

Review Essay

Theory, Totality, Critique: The Limits of the Frankfurt School

Philip Goldstein
University of Delaware

Douglas Kellner, *Critical Theory, Marxism and Modernity*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.

Many scholars have studied the history and the philosophy of the Frankfurt School, but few of them have explained why it became so influential after WW II or why it remains so influential even today. In *Critical Theory, Marxism, and Modernity*, Douglas Kellner, who has published extensively on the Frankfurt School, suggests that the School's original and insightful theories explain its influence.¹ As he says, the Frankfurt School, especially its "analyses of the administered society, the culture industries, science and technology as domination and the consumer society, provides unique and powerful perspectives to conceptualize, explain and critique recent socio-economic developments" (182).

To justify this claim, he examines the School's history, including its origins in Germany, its initial socio-historical program of research, its development of an interdisciplinary research program, its shift towards philosophical studies and cultural analyses, and its provocative accounts of consumer society and the culture industry.

¹He edited *Karl Korsch: Revolutionary Theory* (1977) and *Post-modernism/Jameson/Critique* (1989), coedited *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader* (1989), co-authored *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (1988), and wrote *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism* (1984), *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond* (1989); and, finally, *Critical Theory, Marxism and Modernity* (1989).

While scholarly studies like Martin Jay's authoritative *The Dialectical Imagination* (1973) also detail the history and the theoretical development of the Frankfurt School, Kellner's work examines the theories of the School's second generation (including Jürgen Habermas, Albrecht Wellmer, Claus Offe, and Fredric Jameson) explains the School's accounts of postmodernism, presents forceful criticisms of the School's theories, and suggest a cogent, new socio-historical version of the theories. I will not discuss his perceptive readings of Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, or Habermas in much detail; rather, I will show that his history and his criticism of the School do not consistently support his claim that the School's theories remain relevant and valuable. Rather, the history and the criticism expose the limits of the School's theories, especially its totalizing method and its autonomous theoretical ideals.

To begin with, he adopts a radical, Marxist rhetoric, but his method remains the very traditional, hermeneutic stance in which the critic sets aside his or her biases in order to explain and to evaluate the cognitive or mimetic force of the writer's insights and outlook. In other words, Kellner assumes, like E. D. Hirsch, Jr., and other conservatives, that the truth or falsity of the Institute's views has nothing to do with the critic's subjective evaluations of them but is entirely a matter of the views' mimetic force.

This mimetic approach produces some unresolved contradictions. For example, on this mimetic basis Kellner defends the Institute's belief that radical scholars should divorce themselves from oppositional groups and devote themselves to their theorizing, yet he also complains that the Institute grew more and more withdrawn from practical politics. On the one hand, Kellner presents the School's withdrawal from practical politics as an original and insightful account of an objective situation. As he says,

Critical Theory represents a stage in . . . which radical intellectuals were separated from revolutionary social movements. . . . The Institute theorists were among the first to describe this situation and to make explicit the problems for the Marxian theory of revolution when the working class was defeated or became integrated into capitalist societies. This remains one of the defining features of . . . Critical Theory to this day. (50)

Here he presents controversial claims like "the working class was defeated" or "radical intellectuals were separated from revolutionary social movements" as an objective, empirical "situation" which the Frankfurt School "was among the first to describe" and which counts as one of its "defining features." On the other hand, he repeatedly complains that the Institute's scholars withdrew from practical politics (84). Moreover, he faults Jürgen Habermas and other, second generation theorists for preserving the School's distance from political movements.

His analysis of what the Frankfurt School calls the culture industry reveals similar inconsistencies. To begin with, he argues that in the United States, to which the Frankfurt theorists immigrated in the late 1930s, their status as exiles gave them extraordinary insights into American consumer society and culture industry (121). In a laudatory manner, he points out that the Institute, which "contextualizes culture within social developments," is "among the first to apply the Marxian method of ideology

critique to the products of mass culture" (123). Moreover, he suggests that, since the School's exiled theorists were working in Hollywood and in Washington, the theorists were able "to see what they called the 'culture industries' as a central part of a new configuration of capitalist modernity." As exiles, the theorists experienced American consumer society and culture industry more sharply and more distinctly than American scholars could. Indeed, Kellner says that in the 1940s these exiled theorists experienced many crucial, new developments in the 1940s—"the affluent society, the consumer society, conformity, the media, the administered society, science and technology and domination" (105).

The mimetic truth of this empirical observation and lived experience strongly justifies these views, yet Kellner goes on to criticize them. For example, he rejects the Frankfurt Schools' belief that, since working class and socialist movements do not produce a rational or a just society, science, Marxism, rationality, and technology simply impose social domination (85–86). Contrary to Adorno and Horkheimer, who claim in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that enlightenment rationality enables social domination to progress from the factory and the prison to the concentration camp (97–99), Kellner denies that all science and reason entail domination; as he puts it, the views of Horkheimer and Adorno are too "undifferentiated" (99). Moreover, he complains that Adorno and Horkheimer construe the "culture industry" as administered, imposed forms of indoctrination and control (131) and neglect the oppositional moments of popular culture (142). Kellner argues that a "more multidimensional approach to mass culture" would allow "contradictory moments of desire and its displacement, articulation of hopes and their repression" (141). He even suggests that "the theory of 'one-dimensional society' or notions of an 'organized' or 'state' capitalism—which postulate a situation that presupposes that capitalism has overcome its fundamental contradictions and can now manage or administer away its fundamental problems and conflicts—are deeply flawed" (203). However, these forceful criticisms of Adorno and Horkheimer contradict the School's account of the intellectual's activity: if the School justifies the theoretical critique of the isolated intellectual opposing the mindless conformity of capitalist modernity, the School cannot justify as well the practical critique of the involved intellectual defending the hopes and the dreams of rebellious workers, minorities, women, and third-world groups. Kellner says that the School "is compatible with a multiperspectival approach which allows a multiplicity of perspectives (Marxian, Freudian, Weberian, feminist, post-structuralist and so on) to articulate a complex, multidimensional reality" (231), yet terms like "multiperspectival" or "multidimensional" cannot dissolve contradictions.

Rather, these terms show his unyielding commitment to the totalizing, Hegelian stance adopted by the Frankfurt School. Indeed, he justifies this stance on mimetic grounds, yet this justification, like the other mimetic justifications, generates unresolved contradictions. For example, he points out that in the 1930s manifesto "Traditional and Critical Theory," Max Horkheimer, newly appointed director of the Institute, defends a totalizing, Hegelian stance. Horkheimer complains that the specialized sciences, which ignore their social determination, simply reproduce capitalist fragmentation. Similarly traditional philosophical theory is closely identified with existing institutional structures and ideals and does not recognize its social determination either. By contrast, dynamic and historical, the totalizing thought of the Institute

repudiates class consciousness and the communist party, accepts the determining role of the economy, and contextualizes ideas (45–47).

In the traditional manner, Kellner assures us that social circumstances justify Horkheimer's defense of a totalizing approach. He says that, since capitalism itself was a totalizing system that attempted to penetrate every area of life, "totalizing concepts were necessary to describe the functioning of the capitalist system itself" (54). As he adds,

[A]gainst recent critiques of totalizing thought I would argue that the Institute's use of totalizing categories was justified in the face of a society which, like its totalitarian counterparts in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, was itself attempting to control more and more aspects of life. (54–55)

The critiques in question are undoubtedly those of the postmodernists, who oppose Kellner's description of modern society as well as the School's totalizing thought. Kellner rightly argues that, contrary to the postmodernists' expectations, modern society remains capitalist, yet that argument does not entitle him to describe capitalist society as though its nature and its power were self-evident and not contested or disputed. In *Reading Capital*, Althusser warns us not to read social experience as though its face betrayed theoretical solutions to theoretical solutions. Kellner's mimetic defense of totalizing thought commits this mistake. After all, a totalizing society can only support a totalizing approach if we already believe in totalizing practices.

Moreover, Kellner goes on to repudiate the claim that capitalist society is totalizing. He points out that according to Habermas, Claus Offe, Albrecht Wellmer, and other second generation theorists, capitalism is "governed by a strange dialectic of irrationality and rationality, of organization and disorganization" (202). However, he does not examine what this new view says about his insistence that a totalizing society justifies a totalizing approach. If contemporary capitalist society is, as he says, "a peculiar combination of streamlined rationality and intense irrationality, of organization and disorganization," what sense does it make to say that capitalism's totalizing character justifies a totalizing approach? One might just as well claim that capitalism's fragmented or irrational character legitimizes an irrational approach. Indeed, the fragmented character of capitalism may well support the postmodernist's construing knowledge as power and repudiating totalizing thought.

My reader may complain that only positivist philosophers enjoy such logic-chopping criticisms. However, I mean to suggest that Kellner's mimetic approach ignores the differences between the School and the other Marxisms as well as other philosophical movements. Just as the "monolithic" USSR has broken into competing parties and groups, so too has twentieth century Marxism broken into diverse camps with opposed and contrary philosophies, methods, aims, and ideals. The classical Marxism of the nineteenth century remains influential, but the twentieth century has seen the emergence of historical, Hegelian, cultural, structuralist, and poststructuralist Marxisms as well. In the Soviet Union, the later or "mature" Georg Lukács established an influential, historical approach, which led to impressive cultural studies by the East German scholar Robert Weimann, the eminent French scholar Lucien

Goldmann, and the distinguished British Marxist Raymond Williams. A Hegelian kind of Marxism emerged in France, where Sartre gave it an existential cast comparable to what the Frankfurt School of Social Theory produced; in Italy the imprisoned communist party leader Antonio Gramsci produced a theory of ideological hegemony elaborated by the eminent Raymond Williams, who initiated a new, influential "cultural materialism," and by Louis Althusser, who developed structuralist and, to an extent, poststructuralist kinds of Marxism. Anglo-American feminist scholars have also produced a poststructuralist Marxism engaged in extensive ideological critique. What is more, these Marxisms pursue very different goals. Historical Marxists expect socio-political change to produce an ideal, unified society, Hegelian Marxists defend a utopian realm of freedom and autonomy, and poststructuralist Marxists defend the dystopian condition of evolving disciplinary practices and loose, shifting political alliances.

Kellner's emphasis on the Frankfurt School's theoretical originality and mimetic truth obscures these political and epistemological differences. For example, to justify the social psychology developed by Erich Fromm, he argues that after WWI the failure of German and European revolutions and the emergence of fascism made a social psychology a subject of great importance. He adds that classical Marxism did not have a social psychology that could explain such changes in conservative or radical consciousness (37), but he does not discuss Gramsci's influential theory of ideological hegemony. This theory, which elaborated the classical notion of a civil society, also accounted for these changes in consciousness; moreover, Gramsci also believed that the triumph of fascism and the failure of revolution made such a theory important. In addition, Kellner argues that in the 1930s the Institute carried out significant "ideology critiques of idealism, positivism, existentialism, philosophy of life and the emerging ideology of fascism, as well as of the ideological trends dominant in such disciplines as metaphysics and morality" (25). However, his account of these critiques assumes that all Marxists share a basic notion of ideology; actually, there are important differences between the Institute's "ideology critique" and that of the other Marxisms. To summarize briefly, classical Marxism assumes that the dominant ideas preserve the "objective" interests of the ruling class; Hegelian theorists contend that dominant ideas and discourses preserve the mystified form of the commodity and erase the determining influence of the totality; structuralist and poststructuralist Marxists argue that myths, rituals, practices, symbols, or discourses explain how individuals experience and understand social relations. Moreover, while the classical and the Hegelian Marxists expect objective science or speculative theory to expose ideological distortion or false consciousness, poststructuralist Marxists grant that ideology may be partial or limited but deny that a scientific analysis makes ideology wrong or unnecessary.

Lastly, Kellner lumps Gramsci and Lukacs together with the Institute's theorists on the dubious grounds that they were all sophisticates opposing the vulgar—repressive, rigid—orthodox or classical Marxists. As he says,

Thus, while against the fossilized Marxism of the Second and Third International, it made perfect sense to go back to Marx . . . , the retrieval of genuine Marxism has already taken place in such thinkers as Lukács, Korsch, Gramsci and in Critical Theory. (218)

Kellner does not mention Althusser, who divides the formal theory produced by intellectuals from the concrete practice ruled by ideological forces. This distinction, which lets party leaders go about their business and intellectuals go about theirs, opposes the destructive competition between “radical” intellectuals and “repressive” communist parties.

Kellner also does not mention the work of Husserl and Heidegger, both of whom influenced Marcuse, Adorno, Horkheimer, and other original members of the School, yet the School does preserve certain tenets of a phenomenological outlook. Certainly its commitment to a totalizing practice restates the phenomenological belief that good theory examines what makes knowledge possible, not what makes it true or false. Moreover, the School shares the phenomenological belief that good theory defends autonomous norms and ideals. Why else would the Frankfurt School theorist present himself as a defender of all those values and norms which established institutions, if not the world’s communist parties, deny? Kellner forcefully defends the continuing value of the School, but he does not go beyond this phenomenological faith in autonomous theory. However, to the extent that the School’s disillusionment with capitalist and communist institutions justifies its faith in autonomous theoretical ideals, the emergence of liberal, reform minded communists in the USSR and African-American, third-world, and postmodernist critics in the United States may well mark the limit of the hegemonic Frankfurt School’s totalizing approach.