

Critical Theory and Postmodernism

Post-WWII disillusionment with the Soviet Union did not result in the abandonment of Marx's ideas. Intellectuals and academics continued to develop non-Soviet Marxist thought in Western Europe. Critical Theory agrees with Nietzsche's claim that "God is dead" but argues that Existentialism's answer to the question of nihilism is inadequate. Existentialism didn't really accept the death of God and merely replaced God with the individual. Critical Theory and Postmodern schools of thought such as structuralism and deconstructionism represent a radicalization of Existentialism with the goal of liberation (rehabilitating the Enlightenment in some sense).

Critical Theory examines the function of ideologies within the individual and society at large (how do ideas impact individual behavior and social relations?) An ideology is a set of beliefs that involve assumptions that are taken for granted and that contains internal contradictions. Antonio Gramsci argues that Marx failed to understand how ideology works to make itself unrecognizable. He developed the theory of "hegemony" to explain how a ruling ideology remains dominant. A "hegemonic" ideology persuades individuals and society to see as "normal" the ideas that protect the dominant class or general status quo (patriarchy, white supremacy, hetero-normativity, etc.) Hegemonic ideologies control the power of knowledge itself in that ideologies are passed on at the level of ideas by powerful institutions such as the state, the church, the school, the mass media, the political system, the entertainment industry, and the family. Hegemony involves indoctrination and manipulation "in which the powerful win the consent of those who are oppressed, with the oppressed unknowingly participating in their own oppression."

Critical Theory and Postmodernism combine Marxism and psychoanalysis in order to study the aspects of society that exist "below the surface." Critical Theory puts society under a microscope in order to identify oppressive power relations and to offer strategies for resisting and undermining such power relations. In the 19th century, Marx had insisted that the crisis of modern man was a collective problem, one of class conflict. Critical Theory begins with the alienation of the individual and seeks to first empower the individual within the collective so that changes to the social conditions that cause alienation in the first place can be confronted and altered (the individual must change before society can change). Whereas Existentialism aims to empower the individual who exists within an alienating society to make meaning out of meaninglessness, Critical Theory attempts to go one step further by empowering the individual to change the society that causes alienation. Existentialism seeks "salvation" for the individual, whereas Critical Theory seeks "salvation" for society as a whole (attempt to revitalize the Enlightenment Project and notions of "progress"). Existentialism attempts to give the individual the tools that will enable them to make the best out of a broken world, while Critical Theory still believes that the world can be improved.

Critical Theory is founded on a Marxist analysis of society, therefore, the starting point is the idea that individuals are alienated and exploited and that they must be emancipated. Marx insisted that the "economic base" determines the ideology that is disseminated in the "superstructure." In other words, the ideas and beliefs of society reflect and reinforce the economic values that underpin the economy. Critical Theory and Postmodernism provide a variety of theoretical (interpretive) tools with which to view society and human relations. These tools allow us to interpret the world through a specific "framework" in order to analyze social relations. One basic assumption made by Critical Theory and Postmodernism is that we are always viewing the world through a specific "framework" whether we realize it or not. Such frameworks are synonymous with "worldviews" or "philosophies" or "ideologies" and can be *chosen* by the individual. We can even analyze the frameworks themselves and critique the way that they (the frameworks) view reality. Whereas these frameworks used to exist "below the surface" in the sense that we didn't necessarily know they were there (we lacked the self-awareness to understand that we had a worldview), the frameworks are now seen as human constructions that have a history and malleability.

Critical Theory and Postmodernism operate under the assumption that nothing is accidental in a text (a text being any production of meaning such as a film, novel, or TV commercial). Society itself is a text and everything has meaning and can be interpreted. For Critical Theory and Postmodernism, society (as a text) cannot only be read, but can also be listened to. Society is approached as a “patient” with “illnesses” that can be “diagnosed.” The Critical and Postmodern theorist, like a psychoanalyst, can listen to society and detect subconscious phenomena (ideologies) that may be negatively impacting human relations. What ideologies are we suffering from, or being inhibited by?

Critical Theory, being grounded in Marxist analysis, argues that individuals are dominated and oppressed by ideologies that serve to benefit the few at the expense of the many. Critical Theory considers itself the beginning of emancipation from domination. In other words, being *critical* is being *emancipatory*. How the individual views the world changes how the individual relates to the world, therefore, the act of philosophizing itself is a means to emancipation. Critical Theory and Postmodernism enable the individual to critique their inherited constructions, the ideologies that dominate the way that they view the world. No framework for viewing the world is entirely coherent, and every construction has internal tensions or contradictions. Critical Theory aims to look *into* society and find contradictions that are symptoms of injustice and inadequacy. The root of this approach is the Hegelian dialectic, which views change as arising out of the tension between opposing or contradictory ideas.

Unlike the Enlightenment or Marxism, which posits utopian standards, Critical Theory argues that pursuing personal and political emancipation does not require utopian standards. The task is simple: look at society and say “no” to what is unjust or inadequate. The idea is not to discover the “absolute” correct way, but to endlessly strive for improvement in the face of inadequacy. There is no utopia at the end of the journey, inadequacies always exist, and the project does not cease. The revolution is permanent. The meaning is in the process, not the goal. Improving the world is ennobling for the individual and practically beneficial in itself. The “good society” is actively discovered and created rather than made in the image of received standards. Critics of this approach regard it as destructive of tradition and as relativistic (what do you mean there is no absolute truth?), while supporters of this approach view it as open-ended pragmatism.

Postmodernism, unlike Critical Theory, is less concerned with a positive, constructive political project. Whereas Critical Theory attempts to revive the Enlightenment Project in important ways, Postmodernism typically stands aloof from concrete political concerns in its critique of society. Postmodernism has been heavily criticized as a negative, destructive cultural project that simply destroys “what is” without building what “should be.” Postmodernism shares with Critical Theory a commitment to liberation, but the liberated individual is often left with nothing to stand on or anywhere to go. Popular dissatisfaction with Postmodernism can be summed up thus: “Okay, I see how everything I believe in is just one version of reality. I understand how worldviews are human constructions. Everything is relative...blah, blah, blah. Now what?” Postmodernism, unlike Existentialism, does not offer a response. The uncertainty, ambiguity, and open-endedness of both Postmodernism and Critical Theory have resulted in a “marketplace of ideas” wherein religion has been able to continue offering answers to many people’s questions about what is most important in life. The conversation about what is good, how we should live, and how reality should be understood is an on-going conversation that has always included philosophy, science, and religion. Helpful and constructive contributions continue to come from all three areas. The need to reconcile their often incompatible criteria for establishing what is true or good results in heated disagreement. Destructive political philosophies (Stalinism, Nazism), problematic scientific advancements (fossil fuels, nuclear weapons), and fundamentalist religious movements (Islamic State) continue to challenge us to rethink how we can create a better world and what it means to make the world “better.”