivate their disagreements with one another.

We might regard critical theory as a system of cultural beliefs.

To think seriously about what critical theory might be doing to us, we have to understand it as it understands itself, which is to say, for one thing, as refusing simple distinctions between thought and practice.⁴ In that light, we might regard critical theory as a system of *cultural beliefs*: commonly held claims about the world that generate collective action. If critical theory has taken root in the academy or the vanguard of the New Right or anywhere else, it has done so not as a series of texts but as a culture, and that culture must be our object of analysis.

The Unmasking of Odysseus

Because the choice between Scylla and Charybdis has entered our lexicon simply as an image of a terrible dilemma, we are in danger of forgetting that one option is unconditionally better than the other. If you steer close to Scylla, she will exact a terrible price: Each of her six heads will snap up one of your oarsmen. If you steer close to Charybdis, your ship and everyone on it will be sucked down into the whirlpool. Thus, the enchantress Circe tells Odysseus—and it is hard to think of a moral code that would not require following her advice—to accept the lesser evil and choose Scylla. Odysseus asks whether there is really no way to escape the dilemma by avoiding Charybdis and fighting off Scylla, and Circe answers sharply, “Why won’t you yield to the immortal gods?” The lesser of the two evils is the only way. So Odysseus, concealing the truth from his crew, steers for Scylla and watches her devour six sailors high above his head as they scream his name. Later, telling the story, he allows himself a moment of grief for those sacrificial deaths that he knew were coming and could not prevent: “Of all things my eyes have witnessed in my journeying on pathways of the sea, the sight of them was the most piteous I’ve ever seen.”⁵

In their chapter on the Frankfurt School, they present us as figures of a “modern” economics. “The modern character of a legal system is what comes between the face of immortals, the Sirens, the lotus fruit, the bourgeois disillusion, the theme of the false promise, the irreparable scarcity, the center of Adorno’s *Times* horoscope circle, Marcuse would do it in the latter part of the century can be reasonably to such an extent

In another sense, between Scylla and Charybdis, the critical theory interpretation to the unwritten. Adorno’s Odysseus as the archaic was merely the modern scope and power of the Frankfurt School adherents’ fatalism distorted the evening stream of work generated by the strengthened this. Marx, they stressed beliefs and the loss of these beliefs. Their more powerful by discovered that capitalism’s own punishment” schoolteacher compromise between sized respect for ‘cultural

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In their chapter on the *Odyssey* in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the founding text of Frankfurt School critical theory, Adorno and Horkheimer interpret Scylla and Charybdis as figures of a “mythic inevitability” that anticipate the false necessities of bourgeois economics. “The natural relation of strength and impotence has already assumed the character of a legal connection,” they explain. “Scylla and Charybdis have a right to what comes between them.” Odysseus’s cunning but ultimately resigned optimization in the face of immortal and unchangeable obstacles—not only the monsters, but the Sirens, the lotus fruit, and Circe herself—is an image of “renunciation, the principle of bourgeois disillusionment, the outward schema for the intensification of sacrifice.”⁶ The theme of the false dilemma, the mendacious demand for renunciation in the face of an irremediable scarcity, runs all through the work of the Frankfurt School founders: It is the center of Adorno’s interpretation of the secret repressive meaning of the *Los Angeles Times* horoscope column, and in *Eros and Civilization* and later *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse would develop it into the basis for his summons to sexual revolution. As he puts it in the latter work, “The only pertinent question is whether a state of civilization can be reasonably envisaged in which human needs are fulfilled in such a manner and to such an extent that surplus-repression can be eliminated.”⁷

In another sense, however, the early Frankfurt School was itself attempting a passage between Scylla and Charybdis. In order to reveal the great lie of bourgeois renunciation, the critical theorists had to bring into public an unsparingly suspicious mode of interpretation to be applied to texts of all kinds, ancient and modern, written and unwritten. Adorno and Horkheimer’s unmasking of Odysseus as the ancestor of the repressed bourgeois was merely the most dramatic demonstration of the scope and power of this suspicion. The Frankfurt School adherents maintained that bourgeois capitalism distorted the psyche and that the ever-broadening stream of what we would now call *content*, generated by the “culture industry,” continually strengthened this distorting effect. Drawing on Freud and Nietzsche in addition to Marx, they stressed the contingency of the most cherished and fundamental cultural beliefs and the long, hard collective labor of repression that was required to instill these beliefs. Their analysis of mass culture unearthed an engine of subjection made more powerful by its compulsive appeal to a helpless public. Adorno and Horkheimer discovered that cartoon “thrashings” of Donald Duck taught audiences “to take their own punishment”⁸; in “the heroine of an extremely light comedy of pranks,” a young schoolteacher continually getting into scrapes, Adorno found “an attempt to reach a compromise between prevailing scorn for the intellectual and the equally conventionalized respect for ‘culture.’”⁹

Interpretive hijinks like these are good fun for intellectuals, but for Adorno and Horkheimer they also revealed that the simplest and apparently most intuitive comic and dramatic tropes were working to maintain an unnatural system of thought and feeling in the public. By revealing the hidden deceptions of life under bourgeois capitalism, the critical theorists hoped to destabilize its false necessities, which is to say to

Scylla and Charybdis are figures of “mythic inevitability” that anticipate the false necessities of bourgeois economics.

destabilize the capitalist West's way of life. They may not often have been able to match Nietzsche's violent eloquence, but like him, they set out to philosophize with a hammer.

Suspicious theorists are so keen to escape the false necessity of Scylla, the evil they know, that they run the risk of steering too close to Charybdis, the void that pulls you in when you have nothing solid to cling to. Like their teacher Nietzsche, who saw the real pitch-black nihilism as no less an enemy than the simpering, repressive virtues he sought to expose, the critical theorists were aware of this danger. They insisted that their social critique aimed not just at mindless destruction of the known but at the establishment of a new form of life that could be imagined, if not exactly specified in shining detail.

The point was not to recover a changeless human nature; that would mean steering back toward Scylla, conceding the same kind of permanent, inescapable necessity that Adorno and Horkheimer found in the Enlightenment mythic. Instead, Horkheimer put forward a picture of class society as suffering from a misalignment between "powers and needs."¹⁰ Human psychology had no eternal, transcendent essence, but a dynam-

ic, historically conditioned human psyche might be forced into more or less ill-fitting cultural and economic forms.

Marcuse, the most marketable of the first Frankfurt generation, confidently charted his course between false necessity and the void by appealing to an "objective" system of concepts constituted in "the interaction between a collective subject and a common world."¹¹

To the student radicals of the sixties he offered the outlines of a utopia founded on "the reconciliation between pleasure and reality principle," the reduction of repression to the absolute minimum consistent with a peaceful and satisfying life for all.¹² Achieving such a utopia would require a great unveiling—the full scale of bourgeois deception would have to be revealed. Behind the veil, Marcuse insisted, lay a real, concrete object of aspiration: a free and peaceful sexuality, an "unmutilated" existence toward which the young were consciously or unconsciously urged by nothing less than a "biological necessity."¹³ The basic human questions had right answers, albeit not answers valid for all time. But these answers were obscured by outdated ideas, institutions, and practices, which the discourse of critique would expose for what they were. The overmastering machine, the "technological rationality" that had "become political rationality,"¹⁴ could be cut down to size and turned back to humane purposes.¹⁵

Reading Marcuse today, one can still feel residual shivers from that great thrill of utopian moral certainty that brought so many young people into the streets in the sixties. To understand just how morally certain Marcuse and his movement were, it is enough to read his "Repressive Tolerance," a text that anticipates with amazing precision the turn against free speech that many interpreters link to "critical theory" in its twenty-first-century version. "Repressive Tolerance" builds on the Frankfurt School theme of the half-glimpsed society of liberation blocked and concealed by the psychic distortions of the society of repression. Marcuse argues that in a society of "concentrat[ed] economic and political power," the free and generative exchange of differing views envisioned

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Marcuse is forced into ahistorical abstraction here, because any acknowledgement of the dramatic social changes in the decades since Mill would destroy the argument

FROM FRANKFURT TO FOX / OWEN

by the likes of John Stuart Mill is simply not possible: "The decision between opposed opinions has been made before the presentation and discussion get under way—made, not by a conspiracy or a sponsor or a publisher, not by any dictatorship, but rather by the 'normal course of events,' which is the course of administered events, and by the mentality shaped in this course." Because the game is rigged in favor of the existing power structure, and because the partisans of "progress" can be sure that the views thus repressed are in fact true and correct, it is permissible and even necessary for them to use every lever at their disposal to obstruct the forces of "regression," including such "apparently undemocratic means" as "the withdrawal of toleration of speech and assembly" from groups that oppose the program of the New Left.¹⁶

But Marcuse's strident tone concealed a deeper uncertainty about what exactly lay behind the veil. The critical theorists were looking to a world that they acknowledged was beyond the possibility of clear present description. As Horkheimer put it, "In regard to the essential kind of change at which the critical theory aims, there can be no corresponding concrete perception of it until it actually comes about. If the proof of the pudding is in the eating, the eating here is still in the future."¹⁷ Marcuse theorized a peaceful, sociable, and liberated Eros or "non-repressive sublimation" at length, but as he himself admitted, it is difficult to translate his speculations into a definite practical vision: "Under the established reality principle, non-repressive sublimation can appear only in marginal and incomplete aspects." In fact, the only thing we can say for certain is that for the time being, "non-repressive sublimation must manifest itself in contradiction to the entire sphere of social usefulness; viewed from this sphere, it is the negation of all accepted productivity and performance."¹⁸ Thus, even the vision of the one Frankfurt man who was sufficiently sure of himself to take to the streets with the students cashes out in negation, void, and his own "Great Refusal."

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Carrying Forward: Habermas and Foucault

From the point of view of the student radicals who honored Marcuse alongside Mao and Marx, the sixties ended not in triumph or disaster but in something confusingly in between. As it turned out, the New Left did not manage to deconstruct everything and build the society it had dreamed of. Then again, the liberal machine of state-culture-economy that the Frankfurt School struggled against has managed to fold in some of the New Left's central ideas, seemingly without losing any of its mechanical efficiency, and that might count as a measured success. Certainly, some kind of sexual revolution has taken place. Things may not have turned out precisely the way Marcuse wanted, but the sum total of repression seems lower than it used to be, and the culture industry has rendered obsolete Adorno's complaint that television always resolves conflicts between an independent-minded woman and the stultifying status quo in the latter's favor.¹⁹ (Horkheimer, however, would eventually conclude that oral contraception, the

and as I noted on the previous page, on Marcuse's account all this is impossible which is partly why so many on the left act as though it never happened

technical advance that made these developments possible, represented the subsumption of human Eros into the logic of mechanism.) Racial discrimination is still very much with us, but substantial private and public resources (including those five-figure diversity-training lecture fees) are now devoted to some sort of effort to combat it, and this, too, is a legacy of the sixties. The New Left's hopes for a vast expansion of public services are far from being realized, but Medicare, Medicaid, and the Affordable Care Act have done a good deal to extend health care to neglected groups. And as we have seen, critical theory as a style of discourse is alive and well, even on the inside of many of our ruling institutions.

The effect of these ambivalent and partial successes has been to sharpen the contrast between Scylla and Charybdis. The founders of the Frankfurt School had tried to steer a middle course, flirting with the void while trying not to plunge into it. The unsatisfactory character of the compromises that issued from the sixties indicated that continuing to refuse the choice required a sacrifice of intellectual integrity.

By 1979, Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse were all dead. Who received the mixed inheritance they left behind? If we can be permitted a slightly stylized interpretation, we might say that the legacy of the Frankfurt School was divided between two philosophers on opposite ends of the spectrum of left Continental political thought: Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas.

The most famous living scholar associated with the Frankfurt School, Habermas studied at and later directed critical theory's first institutional home, the Frankfurt University Institute for Social Research. He has inherited the first-generation critical theorists' preoccupation with rectifying a discourse distorted by capitalist modernity. His most influential writings concern the conditions under which the right kind of intersubjective discourse can generate normative legitimacy. In the political sphere, this means that a robust and rightly ordered public sphere, secured by institutions protecting the conditions for free and active participation, is required to make a liberal government's decrees authoritative. Habermas's political theory thus demands a measure of Frankfurt-style vigilance against the deceptions of established power.

Yet for all of Habermas's continuity of interests with his predecessors, his highly original and influential system of thought has its own very different points of emphasis.

For one thing, he does not share with his predecessors their harsh pessimism about political modernity or their insistence on a far-reaching program of deconstruction. Although he is a man of the left and a frequent critic of the public policy of the Western liberal democracies,

Habermas refuses the pleasant stimulant of Marcusean radicalism.

Habermas refuses the pleasant stimulant of Marcusean radicalism. His work offers a legitimating ideal toward which existing liberal democracies can converge by mitigating the distorting effects of institutional influences.

To youthful radicals intoxicated by the early Frankfurt School's promises of a hidden world free from bourgeois anxiety and renunciation, Habermas's insistent moderation and forbiddingly dense style are not likely to inspire devotion. No one has ever taken to the streets to fight for the theory of communicative action. The Frankfurt School's

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school's promises of a hidden mas's insistent moderation. No one has ever taken The Frankfurt School's

inheritance of suspicion was handed down elsewhere, to a tendency that we may describe as headed by Foucault. Though Foucault was formed in a parallel tradition of thought—he said that, as a student, he “never once heard the name of the Frankfurt school mentioned by any of my professors”²⁰—he came to understand himself as working along similar lines. In one lecture he said that modern philosophy was divided between “a critical philosophy that will present itself as an analytic philosophy of truth in general” and “a critical thought that will take the form of an ontology of ourselves, an ontology of the present.” On one side was a philosophy that sought an absolute reality beyond things; on the other was a philosophy that aspired to give an account of what is here and now, without relying on any transcendent reference. Foucault placed himself in the latter camp, along with Hegel, Nietzsche, Weber, and the Frankfurt School.²¹ In other words, he understood himself as carrying forward one element of the Frankfurt project in particular: its attempt to theorize power in the present without grasping at eternal solidities.

Of course, Foucault's accounts of power as “employed and exercised through a netlike organization” and of individuals as “always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power”²² departed from the Frankfurt School accounts, which tended in the end to suggest—even if only rhetorically—a picture of a semicentralized repressive apparatus. And because he surpassed even the Frankfurt School theorists in his characterization of power as diffuse, subtle, embedded in the most unexamined and implicit forms of organization, Foucault was also less willing than they were to point beyond deconstructive critique toward what Marcuse called “the chance of the alternatives.” In his 1971 debate with Noam Chomsky, whose moral confidence brought Foucault's political ambivalence into sharp relief, Foucault declared himself “much less advanced [than Chomsky] in my way...I admit to not being able to define, nor for even stronger reasons to propose, an ideal social model for the functioning of our scientific or technological society.” Instead, he said, “the real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the workings of institutions, which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticize and attack them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight against them.”²³

Habermas, incidentally, was fascinated and troubled by Foucault's labors of negation. He lamented that Foucault saw only “intensifications of processes of empowerment” in the history of political modernity and was blind to the “moral-practical learning processes” that were occurring through the same historical transformations. And, inevitably, Habermas raised the question of how Foucault could justify even purely negative struggle in the absence of some source of normativity: “If it is just a matter of mobilizing counterpower, of strategic battles and wily confrontations, why should we muster any resistance at all against this all-pervasive power circulating in the bloodstream of the body of modern society, instead of just adapting ourselves to it?”²⁴

For all their talk about refusing false necessities, Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse never quite decided between Scylla and Charybdis. That choice would be left to their

Foucault carried forward one element of the Frankfurt project: its attempt to theorize power in the present.

cf. my previous comment on the same blindness in Marcuse

Current evidence suggests that the answer is yes (Is a studied ignorance of political & social history a precondition of commitment to political theory? critical)

heirs. Habermas sailed for Scylla, normative solidity, the defense of a purified form of democracy, and a partial accommodation with the imperfections of the modern. Foucault set his course for the whirlpool. Every construction of modern power had to be stripped away: even justice, which, he told Chomsky, was just another invented instrument of power or counterpower, and one so deeply bound up with the structure of this class-based order that it could not be used “to describe or justify a fight which should—and shall in principle—overthrow the very fundamentals of our society.”²⁵

In the Maw of the Capitalist Machine

It is possible to imagine a world in which the Foucauldians are right and Scylla’s price is simply too high. Some of what the whirlpool sucks down rises back to the surface later. After his men have been killed for eating the Sun God’s cattle, Odysseus, now alone, survives Charybdis by clinging to an olive tree until she spits up his raft. Maybe sailing into the unknown is better than steering, eyes open, toward a terrible massacre. If Odysseus had told his men what was going to happen, that might have been their choice. How high is the cost of accommodation to political modernity?

That question is hard to answer. What is clear, however, is that Foucault’s project was always bound to be more gripping and more seductive than that of Habermas. Foucault’s ruthless unveilings, his ascetic refusal to make use of corrupted concepts,

and his ability to spot malignant growths where others saw only good health made him a figure of fascination in a culture that felt itself to be desperately sick but did not know what to call its sickness. And it is Foucault’s style—his relentless assault on the distortions of subjectivity, his incessant search for new forms of domination—that thrills the new critical theorists of left and right.

How high is the cost of accommodation to political modernity?

A good shout, even though that essay is somewhat over-rated (MF is much better elsewhere)

One of the great diagnostic treatments of the Foucauldian or quasi-Foucauldian turn in critical theory is Mark Fisher’s 2013 essay “Exiting the Vampire Castle,” a canonical text for what is sometimes called the anti-woke left.²⁶ Fisher had seen firsthand the mutations of critical theory around the turn of the millennium. Alongside the soon-to-be reactionary Nick Land, he had helped found the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit,²⁷ and by the time of his death by suicide at the age of forty-eight, in 2017, he had become a leading leftist public intellectual who in his writings sought to further the Frankfurt School attack on the bourgeois reality principle, which he recast as “capitalist realism” in a best-selling book of that title. In “Exiting the Vampire Castle,” Fisher lamented the “bad conscience and witch-hunting moralism” that he thought pervaded British leftist communities, especially on Twitter. The Vampire Castle, Fisher’s name for elite left circles devoted to ferreting out and punishing the most insignificant violations of the most up-to-date identitarian doctrine, was “doing capital’s work for it” by destroying the conditions of solidarity and tearing apart every possible positive vision of the future.

It was perhaps Fisher’s reverence for the Frankfurt School and the protest movements of the sixties²⁸ that prevented him from saying explicitly what the context of his

essay makes clear. His critique is the very positive vision of critique. His style of critique is not whether it is out to be guilty. It is an intramural struggle.

“Exiting the Vampire Castle” Fisher had offered a critique of the relentless, dehumanizing capitalism, arguing that it is held together only by the pursuit of human ends. Fisher’s critique is a phantom independent of the ceaselessly destabilizing culture of capitalism. Power, served by the culture of realism, includes the undermining of the surveillance bureaucracy. The tendencies have been identified in theory, which find their way into veiled workplaces and diversity trainers.

The critical realism of the modern bureaucracy. The most striking thing about it but simply calls it evil: Land’s “accidental” inscrutable design. The ed critical theorist Shullenberger and his only way forward.

Fisher’s own “Exiting the Vampire Castle” practical changes about capital’s too vague assertions. If Fisher is a machine. It takes an account of our salvation. Fisher’s place of the crucifixion as wide and

essay makes clear: The culture of the Vampire Castle is the culture of critical theory, and critique is the vampires' principal instrument. Everyone is liable to denunciation, and every positive vision is liable to deconstruction, because in principle the Foucauldian style of critique has no limits. Everything bears the mark of oppressive power; the question is not whether there is guilt to be found but in what respect the accused will turn out to be guilty. The work of politics is reduced to continual negation, dissolution, and intramural struggle.

"Exiting the Vampire Castle" can be read as a supplement to the broader analysis Fisher had offered four years earlier in *Capitalist Realism*. In that text he took aim at the relentless, destructive churn of economy, society, and culture under post-Fordist capitalism, arguing that the confused and disorderly world of late modernity was held together only by a mechanical logic alien to any recognizably human ends. Fisher conceived of capitalism as a monstrous phantom independent of any guiding human intention, ceaselessly destabilizing and destroying human institutions. The culture of critical theory, with its universal dissolutive power, served the phantom's interests perfectly. *Capitalist Realism* includes lamentations over the post-industrial economy's "undermining" of the two-parent family, the proliferation of a hypercritical surveillance bureaucracy, and the collapse of educational standards.²⁹ All three of these tendencies have been reinforced through the strategic application of the new critical theory, which finds toxicity in conventional visions of family life, inequity in the surveilled workplace, and perpetuation of the "white supremacy culture" condemned by diversity trainers in the demand for excellence in teaching and learning.

The critical right, harder to find in Fisher's account because it is less influential in the modern bureaucratic order, is less subtle about expressing its drive toward destruction. The most striking example is Nick Land, who shares a great deal of Fisher's diagnosis but simply calls good what his former Cybernetic Culture Research Unit colleague calls evil: Land's "accelerationism" summons us to embrace our own subsumption into the inscrutable designs of the great capitalist machine. As for the more prosaically minded critical theorists of the Trump-era conservative movement, they are, as Geoffrey Shullenberger argues, convinced that all the institutions are against them and that the only way forward lies through wholesale deconstruction.

Fisher's own critical theory does not escape these objections. He complains in "Exiting the Vampire Castle" about a "depressed" "neo-anarchism" that despairs of real practical change and confines itself to protesting and tweeting. But his own narrative about capital's total dominion invites the same despair, which is barely tempered by his vague assertions that a "collective subject" might someday vanquish the capitalist monster. If Fisher is right, everything we see, hear, read, and think has been processed by the machine. It takes a strong mind with a high tolerance for contradiction to accept this account of our predicament without losing faith in the possibility of even individual salvation. Fisher thought that late moderns were worse off than Odysseus, because in place of the cruel but survivable Scylla he saw the annihilating logic of capitalism gaping as wide and dark as Charybdis.

he's not wrong

The culture of the Vampire Castle is the culture of critical theory.

There are widely varying degrees of processing, though

If Fisher was right, no sage advice from Circe can save us from our fate. But if you go outside into the light and air, you may start to wonder if things can really be as bad as your political faction's critical theory says they are. And if they are not, we had better start considering what we are doing when we make use willy-nilly of the weapons handed down to us by Foucault and the Frankfurt School.

These days the attacks are coming from all sides, and nothing is safe. Everyone hopes that to steer close enough to the void to escape the painful sacrifices imposed by the common life we already have, and everyone hopes that one's own private ideals can be preserved from deconstruction. The Frankfurt School was modestly successful in pulling off that trick: It managed to dissolve some of the categories it rejected without destroying the possibility of faith in the redeemable ideals of the Enlightenment. As more and more warring groups take up the methods of critique, however, it remains to be seen whether critical theory itself can continue to navigate safely between Habermasian mildness and Foucauldian fury. As a style, critical theory is in many ways a rational response to the massive accumulation of mechanisms of power over the past century. But the more it is taken up by groups in whose hands it becomes a destructive force, the less we will have to build on if, against all odds, we ever again find ourselves in a position to establish forms of life and order beyond the dominion of the machine.

The problem is that critique is what the Constitution was supposed to be, "a machine that goes of itself" — but on like the primitive machine in Kafka's "In the Penal Colony"

Notes

1. Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1955), 151.
 2. Perhaps Kafka's story is the definitive one for our moment, with its image of — here I'm drawing on Byung-chul Han — what had been a disciplinary (controlling/limiting) system giving way to a system of manic & hence destructive excess.
 3. See The Burnout Society
 4. ↑
 5. <https://www.hellenicaworld.com/Greece/>
 6. *Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 8, no. 3
 7. *Journal of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston,

12 Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 151.
 13 Ibid., xxv (from the "Political Preface" appended to the second edition).
 14 Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, xvi.
 15 See, e.g., Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, xvii (from the "Political Preface").

16 Herbert Marcuse, Moore, and Herber
 17 Horkheimer, "Tra
 18 Marcuse, *Eros and*
 19 Adorno, "How to
 20 Michel Foucault, *Habermas Debate*
 21 Foucault, "The A
 22 Michel Foucault, (New York, NY: I
 23 Noam Chomsky, *Michel Foucault 1* chomsky.info/197
 24 Jürgen Habermas *Power*, 100, 95.
 25 Chomsky and Fo
 26 Mark Fisher, "Exi
 mocracy.net/en/o
 27 Mark Fisher, "Ni
 artsandculture/art
 28 See, e.g., Mark F *Unpublished Writ* Books, 2018), 75
 29 Mark Fisher, *Cap* 49–53, 21–26.

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Herder, 1972), 3.

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- ¹⁶ Herbert Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance," in *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, Robert Paul Wolff Barrington Moore, and, Herbert Marcuse (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1965), 95, 97, 100.
- ¹⁷ Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," 220–21.
- ¹⁸ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 208.
- ¹⁹ Adorno, "How to Look at Television," 220.
- ²⁰ Michel Foucault, "Critical Theory/Intellectual History," in *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*, ed. Michael Kelly (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 117.
- ²¹ Foucault, "The Art of Telling the Truth," in *Critique and Power*, 148.
- ²² Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1977), 98.
- ²³ Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault, *Human Nature: Justice Versus Power: Noam Chomsky Debates With Michel Foucault 1971*, moderated by Fons Elders, Chomsky.info, accessed December 30, 2022, <http://chomsky.info/1971xxxx/>.
- ²⁴ Jürgen Habermas, "Some Questions Concerning the History of Power: Foucault Again," in *Critique and Power*, 100, 95.
- ²⁵ Chomsky and Foucault, *Human Nature*.
- ²⁶ Mark Fisher, "Exiting the Vampire Castle," *Open Democracy*, November 24, 2013, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/exiting-vampire-castle/>.
- ²⁷ Mark Fisher, "Nick Land: Mind Games," *Dazed Digital*, June 1, 2011, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/10459/1/nick-land-mind-games>.
- ²⁸ See, e.g., Mark Fisher, "Acid Communism (Unfinished Introduction)," in *K-Punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher (2004–2016)*, ed. Darren Ambrose (London, England: Repeater Books, 2018), 753–72.
- ²⁹ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Ropley, England: Zero Books, 2009), 32–33, 49–53, 21–26.