

Critical Theory

Part 1 Analysis

Proverbs 24:21-22

"Times are bad. Children no longer obey their parents, and everyone is writing a book." ~
Marcus Tullius Cicero

"Fate of empires depends on the education of youth" ~ Aristotle

"There is within every soul a thirst for happiness and meaning." ~ Thomas Aquinas

- I) Western Philosophy Historical Overview
 - a. Medieval AD 500 – AD 1543
 - i. What is?
 - ii. How do we know what is?
 - iii. What should we do in light of what we know exists?
 - iv. Agrarian Economy
 - v. Christian Religion
 - 1. Dogmatic
 - 2. Hierarchical
 - 3. Ceremonial
 - b. Modern AD 1543 – AD 1969
 - i. Do we really know what is?
 - ii. Could this account of what is be plausible?
 - iii. What could our duty be in light of this plausible other account of existence?
 - iv. Industrial Economy
 - v. Christian Religion
 - 1. Academic
 - 2. Egalitarian
 - 3. Experiential
 - c. Post Modern AD 1969 – AD 2020
 - i. Do I really know myself?
 - ii. What is my duty to myself?
 - iii. What needs to change about existence so as to bring about my authentic self?
 - iv. Digital Economy
 - v. Christian Religion
 - 1. Conversational
 - 2. Multicultural
 - 3. Activist
- II) Critical Theory
 - a. Marxists Roots
 - i. Frankfurt School

1. Inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution (AD 1917)
 2. Fled Germany in 1930's to escape Nazism
 3. Mostly Jewish philosophers
- ii. "Critical Theory"
1. Coined as a cover term in the 1930's in America
 2. Meant to hide the Marxist origins of this school of thought
- b. Program
- i. Methodological negation of "traditional theories"
 - ii. Traditional Theory
 1. Any philosophical system that upholds the values of the status quo
 2. Any philosophical system that fails to give full weight to the "historical specification" surrounding any one idea
 3. Any philosophical system that attends to "nature" more than "history"
 - iii. Critical Theory

"Horkheimer had already confronted two popular strains of mainstream philosophy in these terms with his seminal essay "Materialism and Metaphysics" (1933). Materialism in the form of positivism and its offshoots was condemned for dismissing subjectivity and ethical concerns while analyzing society through categories and criteria derived from the natural sciences. Metaphysics was, by contrast, castigated for ignoring the philosophical relevance of the material world and employing universal precepts to enable the individual—whether through what Kant termed "practical reason" or what Heidegger understood as phenomenology—to indulge in what are ultimately intuitive moral judgments. These seemingly opposed philosophical outlooks were seen by Horkheimer as flip sides of the same coin. Each is mechanically defined by what it opposes. Yet they converge in their contemplative preoccupation with philosophical foundations, unalterable categories for interpreting reality, and fixed notions for verifying experience or truth claims. To be sure, scientific rationality was considered the more pernicious of the two by the Frankfurt School. Nevertheless, its members originally chastised them both for their blindness to critical reflection, history, and the utopian imagination. Critical theory was intended as a general theory of society fueled by the desire for liberation. Its practitioners understood that new social conditions would give rise to new ideas and new problems for radical practice—and that the character of the critical method would change along with the substance of emancipation. Highlighting the context for practice thus became a core concern for the new interdisciplinary approach of the Frankfurt School. In turn, this led its members to reject the

traditional separation between facts and values. Critical theory would treat facts less as isolated depictions of reality than as crystallized historical products of social action. The aim was to understand a fact within the value-laden context wherein it assumes meaning. Lukács had already placed the category of totality, or what Marx termed “the ensemble of social relations,” at the center of historical materialism. The totality was seen as comprised of various moments with the economy serving as merely one among others like the state and a cultural realm that itself could be divided into religion, art, and philosophy. Each moment is shaped by the totality but each is also understood as having its unique dynamic and, as a consequence, an impact upon the practice of those agents (like the working class) intent upon transforming reality. Each moment thus needs to be taken seriously.”

Bronner, Stephen Eric. Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions) (pp. 24-25). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

1. Anthropological

“They also undercut the certainty associated with scientific versions of socialism by sharply separating the inquiry into society from any inquiry into nature. In fact, Lukács liked to quote Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) that “the difference between history and nature is that man has created the one but not the other.”

Bronner, Stephen Eric. Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions) (p. 21). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

2. Ethical

Human emancipation became its aim. The critical method was intent upon contesting “hegemony”—using the term made famous by Antonio Gramsci in his Prison Notebooks (published posthumously in 1971)—in all its forms. Among the founding members of the Italian Communist Party, who would languish and then die in prison at the hands of Benito Mussolini, Gramsci was not a major influence on the Frankfurt School, but his work throws Western Marxism into sharp relief. Fundamentally concerned with civil society, its non-economic institutions, and its guiding ideas, he stressed how the dominant culture produces habits of subservience on the part of the ruled. He maintained that a counter-hegemonic strategy was required to empower the working class and, through new civic institutions, strengthen its self-administrative capacities. Such a strategy

called for organization not merely from above, or through some rigid vanguard party divorced from the masses, but rather through the practical work of organic intellectuals dialectically bound to the proletariat.”

Bronner, Stephen Eric. Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions) (pp. 21-22). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

3. Van Jones, Obama’s Green Jobs Advisor

a. *“Our governing move is three things — top down, bottom up, and inside out. We need to work on the middle and the bottom. Government will handle the top down but it’s also bottom-up and inside-out — so now you’re challenged as you leave here — your challenge is to take care of that bottom part and that inside-out part — the heart part.”*

b. <https://sovereignnations.com/2019/08/21/plan-change-everything-top-down-bottom-up-inside-out/>

c. **Anthony Kapel "Van" Jones** (born September 20, 1968) is an American news commentator, author, and non-practicing [attorney](#).^[1] He is a co-founder of several nonprofit organizations, including the Dream Corps, a "social justice accelerator"^[2] that operates three advocacy initiatives: #cut50, #Yeswecode, and Green for All. He is the author of *The Green Collar Economy* and *Rebuild the Dream*, both ranking as *New York Times* bestselling books. He is a regular [CNN](#) contributor and host of *The Van Jones Show*.^[3]

He served as President [Barack Obama](#)'s Special Advisor for Green Jobs in 2009,^[4] as a distinguished visiting fellow at [Princeton University](#),^[5] and as a co-host of [CNN](#)'s political debate show *Crossfire*.^[6] He is president of the Dream Corps and is among activists featured in *13th*, a 2016 documentary directed by [Ava DuVernay](#) about the U.S. justice system and factors that have resulted in the over-incarceration of minorities and the highest incarceration rate in the world.

In 2004, Jones was recognized as a "Young Global Leader" by the [World Economic Forum](#).^[7] *Fast Company* ranked Jones as one of the "12 Most Creative Minds in 2008".^[8] In 2009, *Time* magazine named Jones as one of the [100 most influential people in the world](#).^[9] In 2010, he received the [NAACP](#) President's award.^[10]

c. Eschatological

“Bloch understood socialism as a projection of utopia. It should serve as a reconfigured totality that provides new ways of treating humanity and nature as well as new opportunities for experiencing the richness of civilization. His outlook was eschatological, but it was never reducible to faith or symbols. Utopian anticipations can be found in the most basic human experiences and images that hark back to the garden of Eden. But the best also becomes manifest in the thrill of sports, the desire for love, nursery rhymes, daydreams, and the lightness experienced in a genuine work of art. Each is a dim prefiguration of the world we seek, and human history is one long struggle in the multiple dimensions of life to articulate and realize it.”

Bronner, Stephen Eric. Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions) (pp. 67-68). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

“Underpinning all our disappointments and fears, including death, is the hope for redemption and the freedom that has been denied humanity. Utopia receives an ontological foundation in the experience of hope and the inherently incomplete character of existence. The task of critical thinking is to illuminate these unconscious and half-conscious yearnings by highlighting the “anticipatory consciousness” that allows for reinterpreting the past. Bloch’s *Atheism in Christianity* (1968), for example, emphasizes the religious roots of communism; it would serve to influence liberation theology that became so popular in Latin America and elsewhere in the former colonized world. *Natural Law and Human Dignity* (1961), meanwhile, insists that the hope for equitable treatment and the constraint of arbitrary institutional power has always animated the strivings of the lowly and the insulted.”

Bronner, Stephen Eric. Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions) (p. 68). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

“Imperialism, militarism, economic exploitation, patriarchal family structures, religious dogmatism, and the false needs generated by consumerism all render it irrational. Only a kind of primal guilt maintains the identification with its values and institutions. Punishment is sought and employed to quell the desire for liberation and archetypal thoughts of rebellion by the sons against the unequal distribution of work and satisfaction imposed by the primal father. Too terrible to recall, shrouded in mist, these rebellions and vague dreams of liberation must be expunged. Deadened by the culture industry, bereft of alternatives, lacking in reflexivity, caught within the whirl of a fast-paced yet ultimately meaningless existence, individuals thus lose control of their history.

Bronner, Stephen Eric. Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions) (p. 70). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

But the dream of the best life is an enduring theme of humanity. Utopia might be the most underestimated concept in the philosophical lexicon. It also has exceptional practical importance. Every mass ideology has a utopian component. The great movements were never inspired, and the barricades never mounted for purely pragmatic reasons. “Man does not live by bread alone,” Bloch wrote, “especially when he doesn’t have any.” Utopia has an existential component: it is the ideal for which countless individuals have proven willing to die.

Bronner, Stephen Eric. Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions) (p. 75). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.