

Krisis Reports: Futuring Critical Theory, 13–15 September 2023

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Abstract

This is a report of the *Futuring Critical Theory* conference organized by Frankfurt's Institute for Social Research and held 13-15 September 2023 at the Goethe University. The report situates the conference within wider social, academic, and organizational changes that the Institute for Social Research faces at its 100 year anniversary in 2023.

Keywords

Critical Theory; Frankfurt School; Institute for Social Research.

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I'm at the *Futuring Critical Theory* conference at Frankfurt's Goethe University. From atop the hill, the curvature of the university's New Objectivity-style main building appears to embrace onlookers. Inside, four hundred people have gathered to discuss the past, the present, and especially the future of critical theory in the span of three jam-packed days of talks, conversations, and seminars. The reason for the get-together is the *Institut für Sozialforschung's* (IfS) 100 year anniversary, which the IfS has been celebrating with various occasions throughout this centenary year. A glance at the program of this conference makes clear that participants wish to honor old glory, much as they desire to move ahead and extend critical theory's lease on life. Sure enough, the Institute's famous cast of characters—Horkheimer, Adorno, Benjamin, and Habermas, among others—frequently appear during presentations, discussions, and conversations. Yet the conference also explicitly serves to reckon with the Institute's open-ended future, with the fact that it finds itself in a world wholly unrecognizable compared to its founding year of 1923.

In his opening words, the Institute's director Stephan Lessenich notes that the Institute sees itself faced with a series of new challenges—some social, some academic, and some organizational. Socially, 2023 marks an anxious year. The September month during which the conference was held was the hottest September ever recorded, clocking in at 1,8° C above pre-industrial levels. "[Gobsmackingly bananas](#)," was the technical term scientists used. Heat domes, droughts, and storms confirmed that the climate catastrophe is no longer looming, but rapidly unfolding. They follow a winter that saw Europe losing access to much of its gas supply as a result of the Ukraine war at the edge of its territory, spurring on its leaders to turn to nations such as Qatar in order to bargain over liquified gas. And as energy prices soared after a decade of austerity, more households plunged into poverty, debt, and hunger. Elsewhere at Europe's borders, militarized police violently guard the fortress under the pressure of populist and radical-right factions. In late-neoliberal society, crises multiply while emancipatory forces have been slowly undone.

Academically, critical theory without capital letters has demanded attention to areas traditionally understudied and neglected by critical theory of the Frankfurt variety, or Critical Theory with capital letters. The demand surfaced in the conference, too. "What about women?," one audience member asked during an "evening conversation" that landed on the Institute's male-dominated historiography. In this case, it proved a convenient stepping stone for moderator and IfS professor Sarah Speck to announce the results of a nearly finished [project](#) aimed at producing an alternative, less androcentric history of the IfS, highlighting instead the crucial role of women and feminists in the Institute's century of knowledge production. Other academic challenges point to the Institute's blind spot for the non-Western world, its long infatuation with tales of progress and modernization, and its failure to properly theorize racism outside of antisemitism. Or what about

recent shifts away from culturalist tendencies and towards ‘new materialist’ reckonings with advances in the sciences, developments in infrastructure and technology, and the unfurling of ecological disaster? How does and should Frankfurt School-style critical theory respond to these developments? To face the question head-on, the conference organizers have partitioned the gathering into four sections, aptly named “dissecting,” “globalizing,” “materializing,” and “recomposing” critical theory.

Organizationally, too—Lessenich puts modestly to the audience—change is underway. In July 2021, philosopher of recognition Axel Honneth stepped down from the directorship and sociologist Stephan Lessenich has since succeeded him. Lessenich, who was previously based at Jena’s Post-Growth Societies group and then Munich’s Rachel Carson Center, has worked on topics ranging from the sociology of inequality, social participation, and the welfare state, to socio-ecological transformation. The latter theme formed the topic of his 2016 *Neben uns die Sintflut*, translated into English in 2019 as *Living Well at Others’ Expense*. Opening with terrifying images of red, toxic flood water gushing downhill through Brazil’s Rio Doce after the Mariana dam disaster of 2015, *Neben uns die Sintflut* (literally: “Next to us, the deluge”) connects distant ecological catastrophe to ‘our’ very own prosperity. For Rio Doce is not a desolate outpost of the world economy, Lessenich reminds readers, but a mining hub situated squarely in the extractivist economy that funnels material and energetic resources to the capitalist core. “We” in the West have “externalized” the socio-ecological costs of our wealthy lifestyles to the periphery. Yet those on the receiving end of our “externalization society,” as an older vocabulary might hold, are equally deserving of recognition.

The analysis is not entirely new, but Lessenich’s framing is innovative and asks a further question: Why do we not see it? Why do we deny that *we* are Piketty’s 1%? Externalization, Lessenich stresses, has many layers. It materializes in “structural” power asymmetries that are not so easily broken and that are fortified through “mechanisms of exploitation,” such as unequal trading practices. Yet it is also realized in the thoroughgoing socialization of the externalization society’s well-off members, shaping their “habitus” with mechanisms of dissociation and denial. The guilt is outsourced and diverted, too. This duality of the systemic and the personal resurfaces in the Institute’s recently published and collectively designed research program “100 Years IfS: Perspectives,” laying out the broad orientation of its future research in “a world out of joint.” Concerned about present crises, it asks: “How is it that capitalist domination is constantly reproduced—and what hinders its reproduction?” Continuing early Critical Theory’s “interdisciplinary materialism,” the program stresses the need for laying bare the “‘hard’ technical-material and socio-structural’ mechanisms as well as the ‘soft’ cultural and discursive factors” that shape agents’ semiotic environment. Remaining faithful to critical theory’s mission of un-alienating theory and practice, knowledge and action, or diagnostics and therapeutics, the program proposes to wed a “crisis theory of the operating” to a “practice theory of the possible.”

Its language of “a world of contradictions” also signals a return to Marx and the critique of political economy. From its establishment in 1923, the Institute for Social Research was a Marxist center of activity. It grew out of a meeting of intellectuals in a “First Marxist Work Week” and would, a few years later, lead to the appointment of

Germany's first Marxist professor in the person of Carl Grünberg. The flavor of Marxism practiced there was initially fairly orthodox, however. Within the Institute's halls, a student complained, one encountered "the worship of an iconographic literature, not to mention blackboards full of mathematical juggling ... of Marx's divisions of capital functions, and the like" (Eastman in Jay 1973, 12). It was only when Max Horkheimer took up the directorship in 1930 that Critical Theory would start to emerge. Hence, as professor in practical philosophy at Frankfurt's Goethe University Martin Saar noted during the conference, it is slightly uncomfortable that the Institute celebrates its 100-year anniversary with a selective amnesia about its very early days. Yet every age faces its own orthodoxies. Orthodox Marxism is the least of our worries, since post-'89 academia is dominated by liberal scholarship. Indeed, as Nancy Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi (2018, 5-6) have charged, most of those "who think of themselves as critical theorists" have specialized in "freestanding moral, political, or legal theory" barely distinguishable from the left-liberalism of Rawlsian analytic philosophy. In this context, Lessenich's organization of a "Second Marxist Work Week" earlier this year counts as a bold move—and a successful one at that. Expecting 400 participants, the Institute finally welcomed a crowd of over 800 academics, political organizers, journalists, and activists to Frankfurt's rectangular, brightly sunlit *Studierendenhaus*. A younger generation, it showed, is ready for a return to Marx.

Back at the *Futuring Critical Theory* conference, critical theory now openly faces the current challenges set out by Lessenich. Critical theory is always self-critique in a double sense, belonging to the theory as much as to society. Critical theory is society's way of questioning itself, an "immanent critique" of sorts, a mode of cognition that works through the "palpable tensions" of a society that is always "fractured, open to the outside," as Martin Jay put it on the podium during one of the "evening conversations." Yet critical theory itself cannot avoid these tensions and fractures. The first keynote address, held by Estelle Ferrarese of Picardie-Jules-Verne University, put the question bluntly: "How vulnerable is critical theory?" As she notes, the notion of vulnerability was popular in Christian circles some fifty years ago, before being taken up by feminists in recent years. Vulnerability, in these progressive circles, refers to more than a source of pity, framing it not just as a psychological or moral trait tied to the subject, but as a political potential for emancipatory action. It means, as commentator Rainer Forst put it in reference to Adorno, "lending a voice to suffering."

Suffering became manifestly vocal in Verónica Gago's lecture on the "Feminist Transnational," in which she detailed the struggles and successes of the #NiUnaMenos movement (#NotOneMore movement) that began in Argentina and spread out across Latin America. The movement borrows its name from a phrase by the Mexican poet Susana Chávez, "Ni una muerta más," and politicizes femicide and violence against women more broadly. For Gago, who is a professor of Social Sciences at the University of Buenos Aires, the movement's international success, its steady outward radiation, comes from a combination of accessible fabulation and extensive alliances. Slogans fulfill a widely felt "desire for theory." They connect feminist struggles with various civil society groups, like unions, schools, and Indigenous movements. In the past, for example, the slogan "We want to live debt free!" bridged the stakes of feminist campaigns and economic

struggles. In this presentation, too, Critical Theory's feminist lacuna is silently addressed. Even if, as Rahel Jaeggi remarked at some point, Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and its tragic protagonist Odysseus may be read as an early critique of masculinity.

Another blind spot for critical theory was confronted in the "globalizing critical theory" slot. With a programmatic new look at history, University of Sussex's Gurinder Bhambra charged that the political economy of colonialism is missing from the critical theory tradition. Too often, she put to the audience, colonialism is seen as a contingent qualification of a more substantive capitalist force. Yet the familiar 'stages' or 'phases' of capitalism—think merchant capitalism, competitive capitalism, social democratic capitalism, and so on—must be rethought as "stages of colonialism," with "neoliberalism and authoritarian populism" being the current one. Capitalism is not a unified structure through which colonialism is then filtered, but an economic system that is everywhere connected to and constituted by colonialism. It is, Bhambra argues, a "globalized system of private property organized through dispossession and appropriation." The structuralist outline was illustrated gruesomely by Didier Fassin's anthropological accounts of migration and border violence. The social sciences professor of Princeton's Institute for Advanced Studies recounted stories of migrants—or as he prefers: "displaced people"—who were battered until blistered and blue by border police, dispossessed of their telephones and money, and ordered to undress in humiliating fashion. Fassin's talk offered an instance of what Robin Celikates had earlier called "seeing like a migrant." It means looking from the perspective of those who are, as Fassin put it, not just "unwanted, but undesired," watching through the eyes of those who are not simply without economic value, but also deemed without worthiness.

The alien functions as externality. Yet equally, as Fassin tells with a literal nod to Lessenich, the EU "externalizes" its border control to Turkish and Tunisian authorities to render the hardships of being an outsider invisible. Hence, the so-called 'migration crisis' may be viewed as imperialism coming home to roost, but its strategies of externalization are as vigorous as ever. As Éric Pineault (Université du Québec à Montréal) extends the analysis in a presentation entitled "Ecologizing Critical Theory," capitalism's logic of value always rests on a contradictory process of valorization *and* de-valuation. Growth in one place means a loss someplace else. The insights on this zero-sum economy are taken from the revolutionary writer Rosa Luxemburg and rogue economist Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, even if they are, for Pineault, "suspicious" more than accounting rules or economic laws. In his hands, the suspicion forms the basis of a critical theory of "social metabolism," marrying the familiar eco-Marxist concept to the more developed ecological economics of Marina Fischer-Kowalski. Workers and nature, are caught in "aporetic contradictions" that warrant a close inspection of the exchange between externality and internality, outside and inside, economy and ecology. Pineault here offers a first peek.

After three long days of talks and panels, its mid-way point celebrated with cheese pretzels and champagne, it is clear that Frankfurt's hundred-year tradition of critical theory has been amply dissected, globalized, and materialized. Yet what about its recomposition? Here, the conference does not deliver any final redemption, as is also good

Frankfurt School tradition. What the conference—and the Institute’s bustling centenary year more generally—represents is a statement of intention, a programmatic leap that looks backward and moves forward, eager to learn from the past and the elsewhere in order to escalate history. As Max Horkheimer (1982, 239) stated in the founding text “Traditional and Critical Theory,” critical theory is not a “storehouse of hypotheses” but a theoretical movement evolving within a wider practical movement. Under Stephan Lessenich’s new directorship—for now taking shape in the Second Marxist Work Week, the *Perspectives* research program, and the *Futuring Critical Theory* conference—this message seems to have been taken to heart. It inclines me to say: A hundred more years!

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Biography

Jan Overwijk is NWO Rubicon postdoctoral fellow at the Institute for Social Research at the Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main. His research is in social philosophy and critical theory. Currently, he is working on a project that studies the constitution of value at the intersection of economy and ecology by staging an encounter between eco-Marxism and ecological economics. He has a forthcoming monograph entitled *Cybernetic Capitalism: A Critical Theory of the Incommunicable* coming out with Fordham University Press.