

## CONFERENCE REPORT

### RECOLLECTING THE FUTURE

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***The Future of Critical Theory, Ashworth Program in Social Theory,  
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It was inevitable that the ‘future’ would, sooner or later return, what was perhaps less expected was that it would return so forcefully via a reassessment of the past. *The Future of Critical Theory*, offered such a return by appealing to thinkers and schools—that have, generally speaking, been out of favour in recent times—whilst in the main ignoring or paying little attention to more contemporary, and perhaps ‘fashionable’, trends. The same shift was evident in another conference held soon after, also in Melbourne, *Imagining the Future: Utopia, Dystopia and Science Fiction*. One got the feeling after these two excellent conferences that there is a turn underway in the academy and that the affirmation of the power of critical thought is no longer passé.

*The Future of Critical Theory* was held on the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> of November, 2005, under the auspices of the ‘Ashworth Program in Social Theory’ and ‘The Social Theory Postgraduate Association’ at the University of Melbourne. This was the first installment of what the organizers hope to be an annual event. With over thirty papers packed into the two day timetable (with parallel sessions in the mornings) the intensity was quite high, however, the excellent organization and the collegial atmosphere made it flow well. The majority of the contributors were postgraduate or early career academics with each day having keynote speakers as bookends.

The call for papers was very broad which possibly accounted for the great array of papers given. Not only was every generation of the Frankfurt School from Horkheimer to Honneth, and its roots in Kant, Hegel and Marx given a voice, there were also papers engaging with the work of Cornelius Castoriadis, Agnes Heller and Alain Badiou. Apart from Badiou—whose work one would not immediately associate with Critical Theory seems to be gaining more attention among Anglophone scholars everyday—there was very little work on French Critical Theory; there was one paper on Baudrillard but I cannot recall mention of Foucault at any of the papers that I attended. This is no

small point considering the profound impact contemporary French thinking has had in Australia. What is perhaps even more interesting than the notable absence of French theory was the strong presence of Adorno and Marx. It was not so much that there were a large number of papers on either thinker, but rather we could say there was a 'spectre' of Adorno and Marx present throughout the conference. In the case of Marx one gets the feeling that he will always be 'returning' as long as capitalism remains, but the return of Adorno, which I hope is a sign of a broader trend, must be celebrated even more as his fate at the hands of many over the last twenty years has not been a good one, let alone fair. Another notable absence from the conference was Habermas; apart from one paper linking his work to that of Kant, his ideas had little impact in both the presentations and the discussion.

In addition to the main program, there were four keynote presentations and the conference was concluded with a panel discussion entitled *The 20s and Today: Critical Theory in Troubled Times*. Whilst the panel discussion was very interesting and discussed a 'relevant' or 'timely' subject, it in the main concentrated its attention on 'contemporary issues' (e.g. the rise of the neo-conservative forces in society and contemporary economics) and how their intellectual roots are to be found in thinkers like Carl Schmitt, rather than exhaustively addressing the way Critical Theory could or is engaging with this new 'enemy'.

The first of the keynote speakers was Dieter Freundlieb (Griffith University) who opened the conference with an excellent paper which provided an overview of the much discussed debate between Fraser and Honneth entitled *Third Generation Critical Theory: An Analysis of the Debate Between Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth*. Freundlieb's paper was followed by an excellent discussion that went to the heart of many of the key issues such as subjectivity and the subject, and the problem of post-metaphysical thinking. Freundlieb's willingness to engage with concepts like 'the subject' and 'metaphysics' that do not enjoy the broad acceptance today created an atmosphere for the rest of the conference in which ideas were not ruled off the agenda.

The first day of the conference was closed with the second keynote, *Modernity, Contingency, Dissonance and Critique*, given by the Director of the Ashworth Centre and conference host John Rundell (University of Melbourne). Rundell's detailed paper began by sketching an image of modernity as one rent by simultaneity and dissonance, that is of multiple modernities governed by differentiated logics or social imaginaries that do 'not add up'. Interestingly this sketch was done via a reading of Adorno's writing on music; however, it was not the more familiar Adorno as a theorist of negative dialectics but Adorno 'as a theorist of dissonance' that guided this reading. This image of modernity was the ground for the discussion of 'the possibility of critique itself', which was developed through the work of Castoriadis and Heller, the goal of which was to 'mark the possibility for a dissonant condition that keeps dissonance alive, gives space to its critical potential, and provides a horizon that whilst emphasising indetermination, [but] does not fall headlong into a dissonant abyss.'

The second day of the conference began with the paper *Repressed Materiality: Retrieving*

*the Materialism in Axel Honneth's Theory of Recognition* by Jean-Philippe Deranty (Macquarie University). Drawing on Feuerbach and Honneth's early work Deranty's paper sought to bring nature and the 'object' back into Critical Theory; arguing that Honneth's concept of recognition in his later writings have focused on the relation between people and has excluded interaction with nature and the material world. Paradoxically going back to earlier writings Deranty is indeed moving Critical Theory forward as, particularly under the influence of Habermas, the concept of nature is surely Critical Theory's great omission. This paper drew on and extended some of his earlier work published in *Critical Horizons*<sup>1</sup> which in conjunction with a small number of other scholars forms part of a broader trend to make nature an issue for Critical Theory, a move that is starting to have some impact and presents itself as one of the most fruitful directions in the field. While nature was not a key theme of the conference, it certainly had a presence and was generally recognised as an important dimension of the project by many participants.

In the final Keynote of the conference the Frankfurt School was represented by Frederik van Gelder (Institut fuer Sozialforschung, Frankfurt/Main). His paper *Social Crisis and German Idealism: In Search of the Origins of Critical Theory* argued that there is a need to examine the origins of Critical Theory because it is starting to 'fray at the edges' and as a consequence can mean just about anything. This examination, which is too complex to recount here, was given in twelve forceful theses that drew heavily on the original vision of the first generation of Frankfurt thinkers. Ultimately for Gelder, Critical Theory consists of a unity between its objective-historical side and a subjective-motivational side. The 'objective-historical' side attempts, in the face of the crisis of European Culture, to radicalize German Idealism in order 'to rid "traditional" theory of its contemplative and "time-less" (Aristotelian) elements, and to mobilize popular-democratic support in the face of National Socialism and Totalitarianism.' Where the 'subjective-motivational' side attempts a radicalization of Freudian Psychoanalysis in order to actualize the idea of 'free and autonomous subjectivity' with the hope that 'the self-destructive and alienating aspects of popular culture can be [one day] transcended.' One was left with no doubt after Gelder's paper that Critical Theory means *something* and if contemporary theorists want to operationalize its power as a theoretical discourse they must return to the origins, to what it actually is, for the present trend in which Critical Theory 'means just about anything' is counter productive.

While, Gelder's paper was critical of some trends that are taking place in the 'name' of Critical Theory, the extremely high quality of the papers across the whole conference left one with the impression that Critical Theory's relevance and future is indeed enduring and that the field is on the verge of a period of renewal and expansion. Even though, as mentioned, the concept of nature did not have a particularly strong presence at the conference, it seems to me that the work of Deranty, among others, in developing a more exhaustive critical theory of nature than has previously been presented is at least one of the directions in which the 'future' of Critical Theory lies. While the

1. Jean-Philippe Deranty, 'The Loss of Nature in Axel Honneth's Social Philosophy. Rereading Mead with Merleau-Ponty', *Critical Horizons*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2005, pp. 153-81(29).

'environmental crisis' determines it as an essential aspect of the critique of capitalism, in a more general sense Critical Theory's philosophical understanding of the world as such is limited without a thoroughgoing philosophy of nature. More broadly speaking, as the one-dimensional life of capitalism intensifies in all directions, and oppositional discourses lay to the side in tatters, Critical Theory appears to be one of the few theoretical positions that has the strength to survive under such conditions. This at least appears to be the case if *The Future of Critical Theory* conference is any guide.

The Ashworth Centre, the host of the event, is the home of the excellent journal *Critical Horizons: Journal of Social and Critical Theory* (one of the world's leading critical theory journals [Brill]) so it is more than likely that some of the papers from the conference will appear in its pages.

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