

Critical Inquiry and Critical Theory: A Short History of Nonbeing

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Other board members, I expect, will comment on the state of matters critical in literature and the arts. There is also of course the issue of the status of a critical theory of society. So I wanted to say something about the state and future of critical theory *an sich*, essentially the Left-Hegelian, Marxist, Frankfurt school tradition, although the notion has become broad enough so that even the likes of Heidegger and his influential legacy and army of epigones are relevant. There are obvious implications for contemporary literary theory, but I won't try to go into that. This will just be an attempt to identify *the* still unsolved problem. It will have to be breathless, and I'm not entirely sure it is relevant. But here goes.

The historical dimension first. I understand critical theory (or perhaps even literary criticism once it began to think of itself as informed by philosophical theory of some sort) to be at its core a post-Kantian phenomenon, that is, very much a legacy of the original Kantian idea of critical philosophy, a critique by reason of itself. (I don't mean to place any great historical importance on the individual "great man," Kant. The "Kantian historical turn" in question is larger than, takes more in than that individual.) The basic claim is that "First Philosophy," the foundation of all premodern university learning and all science, was not in fact any longer regarded as *first*. A critical account of the possibility of such, or any other claim to know, was first necessary. (This is all immediately subject to Hegel's famous objection—that it is like trying to learn to swim before one enters the water—but that to one side.) What then does it mean to see Kant (or the Kantian moment) as the hinge on which something quite new in the history of philosophy and social and perhaps aesthetic theory swings open?

The most important result of the all-destroying Kant was the destruction

of metaphysics as traditionally understood (a priori knowledge of substance). Philosophy, nonempirical claims to know, could not be understood as about the world or things in themselves but rather had to be reconceived as concerned with our mode of knowledge of objects. Eventually this would become the linguistic turn, logicism, sociology of knowledge, all sorts of things. (The rhetorical importance of the claim to be critical [that is, in many contexts, “modern”] in all sorts of disciplines and schools of scholarship is an important story in itself.) But the most important result for later critical theory concerned the status of necessity in philosophy or Kant’s attempt to argue that some philosophical account of the once-and-for-all necessary conditions of knowledge was possible. To make a very long story very short, after Kant, while the critical attack on the very possibility of first philosophy survived, this faith in a formal philosophy, capable of delivering an epistemological form of necessary truth, did not. Retaining the notion of a subjective contribution to, legislation of, the possibility of representational content, or all aspects of human experience “fraught with oughts,” but without the necessity or fixity, meant that it wasn’t long before the most important aspect of the Kantian aftermath was apparent: Hegel’s famous claim in the preface to the *Philosophy of Right* that “philosophy . . . is its own time apprehended in thoughts” or that every philosopher is essentially a “child of his time.”¹ (It also led to neo-Kantian psychologism and philosophy of science, but that is another story.)

This all meant that some new way of conceiving of philosophy adequate to the realization of the radically historical nature of the human condition was now necessary, especially one that could distinguish in some way what was central, elemental, essential, in some way, that on which other quite variable and much more contingent aspects of human historical time depended. The problem of understanding properly (especially critically) conceptual, artistic, and social *change* was henceforth at the forefront of much European philosophy.

This is all pretty much a comic book summary—my claim that Hegel is

1. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford, 1952), p. 11.

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a postmetaphysical philosopher, not a regressive theologian, will raise eyebrows—and it leaves lots of gaps, but it gets me to the point I wanted to make. For it was also the time, as this consensus was building about historicity, postmetaphysical philosophy, and so forth that some consensus was also building in European high culture that the modern form of life coming into view after the middle of the nineteenth century or so was in some basic way unacceptable, unaffirmable, pathological even, certainly ugly. (A recoil most dramatically first obvious much earlier, in Rousseau.) To cut to the chase: it then became obvious how difficult it would be to theorize, as it is now put, this gap or absence or lack in this new, comprehensive form of life. No appeal to an underlying, unrealized human nature (Feuerbach, the early Marx) was possible (if one truly took Kant's critical results to heart and abstained from Marx's neo-Aristotelian essentialism); no appeal to an independent moral criterion was possible (after the historicizing Hegel); and the idea of an underlying historical teleology, such that what was missing was what was not yet actual, but being realized, began to seem a metaphysical regression.

This meant that the problem of critical theory turned out to be connected to a very old problem, indeed the oldest, long ago called the problem of nonbeing (how to say what is not without saying nothing); in this case it is the problem of *theorizing* what was historically missing, absent, simply not, in this historical moment, and understanding the nature of its claim on our attention. Or, how to understand, theorize, the recoil or aversion to modernity already apparent in Hölderlin's nostalgia (and other romantic productions of course) and much more in evidence in Kierkegaard's *The Present Age*, Nietzsche's "death" of God, and so forth. Formulating an adequate account of what was missing, unrealized, or just unacceptable in these altered conditions proved difficult and provoked ever more radical solutions.

I think this problem remains poorly understood and hardly yet well worked out, not resolved by Benjamin's messianism and idiosyncratic philosophy of history, nor in Adorno's negative dialectics and attempted recovery of the "nonidentical" (although Adorno comes as close as anyone to realizing the generality and difficulty of the postidealist dimensions of the problem), and not in the most radical response to the problem, Heidegger's. What is sought is some sense of the falseness not merely of contemporary philosophical positions but of everyday life itself: the falseness, deceptiveness, thoughtlessness, and forgetfulness of the ordinary itself. And all this without a reinstallation of traditional reality-appearance distinctions. Heidegger came up with a novel, explosive account of the inherent nothingness of the everyday world, its potential for an episodic, largely in-

explicable breakdown in anxiety and homelessness, and then proposed a vast, novel ontological account as a way of thinking through the implications of this distinct fragility, groundlessness. That would be better left to several separate volumes.

So much for a Short History of Nonbeing. I only mean that I think critical theory *still* needs an account of what isn't in the what is and still needs to understand the dimensions of this problem as an interconnected problem from Kant on appearance, Hegel on dialectic (and teleology), Marx on contradiction, Kierkegaard on despair, Nietzsche on the nihil in nihilism, Adorno on negative dialectics, and Heidegger on *Nichts*. In fact, I would say that the level of discussion and awareness of this issue, in its historical dimensions (with respect both to the history of critical theory and the history of modernization) has regressed. Habermas's attempt to revive a Kantian view of implicit (quasi-transcendental) conditions of linguistic meaning and even an implied teleological commitment to an ideal speech situation, while understandable in its motivations and interesting in its details, seems to me a pretty clear failure. My own view is that this problem is not theorized well in Foucault. It is quite well known and on the surface among the deconstructionists, but more played with than addressed and is, in the rather thin theoretical dimensions of postcolonial theory and New Historicism, mostly neglected. So it is now possible to say that the problem with contemporary critical theory is that it has become insufficiently critical.

I should say that I still believe that the Hegelian response to this situation (postmetaphysical philosophy, radical historicity, modernist dissatisfactions) is the most promising. It is tagged by such phrases as the causality of fate, internal critique, and determinate negation and usually involves a three-stage claim. The lack or gap or failure in question is initially the obvious one: a community is not living up to its own ideals (or cannot, as in tragic situations). This is then said to have unavoidable experiential consequences (a kind of suffering due to its own unreason; and this feature of course is why attention to contemporary literature and art can become so theoretically important, as a way of evincing and beginning to diagnose such suffering). And then the most difficult claim: the status of the ideal not being lived up to is something like "the best we have been able to do so far," and so it is not just a fact about a local community at such a stage that it cannot live up to its own ideal. That failure has significance beyond its local meaning; all of which forces on stage the difficult issue of the referent of the *community* so described and the now tired issue of grand narratives.

Regardless of how all that might be worked out, there is also a historical cost for the neglect or underattention or lack of resolution of this core critical problem: repetition. Essentially, the cost is the rather mysterious

repetition—now over several generations—of a number of the original moments of recoil, revulsion, and alienation among the founding formulations in modernism. (How long can art be about the end of art? *Why* did modernist art turn to itself as its subject? How many iterations of what is essentially nineteenth-century French bourgeois self-hatred are possible in the novel before we exhaust that moment?) It may seem extreme to claim—well, to claim at all that such repetition exists (that postmodernism, say, is an instance of such repetition)—and also to claim that it is tied somehow to the dim understanding we have of the post-Kantian situation with respect to, let's say, “the necessary conditions for the possibility of what isn't.” But, however sketchy, that is what I wanted to suggest. I'm not sure it will get us anywhere. Philosophy rarely does. Perhaps it exists to remind us that we haven't gotten anywhere.