

# Book Review: Critical Theory and Contemporary Europe

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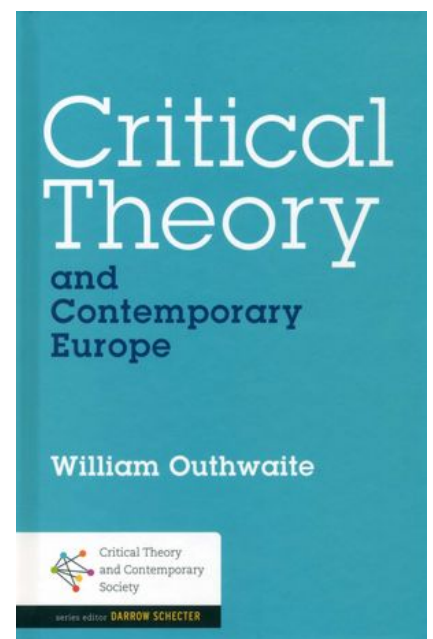
***Critical Theory and Contemporary Europe*** introduces the major contributions that critical theorists have made to the study of Europe, from the interwar years to the present time. The work begins with theorists such as Adorno who addressed Nazism and the Holocaust, then moves on to discuss the postwar affluence of capitalist Europe, taking in Habermas and Marcuse. Reviewed by **Ioannis Papagaryfallou**.



**Critical Theory and Contemporary Europe. William Outhwaite. Continuum. 2012.**

## Find this book:

In *Critical Theory and Contemporary Europe*, William Outhwaite, Professor of Sociology at the University of Newcastle, provides an overview of the development of critical theory after the Second World War. Along with the United States, Europe offered not only the physical basis but also the object of the analysis of critical theorists from Theodor Adorno to Jurgen Habermas. Outhwaite is not particularly concerned with the work of the first generation of critical theorists, notably Adorno and Max Horkheimer, and the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* receives only scant attention in the book. What emerges from his discussion of critical theory after the Second World War is an increasingly cosmopolitan form of theorizing with a remarkable receptiveness to the socio- political developments that are keep changing our world. On the other hand, however, Outhwaite leaves open a number of interesting questions regarding the intellectual relationship between different generations of critical theorists and, most importantly, the very identity and cohesion of critical theory.



The main debates covered in the book concern the nature of the political regimes that are usually described as actually existing socialism, the outburst of the student movement in the West in 1968, and the prospects of democracy in Europe. In order to address Slavoj Zizek's challenge that the first generation of critical theorists avoided the investigation of the totalitarianism of the Left in order to hide their unarticulated but real support for the West, Outhwaite calls attention to the important work of Herbert Marcuse.

In books such as *Soviet Marxism* (1958) and the *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) Marcuse expressed his dissatisfaction with the totalitarian tendencies that were at the time present in both the East and the West, and were thwarting the emergence of a freer and happier society. Despite their divergent social foundations, the bureaucratic societies of the East and the organised capitalism of the West bowed before an all-powerful state, which rendered obsolete the distinction between private and public and moulded the consciousness of the individuals according to its own needs. Although Outhwaite is right to note that Marcuse had no illusions regarding Soviet Marxism, he does not adequately explain his view that the East was in need of liberalisation whereas the West was in need of a revolution. Furthermore, although the emergence of the student movement as a political actor in various European countries and the United States before and after 1968 could be read as a confirmation of some of the ideas put forward by

Marcuse, it also proved that the political pessimism of the first generation of critical theorists was largely misplaced.

In any case, it should be noted that the distaste of the first generation of critical theorists for consumerism and mass culture distance them from the kind of ideological and policy consensus prevalent in the West during the economic expansion abruptly terminated by the oil crisis of the 1970s.

The end of the Cold War triggered conflicting reactions among critical theorists. Despite the fact that thinkers such as Claus Offe continued to see traditional socialist goals as worth pursuing, Habermas made the point that the autonomy of economic markets cannot be suppressed without also endangering the level of social differentiation achieved in modern societies. Disillusioned with both capitalism and socialism in their Northern American and Eastern European guises, critical theorists after the Cold War adopted a new utopian vision which is no other than the European dream.

According to Habermas, the on-going political disagreements between Euro-sceptics, market Europeans, Euro-federalists, and cosmopolitans, can be attributed to fundamentally different understandings of the future of employment, the relationship between economic efficiency and the pursuance of social justice, and the possibility of a post-national democracy. For a time at least, Habermas was relatively sanguine regarding the prospects of democracy in Europe, arguing that the existence of common historical memories and the creation of a European-wide public sphere could compensate for the absence of a culturally homogeneous European demos.

On the other hand, Seyla Benhabib and Claus Offe adopt a more cautious attitude towards the European project arguing that some form of closure might be inherent in the logic of democratic representation, and that European integration stresses both democracy and the welfare state in their existing forms. For Offe, the danger of abandoning democracy and the welfare state, as we know them today, in the name of a still ill-defined European alternative is that political resources might not be mechanically added but rather get lost on the way to Europe.

Although the writer manages to show the different points of view that co-exist under the rubric of critical theory and the internal differences and disagreements between critical theorists, the book's main disadvantage is that critical theory is examined mostly from within and its dialectical alternative is never spelled out clearly. Outhwaite's brief discussion of Foucault and neo-Marxism at the end of the book is not enough to illuminate the relationship between critical theory and other similar approaches. More importantly, critical theorists are presented as a more or less self-sufficient intellectual community, and we nowhere see the traditional theory against which critical theory defines itself today. To the extent that critical theory represents a distinct philosophical approach, it would be useful to investigate its relationship with idealism, existentialism, and so on. To the extent that it represents one of the narratives of the Left, it would be interesting to compare it more extensively to political traditions such as social-democracy, Western Marxism, or even certain forms of anarchism. By adopting an internalist approach to his subject, Outhwaite shows its variety but fails to locate it properly in its environment and to make evident where critical theory ends and different schools of thought begin.

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