

## WHATS'S CRITICAL ABOUT CRITICAL THEORY AGAIN? CRITICAL THEORY, ETHNOCENTRISM, SEXISM AND RACISM

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### Abstract

The purpose of the article is to examine some of the weaknesses of critical theory with regard to race and gender, as well as to critique the limitations of critical theory stemming from its ethnocentrism. In it the author argues for a return to the deeper engagement with the breadth of contemporary social, political, and emancipatory theories and movements as seen in the first generation of the Frankfurt School. As a case in point, he shows that Angela Davis' omission from the history of critical theory indicates the degree to which even critical theory is haunted by racism, ethnocentrism, and sexism. These shortcomings of critical theory make it necessary to revisit critical theory once again, carrying forward the provocation made by Nancy Fraser in her essay entitled "What's Critical About Critical Theory?". As a result of the argument, the author suggests that a new critical theory, which brings Herbert Marcuse and Angela Davis into contact with other recent theories, would lead to more fruitful forms of critical theory that would help overcome the one-dimensional concerns of traditional critical theory.

**Keywords:** Racism, Ethnocentrism and Sexism; Critical Theory; Herbert Marcuse, Angela Davis.

## O QUE HÁ DE CRÍTICO NA TEORIA CRÍTICA, MAIS UMA VEZ: TEORIA CRÍTICA, ETHNOCENTRISMO, SEXISMO E RACISMO

### Resumo

O objetivo do artigo é examinar algumas das fraquezas da teoria crítica com relação a raça e gênero, assim como criticar as limitações da teoria crítica oriundas do seu etnocentrismo. Nele o autor defende o retorno ao engajamento mais profundo com a amplitude de teorias e movimentos sociais, políticos e emancipatórios contemporâneos tal como vimos na primeira geração da Escola de Frankfurt. Como caso exemplar, ele mostra que a omissão de Angela Davis da história da teoria crítica indica o grau em que mesmo a teoria crítica é assombrada pelo racismo, etnocentrismo e sexismo. Estas insuficiências da teoria crítica tornam necessário visitar a teoria crítica mais uma vez, levando adiante a provocação feita por Nancy Fraser em seu ensaio intitulado "O que há de crítico na teoria crítica?". Como resultado da argumentação, o autor sugere

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que uma nova teoria crítica, que coloque Herbert Marcuse e Angela Davis em contato com outras teorias recentes, conduziria a formas mais frutíferas de teoria crítica que ajudariam a superar as preocupações unidimensionais da teoria crítica tradicional.

**Palavras-chave:** Racismo, Etnocentrismo e Sexismo, Teoria Crítica, Herbert Marcuse, Angela Davis.

## 1. Introduction

In 1995 the feminist critical theorist Nancy Fraser published an essay entitled "What's Critical About Critical Theory?" Fraser's essay was a critique of Habermas' omission of a critique of sexism and patriarchy in his form of critical theory. In 2001 William S. Wilkerson and Jeffrey Paris edited and published their book *New Critical Theory*. The essays in this book were attempts to rescue what the authors took to be the dying critical impulse of critical theory, revive Frankfurt School critical theory, and put critical theory in conversation with more recent emancipatory movements from postmodernism to feminism to queer theory.<sup>1</sup> Since then, several conference sessions in the US have been devoted to the new critical theory. There has also been an attempt to return to early Frankfurt School critical theory due to what some believe to be a watering down of the critical impulse in critical theory in the works of second generation critical theorists such as Habermas and third generation critical theorists Axel Honneth. Some have also suggested that the critical theory of the Frankfurt School focused on economic injustice at the expense of many other important social struggles. Finally, in an era replete with multiple forms of social struggles across the globe, some have argued that critical theory and its analysis of these social struggles are limited by its ethnocentrism.

These events and publications signify a spirit of discontent among contemporary critical theorists and students of critical theory. In this paper I examine some of the weaknesses of critical theory with regards to race, and gender, as well as critique the limitations of critical theory due to its ethnocentrism. Like many more recent critical theorists, I argue for a return to the Frankfurt School along with a deeper engagement with more contemporary social, political, and emancipatory theories and movements. I also challenge a history of critical theory that has left out the contributions of Herbert Marcuse's star student Angela Davis. The omission of Angela Davis from histories of critical theory indicates the degree to which even critical theory is haunted by racism, ethnocentrism, and sexism. It also suggests that critical theory has to some extent turned its back on praxis. These short comings of critical theory make it necessary to revisit the question raised by Fraser in 1995. I conclude by suggesting that a new critical theory that puts Marcuse and Angela Davis in conversation with other recent theories would lead to a more fruitful form of

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<sup>1</sup> I have made a similar effort in my 2009 *Critical Theory and Democratic Vision: Herbert Marcuse and Recent Liberation Philosophies*.



critical theory and will help overcome the one-dimensional concerns of traditional critical theory.

## 2. The Original Program of Critical Theory

Any attempt to use, employ, further develop, or critique critical theory demands a clear understanding of what critical theory is as well as its function. This demand is quite simple on one hand, yet not so simple on the other. It is simple with regards to critical theory as a form of theory that strives for the unity of theory and practice with an emancipatory interest. However, the scope of the theory is not so easy to define. This is the point of Fraser's essay. It is worth quoting Fraser at length here. She writes:

To my mind, no one has yet improved on Marx's 1843 definition of critical theory as "the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of an age." What is so appealing about this definition is its straightforwardly political character. It makes no claim to any special epistemological status, rather it supposes that with respect to justification there is no philosophically interesting difference between a critical theory of society and an uncritical one. However, there is, according to this definition, an important political difference. A critical social theory frames its research program and its conceptual framework with an eye to the aims and activities of those oppositional social movements with which it has a partisan, though not uncritical, identification. The questions it asks and the models it designs are informed by that identification and interest. Thus, for example, if struggles contesting the subordination of women figured among the most significant of a given age, then critical theory for that time would aim, among other things, to shed light on the character and bases of such subordination. It would employ categories and explanatory models that revealed rather than occluded relations of male dominance and female subordination. And it would demystify as ideological any rival approaches that obfuscated or rationalized those relations. In this situation, then, one of the standards of assessing a critical theory, once it had been subjected to all the usual tests of empirical adequacy, would be: How well does it theorize the situation and prospects of the feminist movement? To what extent does it serve the self-clarification of the struggle and wishes of contemporary women? (FRASER, 1995, p. 21-22)

There is a lot going on in this very long passage. There are a few things that I want to examine as some of the claims in this passage will guide our present inquiry. I will also take a look at a couple of other claims about the purpose of critical theory by Horkheimer and Marcuse. Interestingly, Fraser goes back to Marx for a definition of critical theory. She is in good company as Marcuse often defined Marx's project as critical theory. Hence, the Frankfurt School did not see themselves as founding critical theory as much as further developing it. However, as Fraser's statement and her essay indicate, this

further development remained trapped within a narrow framework that limited its analysis of social reality and social struggles. For that reason, Fraser simply tosses in one of those omitted social struggles as she defines the project of critical theory. The quote from Marx occurs within the framework of struggles for economic justice while Fraser goes on to apply the task of critical theory to the feminist movement. So, there is a switch of frameworks wherein the same method of critical theory is applied.

Frankfurt School critical theory is oriented around a Marxian/Marxist framework of class struggles and economic injustice. It extends the Marxian framework by introducing psychoanalysis as one of its main tools for exploring the psychological mechanisms by which the working class begins to identify with its rulers. It also brings into its theoretical tool box research done in the social sciences as well as philosophy. Finally, there is a move beyond mere political economy to a deeper critique of political and cultural mechanisms of domination. However, the driving force is still a critique of political economy and class struggle. This focus on political economy is reflected in programmatic essays by Horkheimer and Marcuse. In "Traditional Theory and Critical Theory" Horkheimer writes:

Thus the critical theory of society begins with the idea of the simple exchange of commodities and defines the idea with the help of relatively universal concepts. It then moves further, using all knowledge available and taking suitable material from the research of others as well as from specialized research. Without denying its own principles as established by the special discipline of political economy, the theory shows how an exchange economy, given the condition of men (which, of course, changes under the very influence of such an economy), must necessarily lead to a heightening of those social tensions which in the present historical era lead in turn to wars and revolutions. (HORKHEIMER, 1972, p. 226)

While this passage suggests that critical theory is interdisciplinary in its approach insofar as it employs material and research from a wide range of specialized disciplines, it still focuses this research on economic exploitation and domination. Marcuse takes a similar approach. Marcuse writes:

In the conviction of its founders the critical theory of society is essentially linked with materialism. This does not mean that it thereby sets itself up as a philosophical system in opposition to other philosophical systems. The theory of society is an economic, not a philosophical system. There are two basic elements linking materialism to correct social theory: concern with human happiness, and the conviction that it can be attained only through a transformation of the material conditions of existence. (MARCUSE, 1969, p. 135)

Shortly before that passage cited above Marcuse wrote:

Philosophy thus appears within the economic concepts of materialist theory, each of which is more than an economic concept of the sort employed by the academic discipline of economics. It is more due to the theory's claim to explain the totality of man and his world in terms of his social being. Yet it would be false on that account to reduce these concepts to philosophical ones. To the contrary, the philosophical contents relevant to the theory are to be deduced from the economic structure. (MARCUSE, 1969, p. 134-135).

While historical materialism presents itself as a concrete social theory it does involve a form of abstractness that we need to critique here. The above passages by Horkheimer and Marcuse involve an abstraction or a form of reductionism. The concept of materialism or materiality is reduced to the materiality of economic relations. This is not wrong, just too restrictive. It is true that the Frankfurt School attempted to go beyond traditional Marxism by extending their critique of capitalist domination beyond the mere economic so as to include the political and the cultural. The problem that I'm trying to point out is that even their consideration of the political and the cultural was limited to economic domination. As a result, they overlooked many other forms of domination from which human beings suffer at the hands of other human beings. For example; how do we develop a critical social theory that adequately addresses domination in the form of racism, sexism, homophobia, etc?

I propose here that one can still develop a critical theory within the framework of historical materialism while not reducing one's critique to the economic sphere. The context of social struggle and its many forms today demands a new understanding of materialism and material relations. The mistake of the Frankfurt School was that it remained trapped within the western/ethnocentric philosophical framework of the disembodied subject. To be fair, the Frankfurt School was aware of this problem and did offer critiques of such empty notions of subjectivity. However, they did not go far enough. If their human subject was embodied it was in the form of the white male working class. Hence, their critique of the domination of human beings by other human beings remained trapped within the framework of economic relations. The multiplicity of social struggles against domination today suggests that economic domination is one among many forms of domination.

A new understanding of materialism or materiality would put us in a position to avoid economic reductionism as well as ethnocentrism. Here I want to rethink the concept of materialism as well as the concept of class. Of course, rethinking one naturally leads to rethinking the other. This new approach to materialism and class is consistent with the original program of critical theory but avoids its ethnocentrism and other limitations. The work of Charles Mills and Stanly Aronowitz have been helpful in rethinking materialism and not just class but the process of class formation. Mills and Aronowitz are both concerned about missed opportunities for revolution and social change because of the one-





sidedness of Marxism and the failure of Marxists to properly deal with the race, gender, and sexuality problem.

Just like much traditional western philosophy has treated human beings as abstract, disembodied thinking machines, Marxism has had a tendency to reduce the human person to a mere economic being. Again, even the political and cultural analysis of the Frankfurt School was carried out within a predominately economic framework. However, we must keep in mind that this project was interrupted by anti-Semitism and the Nazi takeover of Germany. This forced them to break out of the economic box to a small degree. My main point is that in Marxism and the Frankfurt School the awareness of embodiment is only partial. Critical race theorists, feminists, and queer theorists have tried to get us to think much deeper about embodiment. Charles Mills has made a great contribution to this project within the context of Marxism. In his book *From Class to Race: Essays in White Marxism and Black Radicalism* Mills offers a new definition of materialism that overcomes the shortcomings of Marxist and Frankfurt School critical theory. Mills writes:

Those seeking to salvage Marxism and bring race into a "multiple-systems" synthesis could argue, similarly, that insofar as race in the modern period is deeply tied up with benefit and disadvantage, with structural privilege and exploitation, it needs to be theorized as "material" also. The model adumbrated here could then provide the framework for an expanded historical materialism that incorporates the (social) materialities of gender and race in a way that Cohen's model, which restricts the material to the (asocial) forces of production, arguably cannot. The resolution of the significance of the "material" in "historical materialism" would have then proven to be a very material issue indeed. (MILLS, 2003, p. 55-56).

In a purely Marxist context we can see how individuals are socially situated with regards to wealth, poverty, and material resources in general. However, there are identity makers, which although they may be socially constructed, play a role in how we are socially situated. One may argue that since race is a social construct it is not real. This is false insofar as people are identified and treated according to racial categories. In the US, the Black Lives Matters movement is a response to the painful reality of race. The materiality that one is, one's form of embodiment makes one more likely to be the victim of police brutality than those with a different form of embodiment. The black body is more likely to be situated in poor neighborhoods with very poor schools. On college and university campuses across the US a black man on campus is more likely to be perceived as a cook or janitor or perhaps a nontraditional student than a professor. Mills' point is that forms of embodiment, or one's materiality comes with real social consequences. Therefore, historical materialism must take into account the multiple forms of materiality which we live and the way in which we are socially situated on the basis of that materiality.

This revised form of historical materialism is further advanced by a revised notion of class in the work of Stanley Aronowitz. The revised concept of class by Aronowitz was anticipated by Herbert Marcuse in his 1974 *Paris Lectures* and in a talk entitled “The Reification of the Proletariat” presented at the American Philosophical Association in 1978. In both of these works as well as in a couple of other places Marcuse argues that the notion of class has become more complicated than it was at the time that Marx was writing. He sees that the ruling class is capable of splitting into factions but more importantly the working class is more complex. The working class is no longer merely constituted by the blue-collar industrial worker but also by the professional white-collar worker. Like Aronowitz, Marcuse also recognizes the racial divide in the working class. In the *Paris Lectures* Marcuse sees the expanded working class and the antagonism between white and black labor as the future challenge to the revolt against capitalism (MARCUSE, 2015, p. 67). He implies that any successful revolt against capitalism must address this problem.

The work of Stanley Aronowitz is in some ways a response to at least one of the problems presented by Marcuse. The biggest cause of the failure of progressive movements is the refusal by members of these movements to understand the common cause that they share with other progressive movements. Aronowitz discusses the many opportunities that white labor movements had to join forces with black labor or the civil rights movement. The racism of members of the labor movement robbed the movement of its potential success. Aronowitz proposes a new conception of class that would help overcome the barriers between various progressive movements. The concept of class that has been handed down from Marx to the Frankfurt School is no longer useful for a critical social theory of contemporary societies. Rather than talk about class as if it is a static social position, Aronowitz prefers the language of class formation. This term captures the fluidity of class and suggests a great historical awareness. He writes:

Classes are historical, and their effects are intertwined with their historicity. Saying classes are historical means that their composition changes at every level of the social structure—ruling groups as well as subordinate groups. Classes form when they make historical difference. In one period the military is integrated into the ruling circles and, for a time, may be the dominant partner; in another it is plainly subordinate to the economic and the political directorate. (ARONOWITZ, 2003, p. 38).

According to Aronowitz, attention should be paid to historical struggles over class formation rather than simply class struggles (Ibid., p. 40). At every social level classes are malleable and are intertwined in interesting ways. One of the main features of class domination that is not fully theorized in Marxism nor Frankfurt School critical theory is power. Aronowitz discusses class formation in relation to what he calls power blocs. The question then is in with what group lies the power to effect history and social arrangements. The struggle for class formation is a struggle for the power to shape social reality

and the future. This focus on power blocs is important insofar as it demands a critique of ethnocentrism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and economic exploitation insofar as several social groups may be subordinate to the same power bloc. In fact, these power blocs work in such a way that they prevent to unification of various subordinated social groups. I will address this problem later. Here we must explore a bit further this idea of social formation and power. Aronowitz writes:

By "social formation" I refer not only to the economic domain but to the political and cultural domains as well. As many writing in the Marxist tradition have shown, economic, political, and cultural relations are inextricably intertwined so that the isolation of one from another is always a theoretical reduction, the consequence of which is to prompt some to separate class from social movements. Race relations were fundamentally altered when African Americans mounted a mass movement that, in alliance with fractions of white intellectuals, students, the progressive wing of the trade unions, and liberal organizations, succeeded in breaking down segregation in public accommodations and erasing the Jim Crow laws in the South that effectively denied them suffrage, condemned their schools to chronic underfunding, and barred them from admission to state colleges and universities. More to the point, the black freedom struggle changed everyday as well as legal relations. Despite these victories of which civil rights was an important aspect, the southern power bloc was not broken. Because Americans measure progress not mainly by income but by the accretion of social power, even as many have managed to escape poverty, at least by standards established by the federal government, blacks' economic and political position has deteriorated since the early 1970s. (ARONOWITZ, 2003, p. 39).

In the paragraph following this passage Aronowitz criticizes the labor movement for not dealing with the race question. Although the black freedom struggle included many white people who were in solidarity with oppressed blacks, there was still a failure to create a coalition of oppressed groups to dismantle the power bloc which administered the system of oppression from which all of these groups suffered. Aronowitz points out that even though much was accomplished by the black freedom struggle the southern power bloc was never broken. I would add that the northern power bloc was not broken either since the northern US is also racist. The fact that even today we have a Black Lives Matter movement as a response to racial profiling and the killing and brutalization of blacks by policemen, and great poverty and a high unemployment rate among blacks indicates that the power bloc that was confronted by black in the 1950s and 60s has not been broken. A new critical theory must confront the ruling class by creating a coalition of oppressed social groups. I will say more about this in a later section.

In another statement regarding the function of critical theory Marcuse argues that any critical theory of society is confronted with the problem of



historical objectivity. This problem implies value judgements such as is human life worth living or ought it to be made worth living and do we have in society the specific possibilities for the amelioration of human life (MARCUSE, 1966, p. x). One of the main questions that drives critical social theory is how a society should use its material and intellectual resources for the “optimal development and satisfaction of individual needs and faculties with a minimum of toil and misery?” (Ibid., p. xi)

The idea that critical theory should assess the uses made by a society of its material and intellectual forces for the sake of helping individuals achieve optimal development and the satisfaction of needs is a very important one and it provides the basis for a new orientation of critical theory that would still include a critique of political economy but would go much further.

### **3. Critical Theory’s Ethnocentric Limitations and Contemporary Democratic Struggles**

In the previous section I argued that the critical theory of the Frankfurt School became somewhat Eurocentric due to its failure to get beyond the framework of political economy. This did not happen by necessity since the framework of political economy does not preclude an examination of political economy that transcends Eurocentric and ethnocentric boundaries. Of the members of the Frankfurt School, it was Marcuse who most consistently tried to transcend these boundaries. Although this extension of critical theory beyond Eurocentric and ethnocentric boundaries is not complete in Marcuse, he is able to go as far as he does because of his never ending search for radical subjectivity.<sup>1</sup>

This ongoing quest for radical subjectivity was a response to the political paralysis of the working class and it made Marcuse more sensitive to social struggles that were not merely economic or rooted in the problem of economic exploitation. The language used in books like *An Essay on Liberation*, terms like “the great refusal”, “catalyst groups”, “the new sensibility”, suggests a growing awareness by Marcuse of a wide range of struggles for freedom and the optimum development of human life. However, critical theory in general has failed to properly theorize and respond to these movements. The failure of critical theory to respond to the plurality of voices crying for justice and freedom is what prompts a new generation of critical theorists to call for a new critical theory. Wilkerson and Paris write:

We seek, nevertheless, to engage the plural voices of today’s emerging critical social theorists as a coherent (if multivalent) liberation movement. This anthology brings together various strands of contemporary theory to combine the newer insights of postmodernism, feminism, race, and queer theory with the older ideals of a Marxist-influenced critical social theory of the first- and

<sup>1</sup> Concerning Marcuse’s search for radical subjectivity see KELLNER, 2001, p. 85-103. See also FARR, 2009.



second-generation Frankfurt Schools. (PARIS, WILKERSON, 2001, p. 1).

In my own work I have referred to the plurality of liberation movements as democratic struggles insofar as they are attempts to bring to fruition for all people the unfulfilled promises of democracy. Promises such as freedom, equal opportunity, equal rights, the pursuit of happiness, etc, are present as ideas only while the opposite of such ideas have real material presence in our societies. If we follow Marcuse in seeing the task of critical theory as contributing to the amelioration of human life as well as using society's resources for optimum development and meeting individual needs, then we must be aware of the many ways human life is made miserable in our societies and needs are not met. What are the sources from which misery arises for large portions of the population? We would have to see that the forms of human misery and their causes are many, thereby requiring perhaps a multiplicity of theoretical tools and frameworks in the attempt to develop a critique and response.

I have argued elsewhere that critical theory in general is driven by democratic vision or impulse. That is, critical theory seeks to understand and disclose the social, political, and cultural mechanisms that prevent the materialization or presence of a concrete democratic way of life, a life of freedom, mutual respect for others, equal rights and opportunities, happiness, etc,. Therefore, critical theory must lend its critical vision to a wide range of democratic struggles. Yet, a newer generation of critical theorists have found that their own struggles have been largely ignored by early critical theorists. The project taken on by Fraser, Wilkerson, Paris and others is a response to this void in critical theory. The ethnocentric nature of traditional critical theory has prevented it from properly theorizing the multiplicity of freedom struggles in which large portions of the human population are engaged in. I want to use a historical example to drive my point home here.

One of the most important and visible participants in the black freedom struggle in the US is Angela Davis. The fact that one can read one history of critical theory after another and will not find mention of Angela Davis is testimony to the ethnocentric nature of critical theory. I would also argue that the absence of Angela Davis from the many histories of Frankfurt School critical theory is also indicative of a tacit racism and sexism in critical theory. A brief discussion of Davis' connection to the Frankfurt School is necessary here for those who are not familiar with her life and work. I suspect that many of you don't know about her due to her absence from works on critical theory.

Angel Davis is an African American woman who was studying French literature as an undergraduate at Brandeis University in the 1960s while Herbert Marcuse was teaching philosophy there. Having a desire to study philosophy as well as French literature Davis sat in on a class taught by the popular Marcuse. After that class Marcuse agreed to work with Davis as she began her work on Philosophy. Before her encounter with Marcuse Davis was already interested in Marxism. While studying at Brandeis Davis went on to read works by other members of the Frankfurt such as Horkheimer and Adorno. Later Marcuse



recommended that Davis study philosophy with his friends in Frankfurt since according to him that was the best place to study philosophy. While Davis was studying in Frankfurt the black freedom struggle began to escalate in the US. She says:

The more the struggles at home accelerated, the more frustrated I felt at being forced to experience it all vicariously. I was advancing my studies, deepening my understanding of philosophy, but I felt more and more isolated. I was so far away from the terrain of the fight that I could not even analyze the episodes of the struggle. I did not even have the knowledge or understanding to judge which currents of the movement were progressive and genuine and which were not. It was a difficult balance I was trying to maintain, and it was increasingly hard to feel a part of the collective coming to consciousness of my people. (DAVIS, 1974, p. 144-145).

In another essay Davis writes:

I have often publicly expressed my gratitude to Herbert Marcuse for teaching me that I did not have to choose between a career as an academic and a political vocation that entailed making interventions around concrete social issues. In Frankfurt, when I was studying with Adorno, he discouraged me from seeking to discover ways of linking my seemingly discrepant interests in philosophy and social activism. After the founding of the Black Panther Party in 1966, I felt very much drawn back to [the United States]. During one of my last meetings with him (students were extremely fortunate if we managed to get one meeting over the course of our studies with a professor like Adorno), he suggested that my desire to work directly in the radical movements of that period was akin to a media studies scholar deciding to become a radio technician. (DAVIS, 2005, p. xi).

There are several important revelations in the above passages that require our reflection. First let me say that it is incredible that members of the Frankfurt School were exiled in the early 1930s to the US and most stayed until the end of the war but did not have much to say about the very visible oppression of black people. Although they were also victims of anti-Semitism their blindness regarding the oppression of blacks in America suggests a level of privilege that made such blindness possible. After all, oppressed blacks in America could not leave. It would seem that members of the Frankfurt School would be more sensitive to the plight of blacks in the US, given their situation in Germany. It seems that they were too occupied with their own oppression to understand the oppression of others. Adorno famously raised the question "Can philosophy be done after Auschwitz?" A broader consideration of oppression and dehumanization should lead to the question of the possibility of philosophy after the Trans-Atlantic slave trade or after the imperialist invasions of the Americas by Europeans. Unfortunately, these earlier imperialistic, colonizing, empire building, and destruction of two races of people fail to count as events catastrophic enough to question the value of philosophy in their aftermath.

As an African American Angela Davis did not have the luxury of creating a distance between herself and the struggle of her people for freedom back home in the US. Having lived her entire life in America the pain of racism and her love for her people, the victims of racism was existentially embedded in every fiber of her being. She understood the urgency of the struggle and the moment. For her the struggle back home was indeed a life and death struggle as she had a personal relationship with the four black girls who were blown up by a bomb planted by a white supremacist group in September of 1963 at the Birmingham. 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham Alabama. Davis's mother actually drove one of the mothers of one of the slain girls to the church that day to pick the little girl up, only to discover that she was dead. This particular girl, Carole Robertson was one of Angela's younger sister, Fania's best friends (DAVIS, 1974, p. 128-129).

Adorno's response to Davis' desire to be involved in the black freedom struggle in the US is quite ethnocentric insofar as he discloses an inability to understand the urgency of the race problem in the US and abroad. Adorno's critical theory is locked within the framework of his own interests. The second main point that I want to make regarding the two quotes from Davis is that there is a striking difference between Adorno and Marcuse regarding Davis' relation to the black freedom struggle. Although Marcuse is also guilty of not addressing the problem of racism in more than a passing way he at least understood the urgency of the matter for Davis. Marcuse was much more willing to support Davis' involvement in the black freedom struggle than Adorno. In fact, one can say that regarding the Davis/Marcuse relationship, Marcuse eventually became Davis' student.

In a letter by Marcuse to Davis on November 18, 1970 Marcuse begins by expressing some misgivings he had about being asked to introduce the publication of two lectures on Frederick Douglas given by Davis at U.C.L.A. Marcuse states that the lectures deal with a world of which he is an outsider. However, he goes on to say that after he re-read Davis' prospectus for her dissertation on Kant he began to see the connection in her mind between philosophy and the black freedom struggle. After talking about how he was informed by the prospectus and the two lectures on Douglas Marcuse offers his support of Davis' work and activism. It is worth quoting a large section of the last paragraph of the letter.

The world in which you grew up, *your* world (which is not mine) was one of cruelty, misery, and persecution. To recognize these facts did not require much intelligence and sophistication, but to realize that they could be changed and must be changed required thinking, critical thinking: knowledge of how these conditions came about, which forces perpetuated them, and of the possibilities of freedom and justice. This, I believe, you learned in your years of study. And you learned something else, namely, that almost all the celebrated figures of Western civilization – the very civilization which enslaved your people – were in the last analysis concerned with one thing: human freedom....So you felt that the philosophical

idea, unless it was a lie, must be translated into reality: that it contained a moral imperative to leave the classroom, the campus, and to go and help others, your own people to whom you still belong – in spite of (or perhaps because of) your success within the white Establishment. But you fought for us too, who need freedom and who want freedom for all who are still unfree. In this sense, your cause is our cause. (MARCUSE, 2005, p. 50).

Marcuse would repeat these sentiments and go on to defend Davis' decision to become a black militant in an interview in 1969 (MARCUSE, 2014, p. 214-215). The above passage demonstrates that Marcuse had a sensibility to the black struggle that seemed to be lacking in Adorno. Marcuse seemed to understand the sense of urgency expressed by Davis' desire to join the movement. In fact, it seems that Marcuse stepped down from his position as Davis' teacher and became her student with regards to the black freedom struggle. However, although Marcuse displayed a greater sensitivity to a wide range of struggles for freedom his theoretical orientation was still ethnocentric to some degree. Notice, although Marcuse was sympathetic with the black freedom struggle he still spoke as if he was outside of it or at a distance. This is somewhat understandable since one does not want to assume the position of authority in a movement led by another oppressed group. However, it should be clear to us today that the critical theorists can no longer afford to stand outside of any struggle for liberation. The failure of various liberation movements lie in their isolation from each other. A new critical theory must recognize the distinct logic or mode of operation of each form of oppression while at the same time being aware of ways in which they overlap and support each other. This is or focus in the next section of this paper.

#### **4. Critical Theory as Theory of Intersectionality**

In light of the above, it has fallen to us to redefine critical theory with an eye toward the total liberation of the human species and I would say the entire environment. It is my view that critical theory can overcome the problem of ethnocentrism and broaden its emancipatory scope by incorporating the theoretical framework of intersectionality. This theoretical framework has been employed by black feminists in the US because they realized that the ethnocentric nature of US white feminism did not address the complexity of the struggle of black women. Of course, Marcuse's former student Angela Davis would be one of the pioneers of this new theoretical framework. It would be helpful here to cite the description of intersectionality provided by the black feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins. Collins writes:

As a heuristic device, intersectionality references the ability of social phenomena such as race, class, and gender to mutually construct one another. One can use the framework of intersectionality to think through social institutions, organizational structures, patterns of social interactions, and other social practices on all levels of social organization. Groups are



constructed within these social practices, with each group encountering a distinctive constellation of experiences based on its placement in hierarchical power relations. African-American women, for example, can be seen both as a group that occupies a distinctive social location within power relations of intersectionality and as one wherein intersectional processes characterize Black women's collective self-definitions and actions. Whereas race-only or gender-only perspectives classify African-American women as a subgroup of either African-Americans or women, intersections of race, class, and gender, among others, create more fluid and malleable boundaries around the category "African-American." (COLLINS, 1998, p. 205).

The reflection on the complicated nature of their own identities and the way in which no single struggle for liberation was able to properly theorize and respond to these identities is what led black feminist to the notion of intersectionality. We can see from the passage above that the concept of intersectionality is not far removed from the way in which Stanley Aronowitz theorized class formation and the relationship between classes and power blocs. Black feminists also recognized the fluidity of social group formation and the hierarchical arrangement of social groups. The most important insight here is that race, socio/economic class, gender, and sexuality mutually construct each other. These forms of identity and the forms of oppression that are that are connected to them do not develop in isolation from one another in a unilateral way.

While some black feminist tend to focus on the ways in which these forms of identity (or I would say social locations) intersect in their own bodies, we can also see how race, class, gender, and sexuality mutually construct each other as forms of social discourse. This is important for our analysis here and for the further development of critical theory. One could argue that black women in the US are socially positioned in such a way that they have an epistemic advantage with regards to understanding the way multiple forms of domination work together. Their bodies are the tablets on which racist, sexist, homophobic, and class based forms of oppression, write and intersect. Their social position is such that almost every form of social and economic disadvantage operates on them and shapes their prospects in life.

At another level of analysis we can see that the oppressive operations of sexism, racism, homophobia, and economic inequality not only write on the body of the subjugated population, they also arrange and position individuals and groups within specific domains of discourse and socio/economic status. Social groups that are dominated by the ruling class are organized, not by themselves for the purpose of revolution or qualitative social change, but rather, by the ruling class for the purposes of blind acceptance of their subjugation.

It is true that Frankfurt School critical theory concerned itself with the ways in which oppressed people complied with their oppression. For this reason they turned to psychoanalysis for assistance in understanding the psyche of the

working class. The first chapter of Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* begins with one of the most striking statements that I've ever read. He says: "A comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom prevails in advanced industrial civilization, a token of technical progress" (MARCUSE, 1964, p. 1). Simply put, we are in an age when subjugated groups or individuals are compliant with their subjugation. Subjugation no longer has to be forced, it is accepted. The system pacifies just enough to keep people in their places within the social, political, economic hierarchy. In this book Marcuse goes on to examine the social, political, and cultural mechanisms that encourage the oppressed to identify with their oppressors. This form of analysis is familiar to all of you so I will not dwell on it here. I merely want to suggest that this level of analysis is necessary yet one-sided. I believe that bringing the notion of intersectionality into critical theory will help overcome the shortsightedness of critical theory and will move it beyond ethnocentrism. Let me conclude by giving you an example of how the intersectionality framework can help us understand this embarrassing moment in American electoral politics.

I just wrote an article that I plan to submit to a popular journal or political magazine. The piece is entitled "The Chickens Have Come Home to Roost: The Republican Establishment and the Creation of Donald Trump". There are at least two approaches a critical theorist might take in order to explain the embarrassing Trump phenomenon in the US. First is the approach taken by our friend Doug Kellner who returns to the early Frankfurt School's study of the authoritarian personality. This approach is correct but may be aided by another approach and that is the approach of intersectionality. This is the approach that I have taken.

The nomination of Donald Trump as the republican presidential candidate has significantly split the Republican Party. Many member of the so-called Republican Establishment have tried to distance themselves from Trump. Trump is treated as some kind of anomaly who came out of nowhere. However, Trump is no anomaly, he is the direct product of the Republican Establishment. He is to the Republican Establishment what the Frankenstein Monster is to Dr. Frankenstein. Class, gender, race, and sexuality all play a role in the production of Donald Trump. First, let me say that both political parties in the US are dominated by ruling class interests. However, the racism, homophobia, and the sexism of the Republican Party has been a bit more visible. I have no time here to address the relationship between the two parties and the ruling class. Here I simply want to demonstrate the usefulness of the framework of intersectionality for understanding the current political scene.

Although the Republican Party has historically developed policy that benefits the rich at the expense of the poor they manage to win great support from poor working class people. The vast majority of the republican poor are white evangelical Christians. The Republican Establishment has cleverly used the racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia as well as some rather extreme conservative religious beliefs to keep the support of the working class while continuing to exploit them economically. The economic exploitation continues largely because the right wing has been able to keep members of the

working class fighting against each other. Racism has been a very effective tool in keeping members of the working class fighting against each other. This racism came to the surface after the 2008 presidential election. The negative reaction to the first black president was like nothing I've seen in my lifetime. There were several coded displays of racism as well as very clear displays. The rise of the Tea Party and the cry to "take our country back" happened in a context where blacks were believed to be the "other" the lesser Americans. People like Dylan Roof (the young white supremacist who shot and killed several blacks in a black church in Charlestown SC) would claim that "they (blacks) are taking over". Donald Trump would play on the racist sensibilities of many white working class Americans by suggesting that Obama was not a real US citizen. He would push Obama to reveal his birth certificate as proof of his American citizenship. No member of the Republican Establishment opposed Trump's behavior. Instead, they did everything in their power to help undermine Obama. They indeed thought that they would benefit from Trump's attack on the President without having to attack him themselves. The Republican Establishment allowed Trump to titillate the racist sensibilities of the white working class and thereby create the present environment where Trump is now their candidate.

I use the Trump phenomenon as an example of the need for an intersectional analysis of the various ways in which class exploitation, racism, xenophobia and other forms of oppression may work together to maintain each form of oppression. The racism of many working class whites in the US prevent them from being in solidarity with working class blacks and working together to create a multi-racial movement for economic justice. As I mentioned earlier, Stanley Aronowitz discusses in detail various moments in US and world history where there were moments for a possible multi-racial movement against capitalism. These possible moments did not see the birth of such a movement because of racism, and sexism in some cases.

If critical theory is to avoid being ethnocentric and live up to its own claim to make clear the human demand for the satisfaction of needs and to live happier lives then it must develop an analysis of how multiple form of oppression work together some that progressive social change is prohibited. The framework of intersectionality bequeathed to us by black feminists is a necessary corrective.

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