# Aff Answers

## Alternative

### Critical Theory Fails

#### Critical theory fails the current political moment – focusing on understanding structures of oppression without concrete strategies of dissent and change replicate the failure of critical theory without praxis

Harcourt 18 (Bernard, Prof of Law and Political Science at Columbia, Directeur d'études at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, Critique & Praxis: A Pure Theory of Illusions, Values, and Tactics, and an Answer to the Question: "What Is To Be Done?" Open Review Edition, <https://bit.ly/3AI0948>, accessed 07/11/22]

Another central insight of critical theory is that these struggles are fought, and often won, on the basis of illusions: by getting people to believe so deeply in the truth of social facts that they are then willing to sacrifice their lives for their beliefs. In recent decades, with the collapse of communism and the rise of neoliberalism, the illusion of free markets has done most of the work. But today, increasingly, the specter of immigrant invasion, of loss of white identity, and of the Islamification of the West are now converting many more people to extreme-right populist movements.¶ In times past, critical theory would have had a ready-made answer to these troubled times. In the late nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries, Marxist thinkers dominated the critical Left. Traditional critical theory was tethered to class struggle and historical materialism. Critical practice—what became known as praxis—was oriented toward revolution. To be sure, there were internecine conflicts and rivalries over tactics. The heated debate between Rosa Luxembourg and Lenin on the question of what was to be done is a good illustration.1 But the broad outline of the path forward was well defined: class struggle, international solidarity, and revolutionary social transformation. This vision of praxis shaped the first generation of the Frankfurt School and represented a common horizon for the critical Left in the early to mid-twentieth century.¶ But with peasant and anti-colonial insurrections in the East and South at mid-century, and in the wake of the repression following May 1968, many critical voices began to fracture the consensus of traditional critical theory. The decline of syndicalism and of more radical factions of the international labor movement gradually transformed and pacified labor movements during the second half of the twentieth century The events in the 1950s and 60s, especially in Hungary and the East Bloc, began to unveil some of the illusions of traditional critical theory itself; as did the streets of 1968 where the vitality of the student and worker movements slammed against the rigidity of leftist parties, especially Western communist parties still beholden to the Soviet Union. At that point, the grip of Marx’s philosophy of history began to loosen. And once that glue dissolved, the critical prescriptions got muddied. Since that time, critical praxis has lacked its earlier coherence—leaving many critical thinkers today somewhat disarmed in the face of renewed right-wing populism.¶ There is today no longer an intelligible critical response to the question “What is to be done?” Apart from a dwindling core, few critical theorists would explicitly advocate the answers that most on the critical Left would have imagined in the early or mid-twentieth century. Today, right-wing populist movements have cannibalized segments of the proletarian base of the former Left, turning old-style class warfare into anti-immigrant, xenophobic, and ethno-racist conflict. The cleavage is no longer between the workers and the bourgeoisie, but between a populist white class versus minorities and immigrants, or children of immigrants, predominantly of color. In the United States, it is between destitute whites and impoverished blacks and Latinos. The problems this raises are acute.¶ The questions are pressing—but critical theory no longer provides a straightforward answer. To the contrary, in recent decades, critical theory has been mired in internecine struggles of influence among its different branches—Marxist, Lacanian, Foucaultian, deconstructive, feminist, post-colonial, queer—or worse, in tribal politics and gossip around its illuminati. These internal wars of influence and political games have prevented critics from building on the core of critique and taking on the challenge of elaborating a contemporary critical theory of practice—a critical praxis for our critical times.¶ It is time, then, to rejuvenate critical theory and critical praxis for the twenty-first century. In these pages, I will set forth a new vision for critical theory and praxis, and answer the specific question of what is to be done today, here, and now. In brief, I will propose that we understand critical theory, at its core, as a pure theory of illusions that calls for a pure theory of values and entails a pure theory of tactics. Let me prefigure the argument as succinctly as possible.¶ Critical theory is the constant endless unveiling of illusions in order to demonstrate the distributional consequences of our belief systems, material conditions, and political economies. It traces the effects in reality of our beliefs and material practices, recognizing that, as it unveils illusions, it creates new ones that will need to be unpacked next. It is relentless in this way—this is its anti-foundational basis. It engages in a form of recursive unmasking—an infinite regress—that endlessly exposes the distributional effects of belief systems and material conditions. It entails, in this sense, a pure theory of illusions.¶ In the same way in which reconstructed critical theory, understood as a pure theory of illusions, liberates us from unfounded positivist foundations, it also frees us from the foundational constraints of traditional critical utopias. There is no unique form of political economy that will satisfy a critical utopian vision. All political economic regimes are regulated in unique ways and produce material distributions that are the direct effect of the specific rules and regulations of that particular regime, not of the abstract regime type. A state-controlled economy can distribute to its apparatschik, just as a privately-owned corporation can distribute to its workers: it is not the type, but the detailed mechanisms and regulations of the specific regime that shape the social order. All that we can judge, as critical theorists, is how close a specific regime approximates the values and ideals that the critical tradition shares. In this sense, critical theory calls for judgment about the values that a political economic regime instantiates through its material outcomes and distributions, not for a particular political economy. Hand-in-hand with a pure theory of illusions, reconstructed critical theory must be agnostic about the form of political economic regime, but adamant about its values. It entails, in this sense, a pure theory of values.¶ In terms of praxis, then, reconstructed critical theory calls for entirely situated, contextualized analyses of how to push specific, really-existing, situated political economic regimes—whether capitalist, socialist, or communist—in the proper direction. Each historical, temporal, and geopolitical situation will differ, calling for different tactics—with nothing off the table. This is an inherently combative enterprise because critical theorists are necessarily opposing and confronting the values and material projects of others. Politics is a constant battle over values, and we are all inevitably in a state of competition to realize our ideals. In such a contested space, it is only possible to develop tactics in a situated and contextualized way. Since there is no war to be won, but an endless series of battles, critical theory must focus on tactics. These are not portable or generalizable. What might have been appropriate in 1930s Germany was completely different than what worked in 1940s India. In the latter context, non-violent resistance may have been appropriate; in the former it would have been useless. Battle tactics cannot be universalized. In this sense, reconstructed critical theory calls for a pure theory of tactics.¶ The upshot is that there is no single or abstract answer to the question “What is to be done?” In the same way in which reconstructed critical theory overcomes unfounded positivist foundations, the question “What is to be done?” does not have a unique or correct answer in the abstract. The answer is not a vanguard party, a leaderless movement, non-violent resistance, or any general mode of uprising, in the abstract. There is no one right way to proceed in general terms. We immediately go off track when we seek one generalizable answer to the question. Instead, the question must be answered differently for each situation, specified and contextualized in space and time. There must be a GPS-, time-, and date-stamp to every answer.¶ In this book, I propose one such time, place, and date stamped answer to the question: “What is to be done in the United States on September 1, 2018?” That is the only style of question that is worth a critical response. I hope that others will answer the question with their own time, place, and date stamp wherever they are now—and I will facilitate a forum to post those answers. Critical theory cannot simply understand our crises and unveil our illusions. It cannot content itself with reflection or contemplation as a form of practice. It must articulate tactics and praxis.¶ Critical times call for radical revaluation. Earlier similar epochs were foundational moments for critical theory and praxis. The 1920s, especially in the Weimar Republic, gave rise to a whole generation of critical theorists—many of whom would emigrate in exile around the world and spawn a critical diaspora.2 The 1960s, with its global student uprisings and government repression, stimulated another wave of critical theory and praxis, giving way to a formidable decade of critical thought during the 1970s. Our critical times today demand an equal response from contemporary critical theorists. That is what I propose here: a new vision for critical theory and critical praxis for the twenty-first century.

### Genealogy Fails

#### Genealogy offers no method of diagnosing the specific mechanisms by which power operates or concrete praxis for people to realize their emancipation from those structures

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Genealogy, in its ostensible analyses of the ’historical specificity of modern power relations’, misses ’the ultimate ontotheological origins of panopticism or the regime of truth;’ (p. 174). Insofar as Heidegger’s destruction emphasized the ontological construction of modernity (its philosophical ground) it was, as we have seen, a limited agency of critical practice. But insofar as Foucault (and other contemporary worldly critics) emphasizes its sociopolitical construction (its scientific/technological ground), his genealogy too constitutes a limited agency of critique.... A dialogue between their discourses will show that the overdetermined sciences and the ’residual’ humanities ... are, in fact, different instruments of the anthropo-logos, the discourse of Man, and thus complicitous in the late capitalist West’s neoimperial project of planetary domination. (p. 152) In this thinking Heidegger with Foucault, and in a ’dialogue between their discourses’, Spanos thinks he has the necessary grounding for a structured theory of social relations with critical intent, a kind of theory that American literary theory, from Brooks to de Man, has been unable (or unwilling) to articulate, and a kind of theory neither Heidegger nor Foucault adequately articulated. Heidegger shares many of the problems that faced an earlier generation of critical theorists interested in Heidegger (here I am thinking of Marcuse), and many of the problems that face contemporary philosophical hermeneutics (here I am thinking mostly of Gadamer and Vattimo). Remember that Marcuse’s dissatisfaction with Heidegger grew, in fact, not simply out of Heidegger’s political engagements but more so out of his failure to link his fundamental ontology to any historically concretized praxis (a problem Spanos is aware of, as I suggested earlier, but never resolves via genealogy - a point I shall return to shortly). Heidegger never has much to say about agents and their capacity for historically realizable emancipation: for Heidegger, it is always a freedom that possesses man, a historical destiny that awaits or calls us, and not the other way around. Thomas McCarthy raises this problematic in his essay on ’Heidegger and Critical Theory’: Heidegger, Marcuse wrote, ’remained content to talk of the nation’s link with destiny, of the ‘heritage’ that each individual has to take over, and of the community of the ‘generation’, while other dimensions of facticity were treated under such categories as ‘they’ and ‘idle talk’ and relegated in this way to inauthentic existence. [He] did not go on to ask about the nature of this heritage, about the people’s mode of being, about the real processes and forces that are history.’ (p. 96) The point to be made here is that Heidegger’s politics are not the only (or necessarily the largest) obstacle to coupling him with critical theory. Hence much of Spanos’s energetic defense of Heidegger against his ’humanist detractors’ (particularly in his defiant concluding chapter, ’Heidegger, Nazism, and the ‘Repressive Hypothesis’: The American Appropriation of the Question’) is misdirected. For as McCarthy rightly points out, ’the basic issues separating critical theory from Heideggerean ontology were not raised post hoc in reaction to Heidegger’s political misdeeds but were there from the start. Marcuse formulated them in all clarity during his time in Freiburg, when he was still inspired by the idea of a materialist analytic of Dasein’ (p. 96, emphasis added). In other words, Heidegger succumbs quite readily to an immanent critique. Heidegger’s aporias are not simply the result of his politics but rather stem from the internal limits of his questioning of the ’being that lets beings be’, truth as disclosure, and destruction of the metaphysical tradition, all of which divorce reflection from social practice and thus lack critical perspective. Spanos, however, thinks Foucault can provide an alternative materialist grounding for an emancipatory critical theory that would obviate the objections of someone such as Marcuse. But the turn to Foucault is no less problematic than the original turn to Heidegger. Genealogy is not critical in any real way. Nor can it tame or augment what Spanos calls Heidegger’s ’overdetermination of the ontological site’. Foucault’s analysis of power, despite its originality, is an ontology of power and not, as Spanos thinks, a ’concrete diagnosis’ (p.138) of power mechanisms.3 Thus it dramatizes, on a different level, the same shortcomings of Heidegger’s fundamental ontology. The ’affiliative relationship’ (p. 138) that Spanos tries to develop between Heidegger and Foucault in order to avoid the problem Marcuse faced simply cannot work. Where Heidegger ontologizes Being, Foucault ontologizes power. The latter sees power as a strategic and intentional but subjectless mechanism that ’endows itself’ and punches out ’docile bodies’, whereas the former sees Being as that neutered term and no-thing that calls us.