IS CRITICAL THEORY OUT OF TOUCH?
AN INTERVIEW WITH LOIS MCNAY

By Oda K.S. Davanger & Åshild Flagstad Svensson

Why do critical theorists in general fail to address forms of structural oppression that are inherent in modernity, such as race, class and gender oppression, and their relation to the capitalist framework? Lois McNay argues that contemporary critical theorists have lost touch with critical theory's initial stance, where theorizing starts from experience. She finds that their overriding concern with justificatory issues means that they fail to produce sociologically grounded accounts of oppression.

McNay is Professor of Political Theory at Oxford University and Fellow of Somerville College. She has written extensively on Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and the Frankfurt School of Critical Theorists, and pursues questions concerned with continental philosophy, political thought and feminist theory. She was recently appointed Professor II at the Centre for Gender Research at the University in Oslo in collaboration with the Faculty for Social Science. In September, she was the keynote speaker at a symposium hosted by the Centre on theorizing from experience, feminism, and critical theory.


For those who might not be familiar with your work, what is, in your understanding, critical theory, and which of its main contributors are you concerned with?

There are two senses in which you can understand critical theory. First, in the narrow sense of Frankfurt School theory, which is a direct inheritor of the tradition of cultural Marxism and includes the work of such thinkers as Adorno, Horkheimer, Habermas, Honneth, Benhabib and Forst. Second, there is critical theory in a broader sense, which refers to the largely French tradition of post-structuralist thought, including thinkers such as Foucault and Deleuze. This broader tradition also includes feminist theory and critical race theory.

Although the broad and narrow senses of critical theory are internally diverse, they share a commitment to thinking about politics from the perspective of marginalized and oppressed groups and therefore from the perspective of power rather than that of moral principles. There is certainly a normative content to these traditions, but it is not the type of ‘ethics first’ approach associated with ana-
lytical political theory. They also share a method of theorizing that we might loosely call a ‘radicalized hermeneutics’, which assumes that thought is not impartial reflection – the so-called view from nowhere – that floats above the social realm, but is always historically situated. On this view, theorists themselves are participant observers who are implicated within, and have a practical relation with, those phenomena that he or she studies. So, pulling these threads together, my current project is to look at critical theory in the narrow sense – that is the recent work of the post-Habermasian generation of Frankfurt School thinkers – from the perspective of critical theory in its broader sense. I do this by using feminist theory and critical race theory in particular to interrogate questions of gender oppression and shortcomings in the way it is treated by Frankfurt School theorists.

You say that critical theory has lost touch with its initial intent of exposing oppression in society, which you find must be based on phenomenological observations of experience. Why do you think one must be concerned with embodiment and phenomenology in order to do critical theory?

The idea that political thought should attend to actual experiences of oppression can be found within the tradition of critical theory itself. Critical theory distinguishes its approach to theorizing from other comparable approaches, for example, by claiming that rather than formulating abstract models of justice, equality or freedom it starts from an analysis of existing inequalities and oppressions. Critical theorists locate social experience in a particularly distinctive way. It reads negative experiences, or suffering in the world, as symptoms of a deeper inherent oppression, i.e. the intrinsic inegalitarian nature of capitalist society. They are interwoven in complex ways and that neither has absolute priority over the other.

You argue that Frankfurt School theory was similar to feminist critique. Many of the problems that she diagnosed in Habermas’ treatment of gender still stand for subsequent generations of Frankfurt School thinkers even though they have explicitly sought to address these questions. As you say, some groups of people experience more or less oppression than others. Within the political left, identity politics has been criticised for getting in the way of an analysis of class and economic oppression. Do you think critical theory that takes experience as its starting point might say something about the divide between identity politics and class analysis?

Critical theorists, such as Honneth and Fraser, would say that the divide is artificial and seek to develop ways of examining the imbrication of recognition harms with distributive injustices. I would agree with Fraser that while we might want to conceptually separate the two for analytical purposes, we have to appreciate that empirically they are interconnected in complex ways and that neither has absolute priority over the other. You argue that Frankfurt School theory was similar to feminist thought in terms of its focus on experience and relationality, but find that contemporary Frankfurt School theory has become too concerned with abstract issues of justification and ignores questions of gender or social injustice. In 1985, feminist philosopher Nancy Fraser wrote an article titled “What’s Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender.” What is your take on Fraser’s critique of critical theory?

Simply put, I think that Fraser’s essay is brilliant and still, in many ways, sets the agenda for feminist critique. Many of the problems that she diagnoses in Habermas’ treatment of gender still stand for subsequent generations of Frankfurt School thinkers even though they have explicitly sought to overcome such difficulties. Of course I am not
I think it is a result in part of what I have referred to as the negation of the presence in the debates, namely the current preoccupation with meta-theoretical questions of context transcendence and the foundations of critical theory. To put it simply, the kinds of debates that have dominated critical theory in the last few years turn around the justification of various diagnostic paradigms. For example, Honneth is concerned with justifying the merits of his recognition paradigm in a way that he sees Habermas’ communicative paradigm. Likewise, Forst is concerned with vindicating why his idea of justification provides a superior critical perspective compared to other Habermasian critical theorists. What we have here is a selectivity in the criteria of attribution of credit in the scholarly enterprise of critical theory, a selectivity that has in turn been informed by the contestation over how to understand the major paradigm of critical theory as_negationism_ which is the dominant approach. It might become less paradigm focused so much as one of how critical theory might be reoriented away from meta-theoretical questions of justification towards sociologically grounded forms of critique. It might become less paradigm focused and more problem focused in the manner captured by Benhabib’s ‘multiple lens’ accounts of women’s oppression as patriarchy. The animating concern with oppression seemingly imposes on the critical theorist a certain epistemic responsibility to avoid the type of top-down interpretational prescription that might symbolically compress the already disempowered status of oppressed groups. This epistemic responsibility means that theoretical reasoning ought to be constructed in a way that reflects a manner as possible, that is self-critical and dialogical process. Although, in principle, Frankfurt School theorists endorse such a notion of theoretical reasoning, their preoccupation with justifying the specific interpretative purchase of their particular paradigms over competing versions in practice blocks the development of reflexive critique. Their tendency to bestow a `quasi-transcendental’ status on their chosen constitutive principle shields it from genuinely extensive critical engagement and hence what they hold supposedly as the indispensable capacity for reflexive self-scrutiny is effectively neutralised. By its constraining effect, post-critical feminist theory provide instructive exemplars of theorising that is reflexive and dialogical in nature and my contention is that Frankfurt School critical theorists could learn much from it.

You have an interest in black feminist theory from the U.S. and post-colonial theory (e.g. Patricia Hill-Collins and Chandra Talpade Mohanty). What is it that black and post-colonial feminism may contribute to critical theory?

These bodies of thought exemplify two important things with regard to the diagnostic and epistemic aspects of critique. First, black feminist thought demonstrates a way of grounding theory in the analysis of experience, without it necessarily becoming stranded in contextual particularism or relativism. Contrary to the fears of Frankfurt School thinkers, it shows how theorising from experience need not necessarily be deductive and that feminist effects upon systematic political critique, especially if systematicity is conceived of in terms other than consistency with a uni-foundational paradigm. The point of theorising from experience is not to uncritically affirm immediate subjectivity but to theorise outwards from certain phenomenal realities in order to crystallise and deepen accounts of power. It is precisely with such an aim in mind, namely challenging established but flawed accounts of oppression, that Collins and other black feminist theorists used the neglected experiences of Afro-American women. Their goal was not to assert the intrinsic authenticity or incontrovertible truth of experience but to use it to shed light on the intersectional operations of race, class and gender and thereby explode the prevailing single-lens assumptions of patriarchy that dominated feminism at a certain point. The method of experiential disclosure is crucial, then, to grasping the complexities of oppression and to keep theoretical understanding relevant to its context by injecting it with new meaning. It does not follow therefore that attending to the particularities of social experience, will inevitably immerse theory in the particular so that it is unable to emerge out of it to a general evaluative vantage point.

Second, I think that contemporary critical theory fails to fully enact some of the epistemic implications of its concern with oppression. The animating concern with oppression seemingly imposes on the critical theorist a certain epistemic responsibility to avoid the type of top-down interpretational prescription that might symbolically compress the already disempowered status of oppressed groups. This epistemic responsibility means that theoretical reasoning ought to be constructed in a way that reflects a manner as possible, that is self-critical and dialogical process. Although, in principle, Frankfurt School theorists endorse such a notion of theoretical reasoning, their preoccupation with justifying the specific interpretative purchase of their particular paradigms over competing versions in practice blocks the development of reflexive critique. Their tendency to bestow a `quasi-transcendental’ status on their chosen constitutive principle shields it from genuinely extensive critical engagement and hence what they hold supposedly as the indispensable capacity for reflexive self-scrutiny is effectively neutralised. By its constraining effect, post-critical feminist theory provide instructive exemplars of theorising that is reflexive and dialogical in nature and my contention is that Frankfurt School critical theorists could learn much from it.

You come from a French poststructuralist tradition, whereas feminist ethics of care come from more Anglo-American and analytic traditions although they criticize some tendencies of the analytical tradition, such as the idea of the automatic, national agent. Despite these differences, there appears to be some significant similarities between your position as a feminist political theorist and feminist care ethics (for instance, Joan Tronto, Erin Kittay, Virginia Held) who also argue against top-down theorizing and in favour of contextual theorizing. Do you see yourself as a ‘feminist political theorist of care’ or something of the sort?

I wouldn’t describe myself as a political theorist of care, but there is no doubt that I draw extensively on this rich body of work. As Nancy Fraser points out, critical theorists such as Habermas and Honneth, have a very normativized concept of the family and of women’s role within it that they derive from Hegel. This Hegelian paradigm results in an ethico-utopian understanding of family that normativizes women’s labour and fails to fully grasp the power relations that run through the family. Amongst other things, this makes using the family as a source of ethical potential quite problematic. I think that recent feminist work on care – both as a conceptual and normative issue – is very effective in problematizing the rather sanguine and one-dimensional picture of gender relations that tend to prevail. For example, the commodification of care that is a growing feature of intimate life in Western societies is creating new inequalities that far exceed the interpersonal logic of recognition that critical theorists use to analyse the family.

In your opinion, if critical theory became more concerned with experience and embodiment as starting points of theory, what might critical theory achieve?

It is not so much a question of what it might achieve as much as one of how critical theory might be reoriented away from meta-theoretical questions of justification towards sociologically grounded forms of critique. It might become less paradigm focused and more problem focused in the manner captured by Benhabib’s ‘multiple lens’ accounts of women’s oppression as patriarchy. The animating concern with oppression seemingly imposes on the critical theorist a certain epistemic responsibility to avoid the type of top-down interpretational prescription that might symbolically compress the already disempowered status of oppressed groups. This epistemic responsibility means that theoretical reasoning ought to be constructed in a way that reflects a manner as possible, that is self-critical and dialogical process. Although, in principle, Frankfurt School theorists endorse such a notion of theoretical reasoning, their preoccupation with justifying the specific interpretative purchase of their particular paradigms over competing versions in practice blocks the development of reflexive critique. Their tendency to bestow a `quasi-transcendental’ status on their chosen constitutive principle shields it from genuinely extensive critical engagement and hence what they hold supposedly as the indispensable capacity for reflexive self-scrutiny is effectively neutralised. By its constraining effect, post-critical feminist theory provide instructive exemplars of theorising that is reflexive and dialogical in nature and my contention is that Frankfurt School critical theorists could learn much from it.

Including this leading feminist critical theorist as Fraser, Benhabib, Young and Jaeggi, who have sought in various ways to embed a concern with gender at the heart of critical theory. What I am concerned with is why, to put it crudely, this kind of feminist theorist and his heirs of Habermas – people like Honneth and Forst – who acknowledge the importance of a feminist agenda in some ways, still tend to treat gender as a marginal issue. Against this, someone like Nancy Fraser shows in her recent work that actually, an analysis of gender oppression stands at the heart of understanding how capitalism operates. It is quite mysterious why this does not receive more attention given that, as you pointed out in your question, methodologically speaking, feminism and critical theory share similar commitments as well as a broader understanding of the aims of emancipatory political theory.
Do you think that this focus on all-encompassing frameworks has to do with some sort of Western philosophical heritage of being concerned with First Principles?

Without wanting to overstate the case, I do think there has been a liberal capture of critical theory in so far as the latter has oriented itself to intellectual agenda of Rawlsian justice theorists. The tone was initially set by Habermas’ debate with Rawls and some critical theorists continue in this path at the expense of socially grounded critique. There is no doubt that many of these ‘justice’ issues are important, but at the same time, this engagement with liberalism has affected the way that critical theorists go about intellectual inquiry and has diluted certain commitments of the Marxian tradition from which they stand. In this respect my work on gender oppression echoes other recent criticisms of Frankfurt School theory such as that of Charles Mills who says that it largely ignores racial inequality, or Michael Thompson who says a similar thing about class or Amy Allen who probes the Eurocentric bias of its underlying concept of reason.