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Introduction to the Special Issue: ‘Critical Theory Today: One hundred years of the Frankfurt School’

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By random serendipity, the Irish ‘Decade of Centenaries’ closed in 2023, coinciding with the centenary of the founding of the Frankfurt School. Perhaps this is an inconsequential co-incidence. One hundred years might be considered as a fairly arbitrary time period. Yet, marking the centenary of the ambivalent end of a historic post-colonial revolution that has delivered a profoundly conservative then capitalist state, highlights the importance of Critical Theory. In particular, the Frankfurt School insists that apparent triumphs – whether of nations or Enlightenment itself – are Janus-faced, and that a critical perspective on modern projects is necessary, even – and perhaps especially so – when they are welcomed and celebrated. Refusing to take the existing state of affairs as given, Critical Theory necessitates an ongoing problematization of our past and present. Such reflective engagement, it contends, reveals ‘the conflict between actual forces and capabilities in the society’ (Marcuse, 2007: 146), hence opening up a possibility of emancipatory transformation.

In such a spirit of reflection, the SAI Social Theory Study Group gathered members and guests to a Symposium at University of Galway in March 2023 to consider the legacy of the Frankfurt school, marking the centenary of the establishment of the Institute for Social Research (Institut für Sozialforschung). Rather than following a rather well-established academic custom and focusing on commentaries and exegeses, the contributors embraced the ethos of Critical Theory by exploring the present-time relevance of the passions and aspirations of the Frankfurt School scholars. Therefore, while the event encompassed some retrospective historical considerations, it chiefly addressed wide-ranging contemporary concerns, from the resurgence of the far-right to ecological collapse. Key themes that emerged ranged from aesthetics, profanation or transgression, to passionate politics. How the ideas of Critical Theory might be adapted and refined to provide perspectives on contemporary problems was a key issue.

Historical reflections today within academia are generally haunted by the concept of ‘genealogy’ – a method of history which marks a critical attitude (Harcourt, 2024). Thus, to recall the history of Critical Theory is not to celebrate an official and settled practice of critique, but to open up to reflexive discussion of the many strands of critical discourse, both long before and since that centenary inflection point. Contemporary critique involves a wide diversity of practices (Delanty, 2018), extending far beyond Critical Theory to include its critics (Allen, 2016), and the sociology of critique which positions all critics and their discourses as empirical matters for methodological study – and draws overdue attention to the deployment of critique across the

political spectrum. Yet, to critique critique implicitly involves a thorny theoretical puzzle, if not quite a performative contradiction.

While largely this volume collects a series of theoretical reflections on Critical Theory, focusing particularly on Adorno's contributions, and a series of empirical analyses informed by Critical Theory, this context of the centenary offers another point of departure. Rather than a standard modality of scholarship – citing authors, positioning our work within a field – the uses to which Critical Theory is put today could also be considered among the many uses of history. For some, the foundation of the Frankfurt School might appear as a cause for celebration, and such an articulation of fidelity is not unthinking or irrelevant to contemporary political struggles. The historical interpretation of the survival of Critical Theory through the interwar years as a sort of triumph against adversity has some validity, as does its persistence despite the indifference or even hostility of mainstream theory. Yet, Critical Theory is not a museum piece, it is not a fossil preserved in aspic. To use Critical Theory, particularly its classical thinkers, is to redeploy historical thought, expressing a relation of relevance and currency in the present, and effectually to re-write these thinkers into our analysis of the present, yet always re-deploying their concepts in accordance with contemporary diagnoses.

Paradoxically, to follow Critical Theory involves subjecting it to critique: the classical practice of the Frankfurt School was to take a critical orientation to past philosophers such as Kant, Hegel or Marx, or contemporary sociologists such as Weber or Mannheim. Ironically, to accept Adorno, Marcuse, Horkheimer or whomsoever uncritically would be a complete betrayal of the spirit of the Frankfurt School. Rather than a simple inheritance, Critical Theory is a sort of *tradition of tradition breaking*, involving the scrutiny of critical practice at its core. This does not mean a simplistic rejection of the past, but a thorough investigation of our immersion within critical discourses. Sometimes this leads to a whole-hearted endorsement of Critical Theory, whether naively or strategically. Occasionally it inspires new departures for renewed and distinctive modalities of critique. Perhaps increasingly often it leads to a tragic sense of the lateness and impotence of critique to achieve its ambitions. At all times, however, when done well, it enables us to reject the supposed finitude of our situation, affording us an opportunity to think (about) emancipation. For, as Adorno, reminds us, '[i]f there is any chance of changing the situation, it is only through undiminished thought' (1991: 200–201).

Collecting papers inspired by the Symposium, this Special Issue is the product of reflections and conversations centering on the critical conundrum of the contemporary coexistence of the tendencies towards containment and instigation of radical socio-political change. Some are tightly focused on key Frankfurt School thinkers, others explore contemporary challenges for theory, education and art. Reflecting the spirit of the Symposium, these pieces range in format from traditional journal articles to shorter interventions or provocations, and others are more playful in nature – an experiment in 'sociography' (Kilby and Gilloch, 2022). The importance of Critical Theory today emerges clearly, as does the necessity to consider and clarify the practice of critique and the role of theory. These are pressing issues for times like these, which may well not have their centenary celebrated at all, and if anything, will be commemorated ambivalently.

Herein we divide papers roughly between empirical extensions of Critical Theory and contributions to theoretical debates, although there is no dichotomy between these here.

In 'A negative dialectics of climate change destruction: Reflecting on climate futures with Adorno' Tracey Skillington assesses contemporary ideas about geo-engineering as a response to climate change through the lens of Critical Theory. In particular, she draws on Adorno's negative dialectics to encompass a range of responses, from despair to instrumental reason to alternative imaginaries.

In 'Journeying with Adorno: passion, pathways and ethno-mimesis', Maggie O'Neill traces her encounter with Critical Theory, particularly Adorno's work, informs her creative methodologies, ranging from walking interviews to collaborations with artists. In particular, this article shows how Critical Theory opens up a productive dialogue between sociology and art which is crucial to her concept of ethno-mimesis, which gives qualitative research an emancipatory edge.

In 'From critical theory to critical fabulism: Aesthetics in a minor key', Kevin Ryan reflects upon how 'the thought of the outside' shapes the relationship between politics and aesthetics, theory and praxis. Contrasting Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* with Saidiya Hartman's method of critical fabulism – here framed as 'aesthetics in a minor key' – Ryan demonstrates the fruitful on-going conversation within Critical Theory as it grapples with emergent problems.

In 'On the Menu: Academic Managerialism and Critical Theory' Ross Truscott and Su-Ming Khoo place draw on Critical Theory to rethink the management of self and others within academia. In particular, they place Adorno's *Minima Moralis* in tension with *Impossible Bosses* by Lawack, Wessels and Craig, drawing particular attention to the deployment of readings of Jung for instrumental purposes, whereby workers are advised to engage in strategies to manage their own bosses rather than addressing structural problems of capitalism.

In '*Tatort*: Murder Scene, Montage and Melancholy in the Neo-Noir Imagination', Graeme Gilloch contributes to a wider ongoing exploration of Critical Theory and the contemporary neo-noir imagination, showing how particular motifs and figures drawn from Benjamin and Kracauer illuminate noir and neo-noir. Focusing on spaces, times and protagonists, Gilloch's paper playfully unpacks the genre itself, demonstrating its relation to capitalist modernity.

Among the more theoretically oriented papers we begin with 'Towards a Sociological Anthropology: On Theodor Adorno's *Contribution to the Theory of Ideology*', where Samuel Mercer engages in depth with a lately re-published and translated essay. Following Adorno's move away from a version of ideology focused on individual socialisation to a focus on material conditions, he offers an anti-humanist modification.

In 'Spilled Chalices, Storming Leopards and the Apostates of Capital', João Nunes de Almeida critically reflects on the contemporary challenges of, and to, Critical Theory by means of a re-reading of Kafka's parable of the leopards through a materialist lens. Focusing on the processes of ritualisation and appropriation of emancipatory events, Almeida's intervention recasts the present-day impasse of Critical Theory, pointing to another parable - that of the Frankfurt School itself.

In 'Spectres of Critique: The Nostalgia of Social Transformation', Tom Boland and Diana Stypinska deploy the pessimism of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* to analyse contemporary critique and nostalgic imaginings of social transformation. The problems of instrumental, reified and commodified critique today emerge clearly here.

This special issue hopes both to reflect and promote a renewed interest in social theory and critique for our times, both in readers and in the targets of critique – which is approximately all of us.

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