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Critical Self-Theory

Towards an anarchist critical theory of the self and society

Jason McQuinn

Today, as ever, any genuine theory of living – of authentic engagement in the social world – must begin with the subjective, with the point of view of the necessary subject of that life. Thus, any genuinely revolutionary theory must be at the same time self-theory – a theory of how to live everyday, of how to struggle with the reigning structures of misery and their deceptive appearances. Any effective self-theory must clarify and define at least a few of the most important key concepts necessary for such a theoretical comprehension of the modern world. Most of these concepts are in no way new. They can be found wherever people are attempting to grasp the nature of their world and change it. But the general use of these concepts is more often than not ambiguous, mystified, and deprived of any radical incisiveness. Because of this, these concepts need to be constantly rediscovered and reinvented in the dialectical movement of our everyday lives in the history we are making. Through such rediscovery and reinvention we must construct a living vocabulary of shared concepts with which we can collectively grasp our real conditions as they are lived, concepts

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which will arm our theory by increasing the precision of its aim and power of its impact.

“The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression [both in form and content] of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, hence the ideas of its dominance.”

- K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology* (1845)

“There they flaunt their sensitivity, ranting in private against theory as being something cold and abstract, and lauding ‘human relations.’”

- Jeanne Charles, *Arms and the Woman* (1975)

“Man, your head is haunted; you have wheels in your head!”

- Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own* (1844)

Human life without theory is impossible. Between the conception of a desire and its satisfaction always stands the human activity necessary for the unification of that desire with its object. In every case this necessary activity has two coincident aspects – the practical and the theoretical. These aspects are not strictly separate and totally different; but rather they are intertwined and can be best conceived as simply crystallizations at different points of the same unitary human activity.

All practical activity (or at least that which occurs above the level of purely reflexive behavior) expresses theory. A trivial example might be: you can't go downtown without having some idea, or theory, of where downtown is.

All theoretical activity is at the same time practical. Even the most contemplative interpretation of the world has innumerable, practical consequences – including for instance, and

each day. But it is a start on the road towards the individual and collective self-activity required for that eradication.

Alienation must first be perceived and understood before anything very coherent can be done to eliminate it. This means that everyone must become his or her own theoretician. We must all cease to allow others to think for us. We must criticize all thought ruthlessly, especially our own. Instead of allowing the reference point for our lives to always be somewhere else, we must become the conscious centers of our own critical self-theories. Once all the layers of ideological mystification are peeled off, we are laid bare to ourselves, and our relations to other people and to the universe can be made progressively more transparent. We can then see that all the unnecessary and mystifying abstractions were only projections of our own individual and social powers, our own alienated powers and the powers of other people just like us.

The only really critical self-theory exists where no morals, abstract ideals, or hidden constraints cloud the air. It facilitates our unity with others as individuals who are conscious of our desires, unwilling to give an inch to mystification and constraint, and unafraid to act freely in our own interests.

dividual subjects and their alienated social structures as a completely unquestioned and unconsciously held assumption, critical self-theory attempts to show the real relatedness and unity of its elements – how one side of an abstract separation can never exist without the other. Thus, where ideological theory holds that value and knowledge are always separate entities (and strives for “objectivity”), critical self-theory reveals that all knowledge is social and historical, and that it is always humanly generated for a purpose (or constellation of purposes), even if those purposes remain unclear to its creators. Critical theory reveals value is always immanent in human knowledge. It demonstrates that there are inherent values in the choices of which questions to ask, how to frame them, the criteria for satisfactory answers, the range of acceptable methods for finding such answers, etc.

And where ideological theory insists on the fragmentation, specialization and compartmentalization of knowledge, critical self-theory is always unitary. It picks out and employs all the most worthwhile formulations of ideologies (their partial truths) while rejecting any useless or irrelevant aspects along with the ideological core. The partial truths which are thus appropriated, along with other new observations, are then synthesized with the current body of one’s critical self-theory to form a new totality. Critical self-theory is a continually evolving attempt at the conception of theoretical and practical unity. It is a dynamic totality under construction, always dialectically transcending (abolishing yet preserving) itself.

Self-demystification and the construction of critical self-theory don’t immediately eradicate one’s alienation. Unfortunately, the world of alienation goes right on reproducing itself

dual, or split in two, in nature. It is the archetypal metaphysical conception that Being is fundamentally divided into two ultimate parts which can never be resolved into one. It is the necessary basis for all dogmatism and ideological theory.

often most importantly, the adoption of a stance of passive suffering of the fortunes and misfortunes of that world.

Unavoidably, the conception of a theory unrelated to any practice, and of a practice unrelated to any theory is itself a theoretical construction which contains a very definite relation to practical activity. Theory is inseparable from practice just as the objectifications of theory are inconceivable without the activity of their production and use.

Yet, for many, if not most people, “theory” seems alien, because for all of us “theory” has usually meant having our thinking done for us by ideologues and authorities – by parents, priests, teachers, bosses, politicians, experts, counselors, etc. As a result the theory we use in our everyday lives to realize our desires, our self-theory, has generally become artificially split into two fragments whose forms reinforce and help reproduce each other.

On the one side we often appropriate whole, as if it is our own thought, an ideology (or religion or even a few fragments of the ideologies) we say we “believe in”. This becomes what we tend to consciously identify as our core philosophy, religion, ideology or theory of the world. For many people this core will be identified as something like Science, Marxism, Christianity, Humanism, Capitalism, Socialism, Islam, Buddhism or similar things. These ideologies or religions tend to be abstract, idealist, and rigid. On the other hand, we allow the more immediately practical side (the everyday life side) of our self-theory to remain at a level of unconscious assimilation and use. It appears as such a “natural” expression of “the way things are” (i.e. as “common sense”) that there seems to be no need to question its origins, its basis, or its relation to us. All too often this side of our self-theory is never consciously identified as theory at all.

The thought of most people oscillates between the two poles of this split in our thinking. The theory thus expressed can be classified according to the usual (or average) place it occupies in the continuum between the two poles. Some people tend to

be more ideological in their thought. They attempt to situate themselves in some kind of more or less theoretically coherent relation with their world as a whole; but they usually attempt this by forcing their entire lives to revolve around some abstract “beliefs” (two obvious examples include fundamentalist Christians, most of the various Marxists – especially members of all the putrid Leninist, Stalinist, Trotskyite or Maoist sects).

Other people tend toward un(self)conscious self-expression; they take the world as it superficially appears to them for granted as if it were an humanly unchangeable environment and try to get by on an absolute minimum of personal thought. They usually function almost entirely within terms of the images and slogans which are systematically force-fed to them by mass media and all the dominant institutions whose propaganda seems so nearly inescapable (the churches, government, schools, corporations, etc.). When they are forced to think about their lives, their thinking always remains fragmentary and incoherent since they really have no conscious idea of where they stand in relation to the totality of society, its institutions, or the natural world.

In the end, wherever a person’s mode of thinking might be classified on this continuum, by default, one way or another, that person’s thinking is largely done for him or her by others.

All the thoughts which unreflectively seem so natural, all these beliefs, tend to express the needs, principles, and social relationships of the dominant modes of organization of our society at the same time as they tend to deny the subjective reality of those who hold them. As such they are essentially expressions of what is best termed “ideology”.

Ideology always expresses a defense (whether explicitly or implicitly) of our social alienation. In our present epoch it functions largely as a defense of the closest thing we have to a worldwide system of domination and exploitation – capitalism – by propagating justifications for most forms of hierarchical organization and commodity (buying & selling) relationships.

confront and change the system that destroys him or her each day.¹ The method of critical self-theory is dialectical and contrary to the dualistic and one-sidedly analytic² methods of positivist and ideological theory which always pose every problem (and thus their solutions) in terms of two abstractly separate and mutually exclusive choices. The philosophical basis of critical self-theory lies in a radical phenomenology and its origins from the fundamental fact of our live experience, contrary to the ontological dualism³ of ideological theory.

Whereas ideological theory must always remain dualistic on its most important level, incorporating the division between in-

² The fetishization of analytic method always functions to conceal a dualistic metaphysic. The mere act of conceptually breaking down (analyzing) specific processes and objects is not in itself the major problem here. It is the treatment of specifically one-sidedly analytic methods as if they (and their hidden metaphysical assumptions) are the only or most true methods of examining the fundamental nature of things that coincides with the demands of ideological theory. For example, a rigid belief in the absolute truth of mechanical, atomistic philosophy will usually accompany (no matter how much it may be denied) the fetishization of an analytic method focusing on the breaking down of objects into discrete parts which are then conceptually reunited by solely speculative cause-effect relations. Another example might be the fixation on an analytical method based upon systems orientation. In this case, the mechanism becomes somewhat more subtle, but a dualistic metaphysic based upon the concepts of systems, feedback, and homeostasis (or levels of stability) takes the place of atomic particles and a cause-effect model with similar end-results. The structures of different languages shape the range of possibilities for certain types of thought. English and the other Indo-European languages encourage cause-effect & actor-action-receiver thought patterns as a direct result of their subject-verb-object or subject-object-verb sentence patterns. In the same way, the types of analytical methods (in fact, based upon analytical metaphors) that we choose shape the range of possibilities we are able to use for understanding our world. Once we become fixated upon one method as the only correct method we lose the ability to distinguish what that method can reveal to us from what that particular method at the same time conceals from us. We end up directly confusing the metaphor for the structure of our world with predictably bizarre results.

³ Ontological dualism is the conception that existence is fundamentally

Those who assume (usually unconsciously) the impossibility of realizing their life's desires, and thus of fighting for themselves, either end up fighting for alien ideals or causes (as if they were their own), or remain the relatively passive victims of the illusions and deceptions of others. The critical theorist "goes through a reversal of perspective on his life and the world. Nothing is true for him but his desires, his will to be. He refuses all ideology in his hatred for the miserable social relations in modern capitalist-global society. From this reversed perspective [it is easy to see] with a newly acquired clarity, the upside-down world of reification [the "thingification" of aspects of daily life], the inversion of subject and object, of abstraction and concrete. It is the theatrical landscape of fetishized commodities, mental projections, separations, and ideologies: art, God, city planning, common sense, ethics, smile buttons, radio stations that say they love you, and detergents that have compassion for your hands." (Negations, Self-Theory, pp. 4-5)

When such a person can no longer go on living according to the dictates of such insanity, when every compulsory role becomes too absurd to perform, each constraint and alienation required by the hierarchical capitalist organization of social relations is felt sharply as what it really is – a negation of personal subjectivity and life, as a situation that must be undermined and subverted. The critical theorist constantly feels the need to

¹ Anyone who sets out to change the world soon finds that she or he can't accomplish much in isolation. The basic structures of our world that need to be changed are social – the organized, largely institutional, relations of people to each other, as well as their bodily foundation (anchoring) in socially-produced habits, and personality and character structures. The only way they can be changed radically is through movements of common communication and committed, yet autonomous participation in the project of individual and collective self-transformation and self-realization. One can only change one's life radically by changing the nature of social life itself through the transformation of one's social world as a whole, which requires collective efforts. And one can only change the world as a whole beginning with one's own life, as well.

It assumes that the basic forms of the existing political-economy, and of social relationships in general, are purely natural facts rather than products of human social activity within history which are potentially subject to rationally determined changes.

In our era ideology nearly always constitutes a theoretical acceptance at some level of the logic of capital (the alienation of our life-activity sold within a hierarchical social system). As such, ideology can be characterized very simply as the form taken by capitalism in the realm of thought. It is as if capitalism were thinking up its own justifications through us. Indeed, it is as if the bodies of human beings were not only the tools and resources capitalism needs for the reproduction of its physical social relationships (corporations, the institutions of private property, cops, courts, laws, etc.), but it is as if our minds have largely become appendages of this system, also.

Because ideology is always the form taken by alienation in the realm of thought, the more alienated we are, the less we understand of our real situations. The less we understand where we are and what we are really doing, the more we allow our lives to be determined and controlled by the dominant institutions, and the less we really do exist in any meaningful way as ourselves. And the less we assert our own autonomous existence, the more palpable an existence is taken on by capitalism, by the frozen images of our roles in all the various social hierarchies and transactions of commodity-exchange. It is as if all previous genuinely human communities have been invaded, taken-over by an alien race of body-snatchers, and been supplanted by an entirely different and vacantly hideous form of life.

The split or separation involved in our self-theory (mentioned earlier) is actually a split in ideological self-theory. It is a reflection in thought of the basic split in our own daily life-activities between the more immediate personal reality we live and experience as our own every day, and

the more abstract and alienating ideological reality which we have allowed ourselves to be enclosed within. It reflects the conflict between our most intimate and genuine desires, and the alienating social context which always seems to confront them.

Instead of a transparent relation between an individual and his/her world in which the individual is a conscious subject with the world constituting the objects of desire, there is a mystified relationship. The actual social subject displaces his or her own desire with those of a theoretical abstraction which demands submission to its desires. And this abstraction is at the same time the projection of the real domination of the individual subject by capital onto the realm of myth, metaphor, or superstition. Without realizing it, human beings consent to being taken-over and used, as the tools of God, or Progress, or Historical Necessity, or the Market, Authority, Democracy, the Dollar, etc. And for most people, this actually means allowing themselves to be torn in many different directions by several (or even scores of) different demands seemingly mad by such abstractions. In such a situation can it really be any surprise that most people are so totally confused about nearly everything?

Ideology includes all such theories of human activity in which ideas seemingly escape their real connections with the subjective human world from which they must arise and are instead perceived as purely objective, ahistorical, and either of higher value than our own personal values, or else as value-free entities moving according to their own (or according to non-human “natural”) laws. Inevitably, these ideological abstractions actually come to rest in an unconscious, unperceived, and mystified relationship with the world they are used to attempt to comprehend.

The resolution to the dilemma posed by the split which accompanies all instances of ideological theory is the dialectical path toward unitary thought – critical self-theory. Critical self-

theory attempts to restore the alienated, isolated individual to a position as a real social subject in the life of the world. It maintains a constant awareness of its own relation to its origins in individual subjectivity and to the objects it wishes to comprehend.

In contrast to ideological theory, which tends to ignore or suppress any awareness of our experience in institutional domination and exploitation, critical self-theory locates itself directly in these conflicts as the theory of all the real elements of opposition to authority, alienation and exploitation. While ideological theory arises from the nature of capitalist society as its positive expression, critical theory arises as its negative expression, the expression of all the forces working towards its supersession. This means that critical thought “is the function of neither the isolated individual nor of a sum total of individuals. Its subject is rather a definite individual in his real relation to other individuals in groups, in his conflict with a particular class, and finally, in the resultant web of relationships with the social totality and with nature. The subject is no mathematical point like the ego of the bourgeois philosophy; his activity is the construction of the social present.” (Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*, pp. 210-1)

Critical self-theory is thus not based upon any narrowly political, or economic, or any other fragmentary opposition to the status quo. Its basis is immanent in all human activity – within every individual and social group – since within every contradiction in every person and social group, capitalist society contains the seeds from which a rationally constructed, free human society could one day bloom.

First and foremost, critical self-theory is the unitary body of thought that we consciously construct for our own use. We construct it when we make an analysis of why our lives are the way they are, why the world is the way it is, and when we simultaneously develop a strategy and tactics of practice – of how to get what we really most desire for our lives.