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Editors' Introduction

Nick Osbaldiston & Frank Welz

If you would like to learn "why the future of critical social theory is brighter than ever", read our interview about the *Centre for Social and Political Thought* at the University of Sussex, conducted by Jule Pichler and Sebastian Rösel with Gordon Finlayson, as part of our series on Social Theory Research Centres. If you would like to get your research centre introduced here, please write us.

Do you remember the yellow *Theory* ISA RC16 newsletters that used to arrive by post in the 1990s? Since 2007, *Theory* has been archived on the International Sociological Association website as PDF files, with each issue named after one of the four seasons.

Yet – despite all the critical theory, postcolonial, and self-reflexive constructivist debates we constantly engage in at our conferences – it took us a while to notice: the seasons mean very different things in the various corners of the world where our members live and work!

Thanks to a helpful suggestion from the ISA Secretariat, we will be adjusting the way we name our issues. Starting in June 2025, *Theory* will simply number its issues consecutively, beginning with *Theory, Issue 1 (2025)*.

Also, a small reminder: if you have published a theory-book since 2020, we would love to hear from you! We are aiming to highlight recent *books* a little more prominently in *Theory*.

Finally, we hope to see you in future – and at our midterm conference on the Future (of Sociology) in Innsbruck at the beginning of July 2025!

Theorising in Troubled Times

Re-opening of the Georg Simmel Salon (Second Theory Café)

Frédéric Vandenberghe[1]
(with the help of Gregor Fitzi, Barbara Carnevali and Hans-Peter Müller)

The Second Theory Café was organised in collaboration with the Georg Simmel Gesellschaft, represented by Arthur Bueno. Following a century of abeyance, the Georg Simmel Salon was officially reopened on 5 December 2024. It didn't take place in Berlin Mitte, but on Zoom, and therefore without any Japanese vases, without his paintings by Max Lieberman or his statues by Rodin. Lukács, Bloch and Margarethe Süstermann weren't present either. The Salon was well attended, though (45 persons). In line with the current renaissance of Simmel Studies, which is more oriented toward his philosophy of life and his cultural modernism than his formal sociology, we invited two Simmel scholars to debate whether Simmel should be considered a social theorist or cultural theorist. Hans-Peter Müller,[2] a Berliner from Humboldt University who edited Suhrkamp's *Simmel Handbuch* (2018) and who knows everything about salons, social life and high societies in Berlin, Paris and Cambridge, had accepted to be the Salon Master. Gregor Fitzi[3] joined us from Frankfurt am Oder, close to the Polish border. Gregor is the honorary president of the Georg Simmel Gesellschaft, founder of the journal *Simmel Studies* and editor of the *Routledge International Handbook of Simmel Studies* (2020). He also played an important role in the publication of the *Gesammelte Schriften* (collected works) in 24 volumes and is the author of *The Challenge of Modernity. Simmel's Sociological Theory* (2018). Barbara Carnevali,[4] an Italian philosopher who teaches at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en sciences sociales in Paris, has been working on social aesthetics, a new field of studies at the intersection of aesthetics and power. She is the

author of *Social Appearances: A Philosophy of Display and Prestige* (2020) and a comprehensive Italian anthology of Simmelian texts, titled *Georg Simmel, Stile Moderno. Saggi di estetica sociale* (2020).

Fitzi defended the idea that culture is at the very core of Simmel's sociological theory. Looking at Simmel's work as a whole, we see that the theory of culture introduced in the *Philosophy of Money* is taken up in the foundations of sociology. Human beings are characterised by the need to formulate syntheses of their life experiences and to express them through different forms of culture.

Everyone therefore finds themselves in a common environment full of cultural contents that must be acquired in order to act and communicate together. This is a classic theory of the relationship between subjective and objective culture. However, with the complex development of modern society, there is, for Simmel, a hypertrophy of objective culture. Social actors find it particularly difficult to create a personal synthesis of the cultural contents they have to

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share. This is Simmel's formulation of the theory of alienation, which goes far beyond the walls of industrial factories.

In social interaction in general, the same problem comes to the fore. Everyone can only participate in society if s/he is perceived as a stereotypical image of the particular social role s/he plays. Since in a qualitatively differentiated society people have to play many different roles according to specific logics, everyone is confronted with different, often contradictory stereotypical images of themselves. This provokes an uneasy reaction. The feeling of being 'something else', outside of society, becomes more and more prevalent in modern life. Thus, everyone who has to remain socialised is, for the most part, forced to find a way of relating to each other the insider and outsider nature of his or her social life. It is here that Simmel reintroduces the central categories of his cultural theory into sociological theory in order to clarify the conditions that a priori make 'society possible'. It is the ability of the individual social actor to carry out his 'cultural work' every day that brings together the various dimensions of social and non-socialised life and thus 'makes society possible'.

In this way, cultural and social theory merge in Simmel's reflections on complex societies, allowing him to extend the consideration of the phenomenon from its significance within the theory of social action to its importance for the analysis of social structure. In the late essay on the 'Conflict of culture', Simmel is thus able to reopen the debate with Marx's diagnosis of modernity and its possible transformation. Here it is no longer just a question of the 'crisis of modern culture': it is the emergence of a substantial rebellion of the productive forces of culture (and society) against any possible endowment of form – one could say: the fundamental expressionism of all modern cultural development. This finding undermines both the Marxian notion of a dialectical transition to a higher form of society and the Nietzschean doctrine of modernity as a decadence with no way out. Instead, modernity must be seen as a succession of phases of erratic expansion of social differentiation and phases of sudden social and cultural regression. This was demonstrated by the transition from the first era of unlimited development of liberal capitalism to the First World War. In this diagnosis lies the topicality of Simmel's

theory of culture from the point of view of social structure theory. It is a viaticum that helps us today to understand the structure of our intermittently normative societies.

Barbara did a powerpoint presentation in which she compared Simmel to Bourdieu. At the core of Simmel's and Bourdieu's work is a shared focus on how aesthetic judgments and cultural preferences shape social dynamics, hierarchies, and power relations. Simmel's groundbreaking research on adornment and the sociology of the senses laid the foundation for understanding sensibility (*aisthesis*) as a social phenomenon, which Bourdieu later expanded upon. While their approaches differed - Simmel focused more on sensory perceptions and their spontaneous immediacy, while Bourdieu emphasized the role of the body and habitus - both significantly contributed to our understanding of how taste judgments are far more than personal preferences. Both theorists recognized these judgments as deeply intertwined with social esteem dynamics. This perspective offers an innovative interpretative framework, connecting the concept of recognition (traditionally viewed in ethical terms by Hegelian thinkers like Axel Honneth) to the aesthetic, economic, and cultural dimensions of consumption and social appearances.

The Simmel-Bourdieu approach allows us to examine how material objects (like jewelry and clothing or even tattoos) and expressive forms (such as manners and interaction rituals) function as extensions of individuals and embody complex processes of social esteem. This approach bridges the normative question of recognition with the crucial role of signs, appearances, and lifestyles in social conflicts and identity formation. It moves beyond the disembodied conception of the struggle between consciousnesses in classical idealism, reframing the struggle for recognition as a form of 'style wars.'

Simmel and Bourdieu also delved into the connection between aesthetic judgments and value creation, linking cultural preferences to economic and social capital. This connection not only sheds light on contemporary aesthetic capitalism but also has the potential to transform our understanding of consumer society.

The presentations were followed by an animated and wide-ranging discussion about Simmel's work - about the place of philosophy in his work, the influence of Nietzsche, his metaphysics of life, his philosophical anthropology, his view of

religion, his normative position and other kindred questions that seem at first far away from sociology, but actually go to the core of his work and raise important issues that the Simmel salon, which will go its own way independently from RC 16 and the Theory Café, will have to discuss when they gather next time. Can a value-free sociology and a philosophy of life do without one or more normative cores (individual law, *Geselligkeit* or sociability, the third as Messias)? And what about his late *Lebenssoziologie*, his late 'metaphysical sociology'? What could such a type of sociology look like? A new philosophy of history? And what about Simmel as a critical thinker! But what kind of? Certainly neither critical theory, nor Marx. Therefore, what is his concept of critique and what are the types of criticism he develops with respect to modernity? Isn't his vision of modernity overly urban? But what about the countryside? Has he any ideas or concepts to deal with the rural side of a modern society? Or is it all 'Urbanism as a Way of Life'?

Violent Theory/Radicalising Practices

Francesco Antonelli[1]

In one of his latest contributions, Michael Burawoy (2021), looking back on the defining moments of his intellectual journey, identifies four kinds of sociology: public, professional, policy, and critical sociology. Burawoy argues that these four types of sociology are not mutually exclusive but rather exist in a complex relationship of circular interdependence. Particularly, professional and policy sociology – two kinds of client-oriented sociology – are becoming more and more sterile if their assumptions and biases are not examined: the aim of critical sociology – although this task may conflict with the interests of clients. At the same time, public sociology could achieve the goal of engaging with the public on social issues, but only if the knowledge communicated is not theoretical and methodologically robust.

Such an epistemological circle must be placed at the centre of a rethinking on theory and research about radicalisation and violent extremism.

Two traditions exist in this scientific field: the first one, the internationally dominated paradigm, is policy-oriented and is based on neo-positivistic methodological and theoretical approaches. Nevertheless, its interdisciplinarity is close to what Burawoy calls "professional sociology." Generally speaking, such a tradition is based on methodological and ethical individualism; the focus is on the individual actor and the search for the drivers that can explain why and how a *particular person* becomes a violent extremist. A purpose that replaces the sociologically dominant question of the 1970s and 1980s: why and how does a *particular society* generate political violence? After the September 11, 2001 attack in the US, and the Madrid (2004) and London (2005) attacks in Europe, experts and academic social scientists were recruited by politics to help prevent homegrown terrorism via a new form of scientific-based biopolitics in the name of security and the defense of "our" lifestyle. As Coolsaet (2018) shows, even the keyword "radicalization" was imposed by politics and intelligence agencies on the scientific community to speak about the social roots and the social processes that lead a person toward violent extremism.

The second tradition is that of the so-called "critical studies on radicalization," and it was born between 2004 and 2005 in opposition to both the above-mentioned canonical approach and the attempt by neo-conservatives to hegemonize the public and scientific debate around terrorism and violent extremism. Closed linked to Anglo-Saxon radical political culture and a so-called "organic" public sociology – a public sociology organic to sociopolitical and civil activism – this tradition challenges canonical approaches on three main grounds: to go beyond individual psychology,

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reevaluating the influence of broader social and political contexts; to focus the attention on power and inequality as factor that leads people to violent extremism; to deconstruct hegemonic discourse on terrorism and violent extremism, to struggle the demonisation of certain religion, social or ethnic groups.

The main problem of the canonical approach is that it depoliticizes a political phenomenon as radicalization and violent extremism. Its merits are the rigor of the methodology, the richness of data and results, and the breadth of reflection on policies for the prevention and contrast of violent extremism (P/CVE). The main problem of the critical approach is that it has excellent arguments to reveal assumptions and bias of the canonical approach as well as the public discourse on violent extremism (*pars destruens*), but it is very poor in P/CVE (*pars costruens*). In other words, in Buroway's perspective, the first approach emphasizes professional and policy sociology to the detriment of critical and public sociology; the second one, on the contrary, emphasizes the latter at the expense of the former.

Facing a new wave of global political extremism (violent and not violent) characterized by the quest for identity, mixed unstable and unclear forms of extremism political cultures, complex forms of far-right actors, movements, and leadership, and growing individualization of jihadist terrorist attacks, canonical as well as critical approach are not enough. They are not able to face the complexity of both the new phenomena and the stakes – that is, the future of a democratic society. The situation is now characterized by a global struggle between "conservatives" – people who want to defend the neoliberal global order without self-critique of this order – and "reactionary" – people who aim to break globalisation in the name of anti-liberal political perspective. Current radicalisation and political extremism are defined in the framework of this conflict.

The main challenge of social theory is now to redefine assumptions and methodology of radicalisation and extremism studies to deal with this new complexity. Putting the above-mentioned virtuous Burawoy's epistemological circle at the center can help achieve this task.

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Social Theory at the University of Sussex. An Interview with Gordon Finlayson

Gordon Finlayson,[1] Jule Pichler[2] and Sebastian Rösel[3]

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The Research Centre[4]

(Question 1) What are the current main focuses of the Centre for Social and Political Thought at Sussex?

There are no research themes or particular foci. The Centre is a hub for like-minded theorists with an interest in critical social theory and social and political thought, working in different departments across History, Philosophy, Law, Politics and Sociology. The 'core' faculty comprise: Ian MacDaniel, Darrow Schecter (History); Hannah Richter (Politics); Gordon Finlayson, Dan Williams, Anthony Booth, Mahon O'Brien & formerly Andrew Chitty (Philosophy); Beatrice Fazi; Tarik Kochi, Aravind Ganesh (Law); Yari Lanci (Sociology).

(Q2) How does the Centre for Social and Political Thought balance research and teaching? What role does the Centre play in shaping the teaching landscape at Sussex, and how many dissertations are currently being written on topics related to the Centre's focus?

This question does not come up. The Centre for Social and Political Thought, formerly the *Centre for Critical Theory,* came into existence in 1995 as an events hub for the post-graduate students on the successful and longstanding MA program in SPT (which had been running at Sussex since

1978, set up by the Hungarian émigré Marxist Istvan Meszaros) and the associated PhD program. In 2008, its name was changed to the *Centre of Social and Political Thought* to align with the post-graduate program in Social and Political Thought and to avoid confusion with an MA in Critical Theory running in the English department, which did not have the same SPT focus on Marx and Hegel, and Frankfurt School Critical Theory.

Originally, the Centre served as the Board of Studies for the MA program. However, due to restructuring, the administration of the MA was shifted into departments, first sociology, and then philosophy. So that left the Centre with its main role as an events hub. It has always been very active organizing visiting lectures, seminars, and conferences. However, the Centre was not a formal co-ordination point of large research projects. That was left to departments and to individual faculty. To this day, the research of the Centre is just the research of the faculty.

At present, we have six Ph.D. students enrolled in the SPT program at Sussex at various stages of completion:

Mojo Blyth-Piper

The Idea of Society as Sick: On Diagnosing Social Pathologies in Frankfurt School Critical Theory.

'Is there something in the light of which we can correctly and justifiably say society is awry?'

Samuel Burrell

Understanding Hegemony in Contemporary British Society

‚How is hegemony, as a Gramscian concept, still able to be used to understand the exercise of power? How are (organic) intellectuals able to function as moral and intellectual leaders in twenty-first century Britain?'

Yixin Gao

The Contemporary Relevance of Prefiguration

‚I investigate the theories that have inspired prefigurative movements and ask how prefigure-tive politics can critically negate the established unjust social structure and relations and provide practical guidance to the construction of alternative ones in everyday scenarios.'

Marina Lademacher

The Obstruction of the In-between: A Critical Reconstruction of Hannah Arendt's Account of World Alienation

‚My research seeks to critically reconstruct Hannah Arendt's account of world alienation and show why it remains an important lens to understand the dysfunctional present.'

Ben Potter

Synthetic Mediations: Chatbots, Self-understanding and the Possibility of Critique

‚My research investigates how large language model chatbots are reshaping social communica-tion through new forms of mediation. It critically examines the rationalities and historical conditions underpinning the 'synthetic turn' and explores how the automation of cultural production impacts self-understanding, critique, and emerging configurations of power.'

Melinda Ren

Amor Mundi and Real Democracy: Seeking an Ethical Basis for Citizen Political Engagement

‚Is 'amor mundi', or 'love of the world', a suitable social bond for citizens in the contemporary world? Can a political culture based on amor mundi be cultivated to enhance democratic engagement?'

Camila Vergara speaking on Populism at the Sussex SPT Lecture
© G. Finlayson

Academic Background

(Q3) How has your background in continental philosophy and your work on Hegel and Kant shaped your perspective on Critical Theory?

Chronologically speaking I worked backwards. I was interested in Marx, Marxism and Critical Theory years before I knew about Hegel, Kant and European philosophy. My first degree was in French and German Literature and Thought, mainly 18th and 19th Century literature. I realized that to fully understand the Marxist tradition I was interested in, I'd have to study philosophy. So after graduating in St Andrews, I applied to what was at the time the only existing Master's program in European philosophy in the UK, at the University of Essex. There I studied Kant with Onora O'Neill, Hegel with Jay Bernstein and Peter Dews, Husserl with A.D. Smith, and French continental philosophy with Peter Dews. I started my academic career as a Hegel scholar and gradually found my way back to Critical Theory. Naturally, it helped me. But it also created difficulties. When one is faced with what Adorno writes about Hegel, for example, one is immediately tempted to point out all the idiosyncrasies of his interpretation. However, unless one is specifically writing about Adorno's interpretation of Hegel, that can lead to unproductive digressions. Anyway, yes, my education in classical German philosophy, and philosophy more broadly, deepened my understanding of and widened my perspective on critical theory.

Philosophy & Politics

(Q4) The Role of Philosophy in Politics: In your view, how does philosophy, especially in the tradition of Critical Theory, maintain its role in political discourse?

Good question. Short answer: not well. But not because it does not have anything to say about politics. Recently, for example I've read *Ocean Justice*, by Christopher Armstrong; *Le Marché de la Vertu: Critique de la Consommation Ethique*, by Estelle Ferrarese; and *Limitarianism*, by Ingrid Robyns. These authors have plenty to say about the issues they write about. The question is: do they cut through to the wider reading and non-reading public? Or is the reception of their thought confined to the precincts of academia? Largely, I think it is. But the fault is not really the authors'. Even where philosophers write for general audiences, the fact is that large social media platforms, legacy media, corporate publishers, and most of the other outlets for such ideas are owned by right-wing oligarchs, by billionaires, or people who work for them, who have little or no interest in disseminating such ideas.

(Q5) *Does philosophy still have the power to influence political movements, or has it become increasingly marginalized in contemporary political debates?*

I think it has become increasingly marginalized, but it need not have. There are different reasons for this. Philosophy has become a game of which the aim is to achieve success and prestige within a comparatively narrow ambit of philosophical journals and academic institutions. This not only affects early career academics on whom the institutional pressures weigh so heavily, but mature academics at the opposite end of the income scale who, if they have not become university managers themselves, have been shaped by the institution. The number of academics who reach out and speak out to audiences beyond academia and who use their research to catalyze social transformation is smaller than it should be. Of course, it is really hard to create a large audience, even if one has something important to say.

It is also noticeably harder for the ideas of philosophers who hold leftist, liberal and progressive political ideas to create waves in the public sphere than it is for right-wing and reactionary thinkers to do so. That is simply because the super-rich, who tend to be reactionary and right-wing (not exclusively, but mainly), control social media platforms and their algorithms, the legacy media and their editors, and other outlets. This is one thing makes Marx's well known dictum still true today : »Die herrschenden Ideen einer Zeit waren stets nur die Ideen der herrschenden Klasse«. The rich rule, and they propagate the ideas that serve their interests. That is a huge oversimplification, of course, but broadly true.

The Relevance of Critical Theory

(Q6) What is the relevance of Critical Theory today in light of current societal challenges?

Relevance is a relation. So is political relevance, and one has to specify: relevance to what? One can ask what is the political relevance of Frankfurt School critical theory to the political turn within academic circles: to, say, feminist movements; to the belated emergence of anti-colonial and post-colonial thought; to the cultural politics of trans-rights versus Gender-critical views. There is a lot to say about that, and opinion is divided.

But you might mean 'relevant to present-day domestic and foreign politics' beyond the ambit of academia. Here, I think the outlook is bleaker, partly because critical theory is hard to understand for most people and not easily reducible to simple digestible formulae, unlike a lot of contemporary right-wing 'ideas', such as the anti-woke agenda, and the animus against immigration – anyone can understand those –; and partly, as noted, because of who controls the various social-media and media outlets.

(Q7) Can one say that Habermas' discourse ethics represents an attempt to establish/keep reason as the guiding principle of democracy, contrary to the liberal line of theory, which advocates a certain relativism?

This is a tricky and somewhat leading question which presupposes a common interpretation of Habermas's thought to which I don't subscribe: namely, that discourse ethics either is already a proto-democratic theory, or if not that, is at least an essential component of Habermas' democratic theory. (Whereas I see discourse ethics as a moral theory, and a social theory of morality, with a much looser and more tenuous relation to Habermas's democratic theory. And that is not

just a theoretical but a substantial point of social theory: political legitimacy is sui generis and does not depend on an antecedently constituted moral theory or repertoire of moral norms. It's a bit more complicated, but the underlying point is that democratic discourse, according to Habermas is a mixture of moral, ethical, and pragmatic reason, (and occasional compromises) with a side constraint, namely that no legitimate law may violate a valid moral norm. By comparison, moral discourse and its mode of 'validity' (moral rightness) is purer because it is supposed to be analogous with truth, like theoretical discourse. Anyway, the consequence of that is that in political discourse, on Habermas's view, reason/rationality does not rule the roost as it does in other spheres of discourse. Political discourse orients itself according to the common good of the political community, in a broad and vague sense.

What that means is that while, on Habermas's account, theoretical discourse, for example, natural science, and moral in contrast to ethical discourse, are openly anti-relativist because, in each case, there are, so to speak, objectivities to be right or wrong about; in the political sphere things are different. Politics has to contend with what Rawls calls 'the fact of reasonable pluralism' about the good, which shapes the domain of the ethical.

Is this full-blown relativism about truth or knowledge? No, because not everything goes; not every ethical value or world view is equally 'valid'. But is it 'a certain relativism' or 'certain kind of relativism'? Yes, because on Habermas's view, democratic political discourse has to contend with pluralism in the realm of the ethical, within the bounds of some universalistic normative constraints: valid moral norms, and human rights as basic rights anchored in the constitution.

So my version of the assumption in your question is this. Indeed, Habermas is underneath a kind of rationalist, but his rationalism takes a much weaker form than, say, Kant's. In Habermas's political and legal theory, reason is a faint light that serves as the orientation point for democratic discourse, but like boat at sea, democracies have to contend with other forces too, and their best path forward is not always the shortest and straightest. Or put it another way. Politics, even for Habermas, in both formal and informal

spheres, is a matter of constructing coalitions to form working majorities, in adverse conditions, rather than a simple matter of seeking ideal consensus in discourse through winning arguments.

(Q8) Does the current fragmented public sphere and the apparent inability of contemporary subjects to act adequately communicatively raise the question of whether Habermas' thesis of communicative socialisation is not rather a rational utopia that no longer even rudimentarily takes place in the public sphere?

Aha, another leading question. And another that contains an implicit criticism of Habermas that has been around for a long time – at least since he coined and used the phrase the 'ideal speech situation.' In its early iterations I believe discourse ethics was vulnerable to such a criticism for several related reasons.

To begin with, Habermas's pragmatic theory of meaning harboured the optimistic assumption that there was a much tighter pragmatic (not formal) implicature between truth (or statements asserted as true) and idealized agreement in discourse than there, in fact, was. And that made him assume that discourse had a much stronger stabilizing and unifying power of agreement than it, in fact, did. Once he acknowledged that truth outstripped (even idealized) justification, he had to abandon that assumption, albeit he did so reluctantly. The consequence of that was that, practical discourses – moral and ethical, have a weaker cognitive content.

Secondly, with the introduction of the category of ethical discourse, and the distinction between the moral and the ethical, Habermas's idea of democratic discourse became less closely tied to the idea of moral discourse, (and the assumption that there is an analogy between truth and rightness) while his account of democracy became less dependent on the discourse theory of morality. Democratic discourse is a blend of different considerations, has a weaker cognitive content than moral discourse, and has to make room for compromises, coalitions, and so forth.

Or, to put it another way, the more his theory of democracy depends on his discourse ethics, the more vulnerable to the criticism that it involves a cognitive or rational utopia; the more distance

there is between the two theories, the less that criticism applies.

Anyway, the charge that Habermas's political theory was utopian, as if his underlying democracy consisted in discussions around a giant seminar table, was always in my view too simplistic. While the final aim or end of discourse is agreement, the primary motive or origin is disagreement, dissensus. For discourse is a medium of an always ongoing and uncertain journey from dissensus towards consensus. And idealized consensus in discourse is not the same as discursive agreement under non-ideal conditions. The ideal, even if unconvincingly derived from the underlying theory of meaning, was only ever intended as an approximation, or an orientation for real discourses carried out by real people.

Normative Goals?

(Q9) *Do you pursue any normative goals in your work, and how does Critical Theory assist you in achieving them?*

Most of my work in philosophy and critical theory is trying to either solve existing problems in the work of others or to point out problems in views that have congealed into acceptedness. But I'm not really an agenda setter. I'm a reactive and responsive thinker. I write about different areas. In my academic work, I feel like I'm someone who is perpetually tidying up various different messes left by other more creative and ambitious thinkers.

That said, there are different ways of realizing the practical aims of critical theory. One way is to separate out works written primarily for an academic audience from interventions in the public sphere. That's what Habermas does. He writes in two distinct genres. Joseph Heath is another who writes as a public intellectual for a general public and also for an academic audience. I have done that a little. And I hope to do it more in the future. It's largely a case of finding the right venues I think. And, of course, of having time to write.

The other way is to find hidden resources in Critical Theory for promoting positive (or preventing negative) social change in contemporary society. That's what I did in my recent reconstruction of Adorno's theory of

coldness, which concludes with the idea of an 'education towards empathy' as a more realistic and appropriate alternative to Adorno's 'education toward Mündigkeit'. Empathy and sympathy are diminishing resources in today's world and we need more of them, not less.

German Critical Theory and its Reception in the UK

(Q10) *Given your background in German Critical Theory, including thinkers like Habermas, Adorno, and Hegel, how do you find this tradition resonates in England? Does it give your work a distinctive edge in the British academic context?*

Yes and No. There are plenty of people in England working in these areas and on these thinkers. That said, perhaps not so much in philosophy departments, where it is certainly a minority interest. However, as I recently wrote in a review article on Richard Bourke's *Hegel's World Revolutions*, interest in Hegel, including in Hegel's social and political philosophy, has been surprisingly constant since the beginning of the 20th Century, with perhaps a slight lull in the post-Second-World-War period. Marx too. In fact, there has been a positive resurgence of interest in Marx in the last few years.

Adorno and Habermas

(Q11) *Considering your appreciation for both Adorno's negative dialectics and Habermas's theory of communicative action, do you think it is possible to sympathize with both theories at the same time genuinely? Or do their philosophical premises and methodologies place them in irreconcilable opposition?*

Can one be a Habermasian and an Adornian simultaneously? Probably not. But then I'm neither wholly for, or wholly against, either thinker. I know a lot about each of them, and their work. And I find different aspects of each attractive. At the same time, I've developed a lot of lot of criticisms of their work.

But let me say something about what they share, which is somewhat less than one might think, given the widespread view that they are each practitioners of the same one 'tradition' of critical theory, but is nonetheless very significant.

Gordon Finlayson and Jürgen Habermas   © Peter Niesen

They are both laser-focused on the negative aim of preventing the reoccurrence of Auschwitz, or anything similar as a kind of moral and political bottom line. It's just that they try to achieve this in different ways. Adorno warns against latent tendencies toward authoritarianism and fascism. He advances a programme of «education towards Mündigkeit« and his philosophy challenges its readers to develop their critical faculties, and to become responsive to dialectical subtleties in art, culture and society. Habermas puts his faith in liberal democratic institutions, and the abilities of communicative action and discourse, and the communicative infrastructure of the lifeworld, to act as a bulwark against capitalism, and the development of authoritarianism and totalitarianism.

Both thinkers are staunch defenders of liberal democracy, and the rule of law. This is far more visible in Habermas since his political views are clearly articulated and almost entirely consistent with his philosophy and social theory. Adorno's actual politics, by contrast, are harder to parse, for he says different things on different occasions to different audiences as the moment takes him. Overall though, if you examine his radio broadcasts, and give appropriate weight to what he says in his radio broadcasts and lectures, where he is less guarded, and to what he does as a public intellectual, it becomes clear that his politics differ little from Habermas's.

Both thinkers write for two audiences, as philosophers addressing an academic audience, and as public intellectuals addressing their fellow citizens. But they do so differently. Habermas divides his output roughly in half: into his social and political interventions in the public sphere (published as his *Kleine Politische Schriften*). He has two distinct styles and two genres of writing. Adorno has one style, somewhat dialled down in dialectical subtlety for the sake of his radio and student audiences.

So where would the alleged irreconcilable differences lie, if there are any? Adorno is a devotee of Hegel and thinks that his work is still relevant to 'his' contemporary social world. Habermas isn't. So far as Habermas is concerned, although Hegel isn't exactly a dead dog, neither does his work possess the secret dialectical elixir that will keep philosophy and critical theory alive. (I recall Habermas at a conference on Hegel in the

US in 1998, berating his US colleagues all of whom were bending backwards to reinterpret Hegel in the light of currently accepted philosophers and liberal and social democratic politics, to take more seriously the cogency of Marx's and the Young Hegelian criticisms of Hegel.)

Adorno's range of reference in philosophy and social theory is surprisingly narrow, though he has very wide cultural horizons and, as Thomas Mann remarked, seems to know every note of classical music. As a theorist, Habermas has a much broader range of reference. He not only reads widely across other traditions such as the analytic philosophy of language and American pragmatism, he appropriates a whole bunch of different theories and insights for his own project, not always with sensitivity, but always with a clear sense of purpose.

I think if there is an irreconcilable difference, it lies Habermas's unshakeable faith in four institutions to which he believes there are no alternatives.

i.   markets, for the circulation of goods, and his faith in the capitalist market economy, duly constrained by the political system and the Europ ean public sphere to deliver the goods.

ii. The rule of law, and what he calls the form of law, the institutionalisation of human rights as basic rights.

iii. The political system of representational democracy as a way of mobilizing and taming popular sovereignty.

iv. civil society as the domain of discourse and a source of reasons that can (when it functions well) by dint of its editorial pressure program the political system in the common good.

It's not that Adorno would deny any of these, but rather that he would have regarded developments in the late 20th and early 21st century Western society with far more suspicion. Indeed, the one area where Adorno's political judgment has become more relevant and timely is his view that there are latent tendencies in post-War capitalism toward authoritarianism and fascism. To put it crudely, Trumpism and project 2025 must have come as more of a shock to Habermas, with his faith in liberal democracy, than it would have done to Adorno had he lived to see it.

Critical Thinkers Today

(Q12) *What keeps Hegel, Marx, Adorno relevant today?*

Theoretically speaking: Hegel's dialectic, Marx's critique of Capitalist society, and Critical Theory's critique of ideology, in particular its insights into the failure of Enlightenment and the persistence of unfreedom in the face of technological and cultural advances.

Practically speaking: the fact that capitalism for all its wealth-creating power, has not been able to solve the basic problems of poverty and social and economic inequality. Capitalists have the money and resources to send people into space, and to seriously explore the possibility of living on other planets, but don't seem remotely concerned about the ongoing and impending catastrophe on Earth that industrial capitalism has caused.

Politically speaking: another thing that keeps Critical Theory relevant is the fragility of liberal democracy and the rise of fascism and authoritarianism from the ashes of the unlearned lessons of the 20th Century.

Social Theory in a Sea of Empiricism

(Q13) *Given that empirical approaches tend to dominate much of the sociological landscape in the UK, do you feel a particular responsibility to promote and teach more theoretical approaches to social thought? How do you navigate this balance in your work?*

It depends. If I'm writing about areas where empirical work is relevant, then of course I have to read it. I recently sketched a reconstruction of Adorno's theory of coldness. And I read a lot of empirical psychology about sympathy and empathy, and other regarding emotions, some cognitive neuroscience, as well as a lot of moral philosophy. That's part of the job now. Armchair moral philosophy is old fashioned – most contemporary moral philosophers read widely in the relevant scientific and empirical literature. Critical theory should be no different. We cannot afford to be as cavalier as Adorno when he advances a speculation, or even a hunch about x or y, and then opines something like «empirical research would do well to establish x or y.» On the other hand, there is role for theoretical reflection, argument, and even speculation to fill.

Critical Theory and Immanent Critique

(Q14) *The method of immanent critique, which seems to me to be central to critical theory, is limited in Habermas' work to the identification of normative criteria for a successful life within modern societies. Does this mark a break in the theoretical tradition of the Frankfurt School, away from a purely negative philosophy and a rich sense of immanent critique? If there is a break, how do you assess it in terms of your theoretical preferences?*

This is one of those areas where I've tended to avoid certain well-trammeled paths and to reject certain well-established myths around critical theory, which does not always make me the most popular person at critical theory conferences. I've written several articles on this topic and am also slowly writing a book. Immanent criticism, in my view, is not a method. Nor is it a single identifiable way of criticism. It is an assumption about how one should criticize well – i.e., most accurately and effectively – which works in certain contexts and not in others. Adorno, for example, neither espouses nor practices just one way of criticizing. And that is to his credit, since there are many ways of criticizing and many ways of criticizing well. That point generalizes. There is

no single identifiable method or way of criticizing that is employed by the various members of the Frankfurt School, whatever they might say on the matter, and however much they may claim affiliation with Hegel or Marx. In that case, there is no point of break with Habermas, who, some early works apart, does not attempt to employ a dialectical style of writing and thinking. But it is true that he is less invested in Hegel and Marx than are Horkheimer, Adorno, and even Marcuse.

Critical Theory in the Digital Age

(Q15) *Given the increasing role of digital media and technology in shaping contemporary society, how do you see Critical Theory adapting to challenges such as the rise of algorithmic governance, surveillance, and the impact of social media on public discourse?*

Well, this is one of those important questions that makes us examine the limitations of so-called 'first generation' Frankfurt School critical theory and its application to the present. (This also applies to subsequent 'generations'). How much of Adorno's and Horkheimer's and Marcuse's analysis and social criticism depends essentially on a theory of industrial and post-industrial technology, and in what respects?

In some areas, it is not as much as you think. What difference has digitisation made to transport systems or the circulation of goods in capitalist society? We still drive cars – just more of them and powered slightly differently. Public transport and freight is pretty much the same as it was seventy years ago. There are more planes in the skies. The tech-bro dream of autonomous driving vehicles, robotaxis, is still an empty promise, driving insanely high valuations of EVs. Jeff Bezos's company has a good website, sure, but it's mainly just an enormous number of trucks taking parcels from huge warehouses to people's houses. Musk made most of his money from making and selling cars, albeit powered by batteries. There is a lot of inertia in the world as it is, and for all the talk of a digital revolution, few aspects of the social, political, and economic world have been thoroughly transformed.

In other areas, the differences are indeed greater. Habermas's theory of the public sphere depends essentially on a pre-digital understanding of media and mediatisation. That is no doubt why he has

recently made modifications to it. One of the important points of inflection that need to be examined carefully today is the influence of social media on the education and socialisation of younger generations, and their role in acceleration of populism and intensification of various kinds of polarisation, but also their potential for driving progressive change and social amelioration. In order to do that, of course, one has to understand how the algorithms of different platforms work, how they can be manipulated, and the manifold consequences of these. But at a higher level of generality, similar basic questions apply to the present as they did in the 60s. How do the media work? Who owns the means of distribution? Who owns and has power over its outlets, social media, legacy media, TV channels, etc.? How is that power exercised, and to what end? And how does all this affect the production of information, misinformation, and disinformation in the public sphere or spheres?

So basically, I agree it is important not to assume that analysis and criticism carried out under very different socio-economic and sociocultural conditions can be applied directly to changed circumstances. But while there are definitely areas where classical critical theories developed in the pre-war and post-war periods need to be overhauled and brought up to date, we should not throw the baby with the bathwater.

Philosophy for a Better World

(Q16) *If everyone in the world were to read three works that you believe could significantly improve society, which three would you choose, and why?*

The Liberalism of Fear, by Judith Shklar. Because too many progressives and leftists have forgotten why certain central tenets of 'liberalism' and the liberal (democratic) came to be in the first place and why they are fundamentally important. Cruelty and oppression, whether meted out by other individuals or, worse, by the state, are the ultimate evil that social and political institutions must guard against.

Capital in the 21st Century, by Thomas Piketty. Because it shows what can be accomplished by a social democratic state with the tried and tested policy tools of high progressive income tax and wealth-tax.

The Conquest of Bread, by Petr Kropotkin. Because anarchists are not read anymore, and we have forgotten the important lessons they have to teach us, some of which are now becoming relevant again. And anyway, I wouldn't want my three books to be consistent with one another. In our political lives, we always face a number of possibilities that radiate in different directions.

The Future of Social Theory

(Q17) *How do you view the future of social theory? Does the Centre for Social and Political Thought contribute to ensuring that, alongside the growing empirical tradition, social theory can maintain its significance?*

So long as the world is complex and hard to understand, we are in need of social theory. So long as there is poverty, inequality, oppression, and cruelty in the world, there is a need for critical social theory. To that extent, sadly, the future of critical social theory is brighter than ever. At the same time, social theorists have to know their place and know when theory alone is not enough. One has to understand the world, but one also has to know when one must speak out, and act. That time has arrived in the US and Europe. But the initial action that is needed is not the creation of a better world but the prevention of a much worse one. Right-wing Christian nationalists in the US, tyrants and oligarchs with almost unlimited resources want to create an authoritarian state that leaves them with unbridled power. In this context, it is not the words of Adorno or Marcuse that come to mind, but that of the activist Mario Salvi: «There's a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part, you can't even tacitly take part and you've got to put your bodies on the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you've got to make it stop».

Yes, He Was a Pole (book review)

Peter Beilharz[1]

Zygmunt Bauman, 'Selected Writings' in Three Volumes. Volume One: 'Culture and Art.' Polity Press, 2021. Volume Two: 'History and Politics.' Polity Press, 2023. Volume Three: 'Theory and Society,' Polity Press, 2024. Edited, with introductions, by Mark Davis, Jack Palmer, Dariusz Brzezinski, Tom Campbell. With translations by Katarzyna Bartoszynska.

Zygmunt Bauman died January 9, 2017. He left behind almost sixty books, mostly in English and then Polish from the early years, and many translations.

Here we have three more books, presented as a series of *Selected Writings*. They represent a labour of love on behalf of colleagues at the Bauman Institute, led by the team of Mark Davis, Jack Palmer, Dariusz Brzezinski and Tom Campbell, in collaboration with the Bauman family and the Polity Press. These volumes rely, in different ways, on these collective skills, as well as those of translator Katarzyna Bartoszynska and artist Lydia Bauman, who provides stunning cover work across the volumes.

Do we need three more books by Bauman? The answer to this question is yes, and this whether you may be sympathetic or not, provided only that you may be curious in some manner or another.

Bauman's reception always had something of an iceberg effect. Those who came more lately, in the period after *Liquid Modernity* in 2000, received a thinner and more selective array of arguments. After his retirement in 1990, Bauman changed writerly strategy from the conventional scholarly monograph to writing especially little books for a more general audience. Readers who started at the beginning, in English, with *Between Class and Elite* in 1972, got to glimpse some of the hidden depths. Those who came earlier again, and equipped with the Polish language, received a great deal besides, reaching back into more

conventional social sciences and its apparatus, even if the earlier work came together with the conventional East European parallel discourse of continental philosophy and the overlay or influence of Marxism-Leninism.

Iceberg, palimpsest, choose a metaphor of your own. The point is that there was a great deal of Bauman's work that was largely unknown or unexamined in the English-speaking hegemon. This becomes particularly interesting in the light of various charges that Bauman was ignorant of this or that.

Let's take a peek. For what we find inside the covers is at the very least sufficient to remind us to be wary of the standard essentializing of our practice as social theorists. Ah! Bourdieu is X; Bauman is Y; Habermas is Z; Alexander is A, etc. On this kind of account, Bauman is the Liquid Modern guy. But no! there is always more, as Bauman indicated, among other things, because our practice is open ended and conversational, but also because by its very nature social theory does not allow us to say everything all at once. As indeed in Borges' image, our map of the world of ideas cannot be its exact replica. Yet the judgemental and policing temptations of our discipline, the need to condense and position thinkers, to privilege some over others in order to control the mental map encourage reductionism and misrepresentation. Sometimes, as with Kundera, it is better to slow down.

The first volume of these Selected Writings, *Culture and Art*, appeared in 2021. Its collection covers the period 1966 to 2015. It shows a palette as broad as Bauman's own personal interests were. There are several pieces from the Polish period. In general they are more conventionally academic in style, and follow the apparatus model shared by American and European social sciences. Their subject matters are often more expansive, showing a consistent interest in semantics, language and cognition, art, literature and photography. As always, his personnel is varied and less than entirely predictable – Marx, and then Borges; Einstein and Magritte; his masters in photography, Cartier-Bresson, Kertesz and Brandt; the artists Calder and Mondrian, Damien Hirst and Kundera and Barbara Skarga

[1] Peter Beilharz is Professor of Critical Theory at Sichuan University. His most recent Bauman books are *Intimacy in Postmodern Times - A Friendship With Zygmunt Bauman*, 2020 and with Janet Wolff, *The Photographs of Zygmunt Bauman*, 2023.

(another invisible Pole). Interests range from the Greeks to love, sex and fear. This volume includes a small suite of six his photographs from his eighties portfolio together with a text assembled by the editors on his views on the art of photography.

The second volume, entitled *History and Politics*, appeared in 2023. It opens with a 1957 piece on bureaucracy, through to a 2016 paper on Europe. It includes essays on bourgeois democracy from 1961, 'Perfect Planning' from 1966; the later Polish Solidarity movement, the Holocaust, Blairism, 9/11 and Brexit and especially powerful essays like 'The End of Polish Jewry' from 1969, where the themes are of exile, identity including his own, Zionism, exile and the exit visa. Significant others are also discussed: C Wright Mills, who visited Poland with mutual excitement in the late fifties; Ralph Miliband, fellow social and life commuter; Julian Hochfeld and the idea of open marxism; and the complicated relationship with his compatriot and fellow exile Leszek Kolakowski.

Volume Three covers *Theory and Society*, appearing in 2024. Its personnel include Mills and Gramsci, featuring Bauman's pioneering essay on Gramsci from 1963 - Gramsci before Gramsci, in the dominant Anglo narrative. And yes, as you may imagine, Bauman may well align or even assimilate Gramsci and Mills, in that Polish crucible, where action and agency appealed, even though Bauman was also taken by the magic of Levi-Strauss. Other interlocutors include Gillian Rose; the open Marxism of Tom Bottomore; Durkheim and Agnes Heller. Themes range across personality, information science, Athens and Jerusalem and Birmingham, modernity, change and humanism.

What do these volumes then reveal? No new essential Bauman, no secret or missing Bauman, so much as an activist scholar at work, not least in his Warsaw laboratory of social research, thinking and essaying upon an array of fields, issues and writers who helped educate him, assisting him to think and write. Bauman did not go missing, but we may have missed his prehistory before *Liquid Modernity*, and certainly his Polish (and Israeli) prelife. On the latter, we now have Izabela Wagner's wonderful biography, *Bauman*, 2020; Bauman's private memoir *My Life in Fragments* and the lost 1968 classic *Sketches in the Theory of Culture*. There is no longer any excuse for ignorance of Bauman's Polish life, history and sociology.

Checking my shelves to refresh my memory for this short notice I rediscover two more books vital for the understanding of Zygmunt Bauman. They disappeared almost totally, for although they were published in the English language, they were published in Sweden, by Aalborg University Press, almost twenty years ago. They are collected editions edited by Keith Tester, Sophia Marshman and Michael Hviid Jacobsen, *Bauman Before Postmodernity*, 2005, and *Bauman Beyond Postmodernity*, 2007. This other Bauman has actually been around for a while.

I recommend them to you, along with these fine volumes that make up Bauman's *Selected Writings*. Like Bauman's other works, these books always lead elsewhere. If you are interested in Bauman, they belong on your list. If not, take a dip.

Communications

New Publications by Members

New Books by Members

(2024)

Browne, Craig. 2024. *Social Theory and the Political Imaginary: Practice, Critique, and History.* London/New York: Routledge.

Gökbörü Sarp Tanyildiz. 2024. *Grounding Critique: Marxism, Concept Formation, and Embodied Social Relations.* Leiden: Brill.

(2023)

Schneiderhan, Erik; Lukk, Martin. 2023. *GoFailMe: The Unfulfilled Promise of Digital Crowdfunding.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Riccioni, Ilaria (ed.). 2023. *Theater(s) and Public Sphere in a Global and Digital Society.* 2 Vols. Leiden/Boston: Brill.

(2021)

Jacobs, Ronald; Townsley, Eleanor. 2021. *Living Sociologically: Concepts and Connections.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

(2020)

Eyerman, Ronald; Sciortino, Giuseppe (eds.). 2020. *The Cultural Trauma of Decolonization. Returnees in the National Imagination.* Basingstoke: Palgrave-MacMillan.

Smith, Philip. 2020. *Durkheim and After. The Durkheimian Tradition, 1893—2020.* Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Susen, Simon. 2020. *Sociology in the Twenty-First Century: Key Trends, Debates, and Challenges.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

New Articles by Members

Staubmann, Helmut. 2024. The Orchestration of Sociology in a New Key: Consonances and Dissonances. *The American Sociologist* 55 (3): 298-316 (https://link.springer.com/article ./10.1007 /s12108-024-09628-0)

Opportunities

Call for Proposals for ISA Book Series and Special Issues

As you see on the updated webpages of the ISA's two main publication outlets, 1) SAGE Studies in International Sociology book series and 2) Current Sociology monographs (special issues), the ISA has significantly reduced the turnaround time for proposals for both of these publications. For *Current Sociology* monographs, the ISA team has explicitly required guest editors to incorporate epistemic diversity and inclusivity in their calls.

In particular, ISA RC16 Sociological Theory colleagues are invited to consider turning Research Committee discussions into SAGE Studies in International Sociology (SSIS). The ISA especially welcomes innovative formats that leverage the length of a book. It encourages colleagues to consider small group co-authored volumes (2-4 authors), allowing for an in-depth dialogical investigation of a specific topic.

The editor, Joy Zhang,[1] is happy to discuss any ideas that colleagues may have.

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[1] Joy Y. Zhang (cs-monographs@isa-sociology.org), Professor of Sociology, Founding Director, Centre for Global Science and Epistemic Justice, University of Kent, UK; Editor, Current Sociology monographs and SAGE Studies in International Sociology (SSIS).

Coming Conferences

> **2025, July 2-4** **Sociology of the Future/The Future of Sociology**
> **ISA Sociological Theory (RC16) Mid-term Conference**
> Research Center Social Theory, Innsbruck, Austria

We're no longer moving forward into the future with confidence. The future is now coming in our direction, it seems, throwing its shadow on the present. From the economy and politics to technology and ecology, the accumulation of crises projects us into the future without any solution in sight. One of the tasks of sociology is to accompany major societal transitions and open up radiant futures. To do so sociology has, however, to reinvent itself, rethink its relations to the world, to other disciplines and to its own history. Thanks to its reflexivity, being both in and about social change in the long term, but also in the interstices of society, sociological theory has always been at the forefront of innovation.

About sixty scholars will present their papers. If you would like to attend the meeting, please register by June 1, 2025, here.

Innsbruck and the Nordkette mountains   © Frank Welz

Further ISA Conferences

2025, July 6-11   V Forum of Sociology   Rabat, Morocco
2027, July 4-10   XXI World Congress of Sociology   Gwangju, Korea

Call for Contributions

Theory needs your contribution! Please send your ideas for a short essay, a reply, an interview, a reference to your new (published) book or recent dissertation, or any other information of interest to RC16 members to the newsletter editors

Nick Osbaldiston (Cairns), nick.osbaldiston (at) jcu.edu.au, and

Frank Welz (Innsbruck), frank.welz (at) uibk.ac.at

until **May 15th** to be considered for issue 1, **November 15th** for issue 2.

Currently, we are particularly interested in receiving short (one page or a short essay) contributions to our planned series on

- Theorising in Troubled Times
- Theory & War
- Trajectories into Theory
- What is Critical Sociology?
- Teaching Theory: How to (successfully) teach Sociological Theory?

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ISA RC16 Board 2023-2027

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Objectives

Following the RC16 statutes, the goal of the Research Committee in Sociological Theory is
- to organize open interrelationships among its various schools of thought,
- helping resolve its recurring crises and define its future prospects and
- to create an international community among scholars

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[1] Past Co-Chairs are ex-officio members of the board.