

## IS THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL STILL RELEVANT?

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[Note: This short paper responds to Peter Thomson's series on the Frankfurt School which appeared in the “comments” section of the *Guardian's* website in April/May 2013. The present version of the paper is very slightly longer than that posted on [www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree](http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree).]

The titles of Peter Thompson's most recent articles ('The Frankfurt School...what's left?' and 'The Frankfurt School...where do we go from here?') make the question of the School's relevance difficult to miss.

Our own view is that the Frankfurt School *is* relevant. Our further view is, however, that its relevance is difficult to appreciate owing to changes in Frankfurt School theorising itself. The changes which we have in mind are those referred to by Thompson when he writes of 'two distinct periods in the work of the Frankfurt school' (13 May 2013) and when he comments that the work of Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth represents a 'break' in the school's development rather than a 'continuity' (6 May 2013). We comment in turn on each of these periods.

The first of these periods can be thought of as starting in 1923 (the date of the School's official founding) and continuing until roughly the 1970s. In the course of this period, differences within the School and amongst associated theorists arguably outweighed similarities. This said, a common concern was to develop a mode of theorising that refused to assimilate itself to capitalism's everyday categories and which, instead, pointed towards an emancipated and emancipating social world. The Frankfurt School's term for such theorising was 'critical theory'. Critical theory was seen as, intrinsically, difficult – not because it was wilfully obscurantist but because it thought against the grain of a conformist everyday life. A fascinating feature of first-period Frankfurt School writings is their readiness to experiment with aphorisms, with juxtaposed perspectives, with paragraphs that look like footnotes rather than main texts and with essays rather than monographs of a conventional kind. At times, the form of Frankfurt School writings allude to the social fragmentation and violence which capitalist ideologies seek to mask and deny. If critical theory strikes a reader as difficult, the difficulty concerned resembles that of a Dada artwork or piece of atonal music: like early twentieth-century artworks, critical theory refuses to “flow” in a reassuring and conformist and meretricious way.

The second period of Frankfurt School theory is that when Habermas and, following

Habermas, Honneth, are the major theorists. It is striking that, in this period, experiments with theory's form all but disappear and critical theorists produce studies of a conventional academic sort. In one sense, an irony attaches to this latter-day endorsement of academic forms: in the 1920's, the Frankfurt School had positioned itself within the German university system (the better to avoid party-based dogma) and it is as though, in the Habermas-Honneth period, academia started to exact its revenge. Be this as it may, the period when Frankfurt-influenced writers became less formally adventurous was also one when theory lost, increasingly, its 'critical' and politically radical edge.

This loss of 'critical' edge makes a balanced assessment of the Frankfurt School difficult. In our own view, the School's first period – the half century running from the 1920s to the 1970s – remains challenging and forward-looking and inspirational. In the School's second period, by contrast, we find ourselves struggling to find glimmers of insight in a conceptual landscape that is grey-on-grey. What has happened? Where has Frankfurt School theorising gone wrong? A specific line of thought in Honneth's writings seems to us to encapsulate critical theory's current malaise.

The line of thought concerns the idea of 'recognition' (or social acknowledgement). According to Honneth, there are three main forms of recognition: love (which goes forward in the family), respect (which is the sphere of law and civil society) and esteem (whose proper domain is the state). Honneth makes two claims regarding these forms: first, that they exist in present-day capitalist society and, second, that they serve as templates of (or bases for) any world that we can imagine – however emancipated this world might be. Honneth agrees that much in the existing world might be improved – and that the boundaries between spheres of recognition might be redrawn in this or that specific way. But, it seems, the outline of the existing world and its structures of recognition is unchangeable. It seems, too, that the only task open to the critical theorist is to apply present-day conceptions of recognition in a more consistent way. Stated differently, the conceptual horizons of Honnethian critical theory have closed, and are delimited by the requirements of the capitalist status quo – whereas the critical theory of earlier years sought to transcend these limits. For Honneth, there can be no question of dissolving spheres of recognition into mutually recognitive interaction. There can be no question of launching a critique which starts from rejection and revolt – and which projects emancipatory social change. For critical theory of the first period, critique pointed beyond capitalism's limits. For Honneth, a distinction between capitalist and emancipated society shimmers to nothing in the notion of an ambiguously-defined 'modern' era.

Whereas first-period Frankfurt School theory is fertile and exciting, Honneth's reformulation of critical theory strikes us as a child of sadly conformist times.

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