

Contemporary Critical Theorists

From Lacan to Said

EDITED BY JON SIMONS

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Jon Simons

Notes on Contributors

Mary Eden teaches cultural studies at Nottingham Trent University and Derby University. She has carried out postgraduate research on Irigaray's position on feminine subjectivity in a post-structuralist context. Her current research is about Irigaray and exchange, focusing on her neglected work on linguistics. She has published a critical review of Irigaray's *I Love to You*, for *The Journal of Contemporary French Thought*.

Dr Philip Goodchild is Lecturer in Religious Studies, University of Nottingham. He is the author of *Gilles Deleuze and the Question of Philosophy* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996), *Deleuze and Guattari: An Introduction to the Politics of Desire* (Sage, 1996), and *Capitalism and Religion: The Price of Piety* (Routledge, 2002). He is also the editor of *Rethinking Philosophy of Religion* (Fordham University Press, 2002) and *Difference in Philosophy of Religion* (Ashgate Publications, 2002).

Dr Nick Heffernan teaches American Studies at University College, Northampton. His first book, *Capital, Class and Technology in Contemporary American Culture*, was published by Pluto in 2000.

Dr Paul Hegarty is a lecturer in the French department of University College, Cork, where he teaches philosophy and visual culture. He has published articles and a book on Georges Bataille, and articles on contemporary French theory, architecture, and most recently, on Japanese noise music. He is also involved in art/music/multi-media performance.

Notes on Contributors

Dr Moya Lloyd is a research fellow in the Centre for the Advancement of Women in Politics at Queen's University, Belfast. She is author of the forthcoming *Beyond Identity Politics?* (Sage); co-author of *Contemporary Social and Political Theory: An Introduction* (Open University Press, 1999) and *Political Ideologies* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); and co-editor (with Andrew Thacker) of *The Impact of Michel Foucault on the Social Sciences and Humanities* (Macmillan, 1997). She has written extensively on Michel Foucault and feminism, Judith Butler, feminist political theory and the body. She is currently completing a book, *Judith Butler: A Critical Introduction*, for publication in Polity Press's Key Contemporary Thinkers series.

Dr Susan McManus is currently a lecturer in Political Theory at Queens' University, Belfast. She completed her PhD at the University of Nottingham, where she also held an ESRC Postdoctoral Fellowship. Her first book, *Fictive Theories: Towards a Deconstructive and Utopian Political Imagination*, is forthcoming from Palgrave, New York.

Dr Cheleen Mahar is a professor of Anthropology at Pacific University. She has co-edited the book *An Introduction to the Work of Pierre Bourdieu: The Practice of Theory* and has recently completed a long-term ethnographic study of an urban poor population in Oaxaca, Mexico, titled *Constructing Habitus in a Disenchanted World: From Rural Migrant to Urban Citizen*. She has authored other journal essays on Mexico and New Zealand.

Dr Martin Morris teaches political science and communications at the University of Windsor. He is author of *Rethinking the Communicative Turn: Habermas, Adorno and the Problem of Communicative Freedom* (State University of New York Press, 2001), and guest editor of 'German Dis/Continuities', a special issue of the *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 96, 4, Fall 1997. He has published journal articles on political theory, critical theory and communications research on Canadian politics. His current research concerns the political dimensions of visual and linguistically mediated communication in the public sphere, which is supported by a major grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Dr Adam Sharman is Lecturer in Hispanic and Latin American Studies, University of Nottingham. He works on the interface

between critical theory and Spanish American literary culture. He has published essays on Foucault, postmodernism and diverse aspects of Spanish American literature, as well as editing a book on *The Poetry and Poetics of César Vallejo: The Fourth Angle of the Circle* (Edwin Mellen, 1997). He is currently working on a book entitled *Tradition and Modernity in Spanish American Literature*.

Dr Jon Simons is a senior lecturer in Critical Theory, University of Nottingham. He is the author of *Foucault and the Political* (Routledge, 1995), as well as other journal essays on Foucault, political theory, cultural theory and feminist theory. He has edited and contributed chapters to *From Kant to Althusser: The Background to Contemporary Critical Theory* (Edinburgh University Press, 2001) and is currently working on a book project, *Politics and Aesthetics: Style, Emotion and Mediation*, to be published by Edinburgh University Press and New York University Press.

Dr Steve Smith is a Lecturer in French at the University of Nottingham. He has published essays on critical theory, French literature, film and detective fiction.

Dr Andy Stafford is a senior lecturer in French Studies at Leeds University. He has published *Roland Barthes, Phenomenon and Myth: An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh University Press, 1998) and is currently writing a critical study of Barthes's *S/Z*, as well as a study of the relationship between writing and photography. He also works on Francophone Literature and is a member of the editorial board of the Association for the Study of Caribbean and African Literature in French.

Dr Yannis Stavrakakis studied political science in Athens and received his MA and PhD degrees from the Ideology and Discourse Analysis (IDA) programme at the Department of Government at the University of Essex. After lecturing for two years at Essex (where he directed the MA programme in IDA) he was awarded a three-year research fellowship at the School of Politics at the University of Nottingham. He has published extensively on psychoanalysis and politics, the analysis of Green ideological discourse and the politics of nature. He is the author of *Lacan and the Political* (Routledge, 1999) and co-editor of *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis* (Manchester University Press, 2000) and *Lacan and Science* (Karnac, forthcoming).

Notes on Contributors

Dr Simon Tormey is Senior Lecturer in Political Thought at the University of Nottingham. He is the author of *Making Sense of Tyranny: Interpretations of Totalitarianism* (Manchester University Press, 1995), *Politics at the Edge* (co-edited with C. Pierson – Macmillan, 1999) and *Autonomy, Contingency and the Postmodern: The Political Thought of Agnes Heller* (Manchester University Press, 2000).

Arjuna Weerasooriya is currently engaged in doctoral research on the themes of subjectivity and freedom, having already completed a postgraduate dissertation on ethics and politics in Derrida and Levinas. He teaches critical theory and modern thought at both postgraduate and undergraduate level at the University of Nottingham.

Christopher Wilkes is a professor of Sociology at Pacific University. He has written *In the Public Interest* (with Ian Shirley) and *The Tragedy of the Market* (with Mike O'Brien), and co-edited *An Introduction to the Work of Pierre Bourdieu: The Practice of Theory*. He is writing *Reinventing Culture* with Maria Alaniz, a semiotic study of advertising among Latinos in the Bay Area; *Philosophy and Sociology*, a historical critique of sociological epistemology; and an article on Jameson's epistemology.

Patrick Williams is Professor of Literary and Cultural Studies at Nottingham Trent University. He teaches in the areas of post-colonial studies, race, national identity and contemporary cultural production. His publications include *Post-Colonial African Cinema* (forthcoming), *Edward Said* (2001), *Ngugi wa Thiong'o* (1999), *Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory* (1997) and *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory* (1993), as well as numerous articles and book chapters. His work has been translated into Korean and Turkish. He has also worked at the Open University, the University of Marrakech and the University of Strathclyde.

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1

Introduction

Jon Simons

This volume offers sixteen introductory essays on key contemporary critical theorists. Critical theory in the broad sense used here includes the trends of Marxism and post-Marxism, semiotics and discourse analysis, structuralism and post-structuralism, ideology critique of all varieties, deconstruction, feminism, queer theory, psychoanalysis, postcolonialism, postmodernism, as well as the descendants of Frankfurt School Critical Theory. Those critical tendencies can be found across all the disciplines and interdisciplinary areas of the humanities, from architecture to theology, from American Studies to visual culture. This book is intended to be a good enough introduction to the thought of the critical theorists selected for the volume for readers to have an understanding of their main ideas, the most significant ways in which their ideas can be put to work in the humanities and some of the key problems identified in their work by critics. If this book succeeds in its aims, it will have whetted its readers' appetites to learn more about the critical theories it introduces. The following sections of the introduction explain what is meant by 'critical theory' and the scope of the book and suggests how best to use this book.

What is Critical Theory?

To provide a meaningful answer to the question 'what is critical theory?' I follow Wittgenstein in understanding that the meaning of a term involves invoking the practices and customs of a 'form of life'. The term 'critical theory' does not mean what it does because of

some essential 'criticality' that is common to all modes of critical theory, but because of the ways in which the term is used in a particular 'form of life'. The 'form of life' in question is Anglophone academia since the late 1970s or so, when a range of theoretical approaches to different branches of the humanities began to be adopted on the margins of established disciplinary methodologies.

Within the social sciences there was already something known as Critical Theory which referred to the collective work of members of the Institute for Social Research first founded in 1923, also known now as the Frankfurt School, whose leading members were Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. Critical Theory in this sense distinguishes itself from all forms of 'traditional' theory. It is a critical theory of Marxism developed in contrast to the crude materialist, determinist and allegedly scientific Marxism that had become orthodox in the Soviet Union. At the same time, Critical Theory denied the value-free character of positivist social science that was developing in the West. The neo-Marxism of the Frankfurt School regarded such unreflexive social science as one of the many ideologies that masked oppressive power relations. Critical Theory thus claimed to evaluate as well as explain and describe social reality. Practitioners were indebted to a philosophical and intellectual tradition that includes Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and Weber, on the basis of which they widened Marxism from a focus on political and economic matters to include psychological and cultural matters.

Frankfurt School Critical Theory evolved first in the threatening context of 1930s Germany, against the background of the rise of fascism and Nazism. Forced into exile, mostly in the United States, because of their Jewish background and their left-wing politics, the main insights of the school were soon applied as vigorously to the capitalist consumer mass culture of post-Second World War North America and Western Europe as they had been to fascist society. Technological, instrumental rationalism, a tyranny of administration and the ideological distraction of mass culture precluded the emancipatory potential of Enlightenment from being realised in the democracies of the United States and West Germany as well as in fascist regimes. These ideas were well received by the radicals of the New Left social protest movements, including the student revolts, that emerged out of widespread dissatisfaction with the post-war West in the 1960s. West German economic success and

conservatism troubled a younger generation that had questions about their parents' past. Cold War America also enjoyed suburban prosperity, but embroilment in the Vietnam War (1964–73) affected the younger generation particularly. Critical Theory was thus clearly connected with political events.

Frankfurt School Critical Theory already displayed some of the features that would characterise the heterogeneous set of theories that would become known as critical theory in the more general sense. First, it was an interdisciplinary project, both in that members addressed a range of social issues, including politics, jurisprudence, culture and psychology, and also in that it applied the theoretical insights that had developed in some disciplines to others. Second, it regarded itself as critical not only, or perhaps not primarily, in relation to its object of inquiry but also in relation to traditional or conventional approaches and methodologies with which it contrasted itself. Critical theory requires an allegedly uncritical Other in order to identify itself. Third, Critical Theory was nurtured by the rich ground of an intellectual tradition with which it engaged deeply and productively by both criticising it and by drawing on its best ideas. Fourth, both the ground from which it grew and Critical Theory itself is predominantly continental European, subsequently exiled and exported to the Anglophone world.

New Left radicalism had affinities not only with Frankfurt School Critical Theory but to a varied range of theories emerging in France. Even before 1968 the French intellectual scene had already nurtured its own version of unorthodox, Western Marxism, in the work of Louis Althusser. The most famous of post-war French philosophers, the existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre was, like the Frankfurt Critical Theorists and the post-Stalin French Communist Party, interested in a humanist Marxism. Althusser, however, drew on the structuralism of both the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss to displace man as the centre and driving force of history. The Situationists, a group of radical cultural practitioners active from 1958, rejected conventional Marxism as anachronistic, proposing instead a 'revolution of everyday life' in personal relationships and cultural perspectives. Guy Debord, an editor of the group's journal, published in 1967 his *Society of the Spectacle*, which was an ideology critique of commodified, mediated culture.¹ Along different lines, in the 1950s Roland Barthes was deploying structuralist analysis of signs, or semiotics, to demystify everyday bourgeois consumer culture, as did Jean

Baudrillard in his earliest work. Although Michel Foucault later denied that he had ever been a structuralist, his 'archaeological' studies of madness, medicine and the human sciences shared with structuralism an emphasis on the analysis of language and cultural practices, in the form of systems of discourse. His *The Order of Things*, published in 1966, predicted the erasure of the figure of man as the foundation of knowledge. By 1967 Jacques Derrida was already deconstructing structuralism in addition to the more dominant philosophical trend of phenomenology, while also decentring the human subject as author by examining the gap between authorial intention and textual meaning. In the background to all this intellectual ferment had been not only youth lived out under the shadow of Nazi occupation, collaboration, resistance and the promise of liberation, but also Algeria's anti-colonial struggle for independence from France, from 1954 to 1962. Another alternative left-wing group which was very much concerned with the Algerian situation as well as workers' struggles and daily resistance was Socialism and Barbarism, of which Jean-François Lyotard was a prominent member.

The explosion of French thought after 1968 led to Frankfurt School Critical Theory losing its monopoly on the title of critical theory in a more general sense. The most dramatic manifestation of the student movement in France had brought the republic to crisis in May 1968, during which Situationist graffiti appeared as slogans on the walls and Socialism and Barbarism came into prominence. But revolution was averted and order was restored. Radicals already dissatisfied with the official Marxism of the French Communist Party felt their misgivings had been confirmed by the latter's reluctance to participate in the momentum of May 1968. Post-1968 France became host to a dazzling eruption of theoretical innovation which might not unreasonably be interpreted in part as an intellectual sublimation of disappointed political radicalism. In addition to the figures mentioned above, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who wrote a 'philosophy of desire' that spoke to the ferment of 1968 and its suppression by the establishment, were part of a vibrant intellectual scene.

Critical theory in the broader sense, though, is not a French term or invention, but an effect of the appropriation and integration of both Frankfurt School Critical Theory and the various streams of French and other thought into Anglophone academics. American universities in particular had been radicalised by a combination of

the civil rights movement, experimental youth cultures (most notably the hippies), expansion of higher education that gave access to a broader sector of the population, anti-Vietnam War protests and student revolts. Intellectual culture felt the pressure to change just as established hierarchies and cultural values were being challenged across the Western world. The 1960s, in all their manifestations, were the background in which what became known as critical theory took root. The feminist movement was a major element in the new social movements that then emerged. Feminism's 'second wave' from 1968 onwards was motivated partly by a critique of sexism evident to women activists in student and anti-war protests. The dominant theoretical paradigm for the radicalism of the 1960s was Marxism, generally in its non-orthodox Western and neo-Marxist forms. Yet, even those forms seemed ill-equipped to explain and critique forms of oppression that are not only economic, namely, sexism, racism, militarism and the domination of nature.

The Anglophone world certainly produced its own intellectual figures for the movements that criticised and resisted these oppressions, but the influence of the explosion of French thought that had distanced itself from Marxism was evident here too. Juliet Mitchell, for example, who initially tried to fashion a socialist feminism that would win the respect and attention of her male colleagues in Britain's New Left, drew substantially on Althusser and Lacan, as well as Marx, Freud and Lévi-Strauss.² She sparked an interest in French psychoanalytic, structuralist and post-structuralist theory in Anglophone academia that opened the way for the influence of what became known as 'French feminism', despite the differences between the work of Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous, as well as the work of other French feminists. Feminist, anti-racist and ecological or green thought are all critical theories in that they criticise the methodologies, analyses and conclusions of conventional or traditional approaches to their subject matter, yet what has come to be regarded as critical theory 'proper' often seems to need the additional cachet of originating from Continental Europe, as in the case of French feminism.

In the social sciences, approaches and methodologies that modelled themselves on the natural sciences, often referred to as behaviourism, were the convention or tradition against which critical theory was pitched. In spite of its claims to scientific value neutrality, behaviourism became regarded as a form of covert ideological justification for the status quo, which obscured objections to

a repressive social order by studying people externally as objects rather than subjects, ignoring the subjective meaning inherent in social action. Given the similarity of this sort of criticism to the objections of the Frankfurt theorists to positivist social science, it is not surprising that a leading light in a revised form or second generation of critical social theory was Jürgen Habermas, who had been Adorno's assistant after the Second World War. Habermas associated critical theory with a human interest in emancipation, in identifying ideological distortions and revealing coercive power relations in the operations of the administrative state and capitalist economy. He distinguished critical theory from both positivist social science and hermeneutic approaches which emphasise the meaning that people attribute to social action, meanings which constitute the presuppositions of any social inquiry. In a more general sense, however, critical social theory refers to qualitative theories which both adopt hermeneutic strategies in seeking to interpret and understand social action in contrast to quantitative approaches and at the same time evaluate as well as describe and explain social action. Significantly, this interpretative turn in social science drew on a wide range of literary and cultural theories by means of which society can be 'read', just as a literary text is read.

The literary connection is significant as critical theory in the broader sense took root in Anglophone academia primarily in the field of literary studies. In this domain, critical theory denotes a broad range of approaches to literary interpretation that stand in contrast or opposed to the 'traditional' methodologies that are concerned with the aesthetic qualities of 'great' literature that constitutes the cultural canon. Literary criticism had become professionalised in twentieth-century universities, which is probably reflected by the development of New Criticism, an effort to make criticism rigorous and methodical rather than an expression of subjective judgement. New Criticism (a term first used in 1910) was itself an eclectic collection of methods, but most of them shared a concern for close textual analysis while many were prepared to use extra-literary tools, such as contextualisation, for literary analysis. To some extent, then, there was an internal dynamic in the discipline of literary criticism that made room for further methodological innovation and imports. Just as in visual art the avant-garde modernism of the early twentieth century had by the 1960s become the established art of the museums favoured by professional critics, so had New Criticism become 'traditional' theory in relation to

Russian formalism, reader-response theory and Marxism, followed by psychoanalysis, feminism, semiotics, structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, postmodernism, postcolonialism and queer theory. Some of these terms and ideas were imports from the European continent, while some of them were home grown. Even the latter, though, showed an affinity to what is known in the Anglophone world as 'Continental philosophy'. Indeed, the philosophies of Heidegger, Gadamer, Levinas, Derrida and others were and are much more commonly welcomed and studied in literature than in Anglophone philosophy departments.

However, the impetus behind the movement whereby critical theory became almost synonymous with all theory in literary studies was not merely to multiply the possible interpretations of literary texts and stock the supermarket of new ideas. There was something, maybe a great deal, of the radicalism of the 1960s and the New Left in critical literary theory. Critical theory is always in some way, even if obscure and indirect ways, politically engaged. While this point may be more obvious for critical social theory, critical literary theory has its political edge too. For one thing, just as Frankfurt School theory challenged the value-neutrality of positivist social science, critical literary theory targets the assumption of 'tradition' literary interpretation to be apolitical, as a scholarly or aesthetic exercise. Critical theory exposes the bourgeois, capitalist, racist, (neo)-colonialist, (hetero)sexist bias at work in literature and criticism. It also reads into literary texts the ways in which those forms of social and political oppression constitute the contexts for aesthetic, cultural and literary texts. Through such readings, critical literary theories indicate, even if obliquely or implicitly, a world without such oppression.

A good deal of the political impetus of all forms of critical theory was absorbed by 'campus wars', the struggle to introduce critical theory into the curriculum, to disseminate it through publications and conferences, to appoint critical theorists to academic positions and to establish new, often interdisciplinary programmes as institutional bases for further development. In the 1970s and 1980s critical theory was defined to a considerable extent by its embattled position within academic institutions, forming common ground in opposition to mainstream conventional and traditional approaches across the humanities. Retrospectively, the critical theorists seem to have done quite well out of those struggles in many disciplines, though with varying degrees of success. Anglophone philosophy