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Only Change is Permanent

2021, Summer

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Critical theory is a bit like pornography, as a Supreme Court justice once said when asked to define the latter: “I know it when I see it.”

Critical theory can be defined pretty loosely as well. It’s the multitude of intellectual spin-offs from Marx that began to take flight roughly a hundred years ago, at about the time that Lenin and his acolytes thought they have codified what Orthodox Marxism was, forever.

Starting with Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci, and the thinkers who made up the Frankfurt School in pre-Nazi Germany, the loosely-described tradition of critical theorists have tried to figure out what comes next when history stops behaving the way it was supposed to in the 19th century.

New categories of struggle vie for attention, the State becomes ever more violent and dominating, and capitalism keeps on adapting. Along the way, many critical theorists have strayed far from what Marx had in mind, although they still insist on quarrying the master’s work for indications that he was moving in the same direction.

Stubbornly, they also resist admitting that the road they’ve taken was already paved for them and already has a name: an-

archism. You can find any number of thinkers in the Marxist tradition citing texts by Hakim Bey, the Invisible Committee, Todd May, and others, and invoking concepts like autonomy and leaderlessness, without acknowledging that they belong to a distinct anarchist tradition and instead using them as a grab-bag from which they can pick and choose to bolster their own theoretical case.

That doesn't mean anarchists should ignore critical theory. These writers are grappling with many of the same social and political problems, and they've informed anarchist thinking as much as anarchists have affected theirs. Theorists like Benjamin, Marcuse, Deleuze, Foucault, Hardt and Negri, and Said have influenced anarchist thinking on power, counterrevolution, and cultural domination, just as anarchists have pushed them more in the direction of decentralization, autonomy, and leaderlessness.

Anarchists have also made a somewhat parallel journey from their points of origin. Like Marx, classical 19th century anarchists were imbued with faith in science and convinced that society was moving toward an ideal condition of freedom that it would certainly reach if only the world read or heard its most cogent spokespeople, and acted accordingly.

Now, we're not so sure. Is any ideal condition conceivable? Isn't human history a continuing process of struggle and change, and shouldn't our political thinking evolve with it? Don't the earth and its non-human inhabitants have their own history that follows its own path?

Critical theory began with a desire to answer some of these questions, which Marx didn't do in any easily discernible way. These theorists wanted not just to understand and explain society, but to figure out how to change it. What keeps people from doing the logical thing and overthrowing capitalism and the State? How can we push back against the power of cultural straitjackets like religion, ideology, racism and gender oppression?

“The political condition is an endless struggle that does not terminate in a perfect situation or a utopian state,” writes Bernard E. Harcourt in a recent book updating critical theory, *Critique & Praxis: A Critical Philosophy of Illusions, Values, and Action*, “but goes on forever so that in the end, the political struggle has to be itself part of the utopian vision and of what critical theory embraces.”

Recognizing this is just as essential to keeping anarchism practical and relevant because it keeps us focused on understanding and addressing the current condition of society, instead of reaching some utopian endpoint that may no longer make sense by the time we get there. Context, in other words, is everything. It’s important to remember that anarchism is supposed to facilitate a larger struggle that keeps shifting as political and economic conditions change. And we have to make sure we don’t adopt strategies that replicate the patterns of power we’re trying to overcome.

Critical theorists today address the same concerns. It is necessary to move away from the old categories of revolution and instead focus our energies on insurrectional practices: uprisings, revolts, insurgencies, resistances, insubordinations, desertions. The difference is that revolutions—even the most successful, like those that liberated the colonized world after World War II—generally seek to replace one regime or one version of the State with another.

We don’t take down capitalism and the State by storming the Capitol and installing ourselves there the right is perfectly good at that, too—but by attacking them in a thousand places and in a thousand different ways. In other words, by creating a social revolution through our activism, as the Zapatistas, the farmers in India’s Punjab, and the Movement for Black Lives are all doing. Once we do this, it won’t be so hard to topple what’s left of the State.

Critical theorists have always emphasized another valuable principle: to avoid the pitfall of truth-seeking. Claims of truth

are always contingent, in part because the quest for truth is always soaked in the relationships of power that course through a society defined by capitalism and the State. Asserting or imposing a truth is a way of canceling out politics, of masking relations of power in order to declare victory in the fight for liberation that is never-ending. In reality, there is no truth, only the struggle for it. Every time a power regime—like capitalism or colonialism—is overthrown, there is a risk of establishing a new truth in its place, which in turn has to be criticized, resisted, and overturned.

In his book, Harcourt argues that critical theory got off track roughly 40 years ago when it became too tied to academic settings, stopped focusing on how to change society rather than just understand it and started to produce its own set of supposedly universal truths. But nothing about anarchism makes it immune to such traps either.

What kinds of truths do we need to avoid? One is the ideal of liberalism, which a lot of critical theory is devoted to dissecting and tearing down. Liberalism is built on the myth that a society of laws and constitutions can leave everyone free to pursue their own ideals without getting in anyone else's way. The contention is that there's no reason, for example, that NRA members can't indulge their gun fetish while African Americans attend church in safety, because the law regulates their interactions. Do we really believe this?

At the same time, liberals deplore violence—but define the term so narrowly that it becomes an excuse to avoid acting. Thinkers from Benjamin to Marcuse have argued that violence is everywhere, from the violent taking of Indigenous people's lands to urban policing to slum clearance to the poisoning of Flint, Michigan's water supply. We're just not allowed to call it that. But actually, political change always inflicts violence on someone in some form, whether it comes from the right or the left. Once people understand the nature and impact of particular forms of violence, it's a lot harder to convince them

that burning a patrol car, for example, is as heinous as evicting a low-income family from their home.

Critical theory also raises some thorny issues that anarchists need to confront. Much of anarchist organizing revolves around a pursuit of consensus as a basis for action. But consensus relies on people's reasonableness or rationality, as Harcourt points out, on the existence of some kind of rational truth that we can all subscribe to. Consensus, on the surface, appears to be the least oppressive form of decision-making. But what if it can produce its own form of oppression: another way to cancel or deny the fact that politics has always been about struggle and conflict, and always will be?

Power is another sticky problem. Anarchism is about minimizing or eliminating the exercise of power by one individual or group over another, and maximizing cooperation. Critical theorists like Foucault looked at power in a completely different way; it's everywhere, in the air we breathe, circulating all through our social relationships. We can't eliminate it, only work with it. The theorists may be wrong, but it's up to us to address their point.

Anarchists and critical theorists probably never will find themselves in complete harmony—particularly on the pivotal matter of the relationship between the State and capitalism. But we can keep learning from each other, and sharpening our thinking in the areas where we disagree. What we share is a desire to make theory something practical, a tool for sustaining a real and effective opposition to the ever-more enveloping system of the State and capitalism, not a self-reflexive exercise.

Before we can be effective either as revolutionaries, or insurrectionists, or autonomists, we need to learn how to be in a world that makes struggle and emancipation essentially synonymous.

Eric Laursen is a writer and activist and the author of *The Operating System: An Anarchist Theory of the State* (AK Press, 2021).