The Urgency of Critical Theory Today: Towards Optimism and Renewal in a Neoliberal World

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Abstract: This chapter takes the form of a critical conversation between three generations of critical theorists, examining the role of critical theory in the neoliberal academy: does this sort of intellectual project still have a place in an academic and educational system that tends to favour empirical research and policy-driven projects? Through a discussion of the relationship between critical theory and power, privilege, and positionality, the chapter addresses the ongoing urgency of such intellectual activities in the present context. The dialogue between the three participants acknowledges critical theory's historical, and continuing, fragility within the university, while elucidating the ways that it can provide a vehicle for challenging dominant forms of power. In doing so, this cross-generational exchange demonstrates that critical theory remains a vital space of rebellion, optimism, and social change.

Critical Theory, Knowledge Production, and the (Public) University

The first edition of the journal *Theory, Culture & Society* appeared in 1982. The opening editorial rather gloomily identified "an assault on higher education in Britain"[4], noting "an economic climate in which the trend is towards the 'commodification' of thought"[5]. Dark though this is, the complaint is sharply familiar to anyone working in academia more than three decades on, when instrumentality is at the heart of research directives[6], government higher education poli-

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4   Featherstone (1982), p. 1.

5   Featherstone (1982), p. 1.

6   See, for instance, Billig (2013).

cies are dominated by the metricization of thought[7], and a culture of overwork and affective alienation proliferates.[8] Concurrently, Meg Stacey's presidential address to the annual British Sociological Association conference in 1982 recognized that "we are experiencing in this country […] a serious attack upon the entire knowledge base of the entire society, upon academic freedom and particularly upon the social sciences and sociology among them"[9]. What Stacey's address and the *TCS* editorial have in common – reflected thirty years later – is that attacks on the humanities, social sciences, sociology, and academia are ultimately also attacks on intellectual life. Indeed, *TCS* was founded in order to preserve space for the abstract and for theorizing in an economic and professional landscape that is often structurally and systematically hostile to such work.[10]

This conversation between three generations of critical theorists working in contemporary UK academia examines the vital role of critical theory in challenging the ongoing and entrenched neoliberalization of higher education and intellectual practice – but with an eye to the ways in which this is not a new phenomenon. Through analysing the remit and boundaries of critical theory and its ability to be adapted to new contexts and questions, the need to acknowledge the potential elitism of hegemonic modes of thinking and publishing, and the applicability of critical theory to comprehending and questioning the present circumstances of the university and academic life, this exchange opens up new avenues to collectively rethinking how critical theorists engage with, and may attempt to change, the intellectual and professional fields in which they – and, more generally, researchers in the humanities and social sciences – find themselves situated.

The conversation took place on 11th October 2018, over the course of an hour; all three participants have known one another professionally for a number of years. We begin with a brief discussion of successive generations of critical theorists, before moving on to tack-

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7   See, for example, Beer (2018).

8   See Gill (2009) and Burton (2018a).

9   Stacey (1982), p. 407.

10 See, for instance, Burton (2016) and Santos (2014).

le the definitions of "critical theory" and the extent to which these may be regarded as inclusive or elitist. From here, the conversation turns to the relationship between the structural conditions of the contemporary university and the flourishing (or demise) of critical theory. We end by considering the political function of critical theory and the ways it may be used as a "martial art" – to borrow Pierre Bourdieu's analogy[11] – as well as the possible futures for this as a radical intellectual project or mode of collective resistance to neoliberal incursions to academia and higher education.

Generations, Genealogy, and the Unfolding of Critical Theory Today: Definitions, Boundaries, and Borders

Sarah Burton (SB): Let's begin by discussing our parameters. Do you think there are different generations of critical theory and critical theorists that are very distinct from each other, or are they all merging together – and is there a lot of overlap, or very distinct kind of barriers?

William Outhwaite (WO): I think Simon and I are both essentially Frankfurters in our critical theory [*laughter*], but with a broad approach to it. I do tend to stick with the idea of generations of at least Frankfurt critical theory – with Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse in the first generation, Jürgen Habermas in the second, with Albrecht Wellmer (probably), Axel Honneth and Seyla Benhabib in the third, and then people like Simon in the fourth.

Simon Susen (SS): It seems to me that, in the current context, the main (that is, most influential and most interesting) figures are Rainer Forst[12], Martin Saar[13], Rahel Jaeggi[14], Robin Celikates[15], and – of course – Hartmut Rosa[16]. In my view, their work is of exceptional quality – they are the ones who stand out.

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11 See Bourdieu (2001).

12 See Forst (2012 [2007]) and Forst (2013 [2011]).

13 See Saar (2007) and Saar (2013).

14 See Jaeggi (2016 [2005]) and Jaeggi (2018 [2014]).

15 See Celikates (2018 [2009]).

16 See Rosa (2015 [2005]) and Rosa (2019 [2016]).

WO: But some people would say, "No, no – Habermas has a radical break from the 'first generation' critical theory"[17]. Gordon Finlayson, for example, would say this is "first generation" Starnberg theory, it's not "second generation" critical theory, which he is doing, at least in his work from the late 1970s onwards. So I'm a traditionalist in that sense of sticking with the four-generational model. But I don't see it as an evolutionary sequence where each is superior to the last. This journal (*BJCT*) was set up with the aim of reviving interest in the first generation, and there is a stronger view that what we have, since the first generation, is a decline not just in radicalism but also in intellectual quality in critical theory.[18] Personally, I think there are more kinds of overlaps and recurrences back to earlier traditions of theorizing.

SS: Yes, I tend to agree. One problem we face here is the extent to which we define "critical theory" – that is, the critical theory of the Frankfurt School – in terms of the scholars who are based at Frankfurt – or involved institutionally in whatever is going on at Frankfurt – and those, like myself, who are based somewhere else, sometimes not only outside Frankfurt but also outside Germany. For instance, Robin Celikates – before taking up his position at the FU (Freie Universität Berlin) – used to be based at the University of Amsterdam, Rahel Jaeggi is based at the HU (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin), Hartmut Rosa is based at the Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena (and, as Director of the Max-Weber-Kolleg, at the University of Erfurt), and I am based at City, University of London.

I think commentators who subscribe to more "orthodox" conceptions of "critical theory" don't regard the scholars I just mentioned as "critical theorists" in the strict sense. Why? Well, because they are not institutionally attached to, let alone based at, Frankfurt in the way other major figures, such as Rainer Forst and Martin Saar, are.

WO: Yes, I mean, "Frankfurt" really means a moving or spread-out thing between Germany, other bits of Europe to some extent, and mainly the US.

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17 See Müller-Doohm (2017).

18 See, for example: Bernstein (1995); Osborne (1998); Outhwaite (2017), pp. 5–7; Rose (1981).

SB: But then if you're taking that as your definition of what and who counts as "critical theory", you're going to have an extremely exclusive, very bounded, version of what counts as such – which is in itself going to stop it from regenerating, and that's going to be a reason in and of itself to say why critical theory's not taken seriously in wider spaces. Thus, do we need to have a think about being quite so elitist with our definitions?

WO: Yes – and you don't have to call yourself a "critical theorist", I think, to count as one. A lot of people doing, say, postcolonial theory might well not really want to identify with critical theory because it's so Eurocentric and so forth in its earlier phases. But it's all part of the same approach essentially.

SB: One of the things I was going to bring up is the following question: to what extent do you both see things like feminist theory, various kinds of postcolonial theory, critical race theory, different theories of class – for instance, people like Imogen Tyler and her work on class and classification[19] – as being part of the work of critical theory?

WO: Yes, I do.

SB: And how does that change the boundaries of critical theory and what it is and what we're doing? What commonalities are there between the sorts of things that you two do, and the sorts of things I would do as a critical race theorist or as a postcolonial theorist, or a feminist…?

SS: It seems to me that one major concern that all critical theorists share is an interest in *power relations*, in particular *relations of domination*. [*Murmur of assent from WO.*] That's one thing. And the second major concern that, to my mind, all critical theorists have in common is a belief in the possibility of challenging, if not subverting, these power relations, and a belief in what we may call *emancipation* and, more specifically, *emancipatory practices*. I think where critical theorists often differ – and this takes me to the third point – is the question of whether or not it is possible (and, in fact, desirable) to provide what Habermas would call "normative foundations", which might (or might not) be "context-transcendent". In my own work, I have

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19 See Tyler (2013).

been grappling with these issues[20] – and, I believe, the same applies to William's writings[21].

WO: I think, like buses, you can either take a single one from one place to another, or you can change a couple of times in the journey, and it's not a matter of identifying yourself with a particular framework. I think in Germany, certainly, there was a tendency to want to pigeonhole people, and say: "What's your approach?" And you say: "Well, you know, I just do my thing, which is a bit of Marx, a bit of Weber, a bit of Habermas, a bit of Honneth." This, I suspect, reflects a more flexible kind of approach to theory. And that's the point at which it becomes more open to all of these other tendencies, which are also including somebody like Frantz Fanon.[22] I don't know whether you'd count him as a critical theorist. Maybe you should. He's very Hegelian-influenced, but clearly not part of the standard kind of critical theory panoply.

SB: This more iterative understanding of how you might use different theories and theorists would permit us to conceive of perspectives such as postcolonialism, critical race theory, and feminism (and similar approaches) as part of a broader critical theory and how that might be a thing that links us across generations as well. You can see where you might have affinities with people who are doing very different things to you and coming from a different sort of space. [*Noises of assent from WO and SS.*]

SS: Another thing I have noticed is that, within contemporary critical theory, there has been a decisive shift from *social theory* towards *political theory*. For instance, at the critical theory conference that takes place every year in Prague, one gets the impression that it is almost completely dominated by political theory. Granted, there are a few papers on social theory here and there; but, overall, the conference is very much focused on issues in political theory. This, of course, tells us something about what is going on at Frankfurt

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20 See Susen (2007), Susen (2015), Susen (2018a), Susen (2018b), Susen (2020a), and Susen (2020b).

21 See Outhwaite (2006), Outhwaite (2009), Outhwaite (2012), Outhwaite (2017), and Outhwaite (2019).

22 See Fanon (2004 [1961]).

at the moment, especially if you consider the influence of seminal scholars such as Forst and Saar.

We should not forget that most, if not all, of those who move in academic circles feel – or, arguably, know – that, in one way or another, their careers are at stake. The annual critical theory conference in Prague is a very good example of this dynamic. A considerable proportion of academics attending this conference are based at (or linked to) the New School in New York or somewhere in Berlin or Frankfurt. It is also pretty obvious that it is, essentially, a "Global North" event. And, as previously mentioned, it is now very much dominated by political theorists. Without a doubt, a conference is shaped not only by substantive issues (that is, the *content* of what is being discussed), but also by the social, demographic, and institutional factors underlying the *context* in which it takes place. Admittedly, there is a fair amount of postcolonial theory discussed at that conference. Most key debates, however, tend to be dominated by Western European and North American scholars. This, one might suggest, is somewhat problematic (to say the least). Amy Allen's work on "decolonizing the normative foundations of critical theory" is crucial in this regard.[23]

WO: And there's a narrowness I think about political theory and about political science as well. As sociologists, we enjoy the greater freedom of a more cosmopolitan environment.

Structures, Disciplines, and the Tenuous Ground of Critical Theory Today

SB: So taking it back to the relationship between critical theory and the conditions of its production – particularly the institutional conditions of its production in contemporary universities – we've said that perhaps things haven't changed quite so much in terms of the viability of critical theory, but things have changed in terms of teaching, workload pressure, the extent of academics' administrative responsibilities, and suchlike. But is there anything *specific* going on now that reshapes or challenges the conditions for actually producing critical theory in the universities? Neoliberalism has been a facet of

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23 See Allen (2016).

university life for decades.[24] And, of course, there's now the recognition of a particularly vulnerable "academic precariat"[25] – so what, if anything, is particular to our current moment? And how should critical theory respond to these new forms of casualization and neoliberal governance?

The bureaucratization and the metricization of most, if not all, academic disciplines is happening. We may consider here what John Holmwood has written on importer-exporter disciplines[26]. If certain things are valued – particularly empirical work, and particularly what can be said to be very "concretely" sociology and clearly understood in undisrupted discipline-specific terms – then critical theory as a much more interdisciplinary project, as a much more unbounded project, doesn't seem to fit very well within any particular department and therefore doesn't fit in a clear category for something like the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF).

So is there a particular sort of space that's needed for abstract and conceptual work and critical work that you just don't get now?

SS: I suppose what it comes down to is that most of us just play along. In my view, this is a classic example of the success of "the dominant ideology"[27] – that is, of an ideology understood not simply as a sort of cognitive and symbolically mediated state of affairs, but, rather, as something that actually affects what we *do* and shapes, if not governs, our everyday *practices*. Let's be honest: in different ways and to different degrees, most of us play along, no matter how "radical" we claim to be. If, for instance, I reflect on my everyday institutional practices, these are pretty conventional. Like most others, I am – if one wants to use this term – largely "complicit".[28] And that is a problem. For example, the moment you apply for a research grant, you know that you have to push all the right buttons and to tick certain boxes. Hence, you try to "package" your application in such a way that you can "sell" it. And even then it is obviously dif-

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24 See, for instance, Billig (2013), Gill (2009), and Evans (2004).

25 See, for example, Loveday (2018).

26 See, for instance, Holmwood (2010).

27 See Susen (2014) and Susen (2016).

28 Cf. Loick (2018).

ficult to obtain funding, because it is what it is – it is *critical theory*. [*Half-laughs.*] You may call it "the preponderance of the object", "the preponderance of society", dominated by certain mechanisms, which we may not like, but which shape – if not govern – what we do.

SB: Do you find that there's certain things that you want to write, or certain ways that you want to write or spaces that you want to publish in that you just don't, because you feel some sort of potential institutional backlash? You might get recognition by your intellectual peers, but what happens in your institution is often a very, very different thing.

SS: Yes. I guess, in a way, you have to be strategic. You have to make sure you produce your "REF-able" outputs. Once you have those in the bag, you can basically do whatever you want. For example, I have published several articles in so-called "non-REF-able" journals – that is, journals that are not Scopus-indexed. These journals are not part of the metrics game. When I wrote these pieces, I already had all the articles and books I needed for the REF "in the bag". Had that not been the case, however, I could not have submitted them to the respective journals, because my Department would have said: "Sorry, this article, regardless of its intellectual merits, is not REF-able." Obviously, there are tangible (and somewhat disempowering) constraints. I don't know about your experience, William. Do you just not worry about this kind of thing?

WO: I've never bothered. I…

SB: Do you do things differently now that you're retired?

WO: No, I think I never bothered…I hardly ever published a journal article except invited. [*Half-laughs.*] And I think the one time I did submit an article to a journal, they turned it down because they'd had something rather similar before. So, you know, a university which measured peoples' output in terms of refereed journals would never have promoted me. [*Laughs.*] I would have retired as a lecturer, I think. I suppose there's also the more fundamental question of whether the kind of thing we want to do is capable of being presented in a sort of small-packaged form as a module. I think I'd probably want to say that it can be, and that you can give people the essence of Kant in half an hour, if pressed. And it's worthwhile. And

students will take something away from it – there's nothing that is fundamentally inaccessible.

SB: I wonder whether there's something as well about the physical conditions of intellectual life today. We've discussed institutional conditions for producing critical theory, but what about the literal institutional fabric and environment for producing critical theory? This is work that is abstract and intense – very conceptual and very much about thinking and needing time and space. I'm quite aware that in our current conditions it's extremely difficult to get any mental calm to do that sort of work. We teach more and more. We have more and more administrative calls on ourselves – which lessens the protracted space that you need to do that kind of reading and that sort of thinking and planning, and I wonder whether you could say a bit about that.

SS: I don't know what William's working habits are like, but I do most of my "serious" work from home. I have never been able to do any rigorous intellectual work at the office. I am happy to come in – for doing my teaching, dealing with administrative duties, and having face-to-face contact with my colleagues. In terms of research, sometimes I manage to read draft material when I am at the office. But the creative stuff? I find it very difficult in the "professionalized", and increasingly managerialized, space of the neoliberal university. This is paradoxical, because I actually like coming in a few times a week, since you do get intellectual stimulation from talking to others – notably to colleagues and students. In addition, for most of us, it is important to feel part of something. But I don't know about you, William. Do you feel the same way about this?

WO: Yeah, I think the great thing about being an academic is the vacations, there's a place to work. Daniel Bell, when he was asked what's good about being an academic, just said "May, June, July, August". [*Laughter.*]

SS: Spot-on (although I do enjoy the rewarding aspects of teaching)!

SB: But then this takes us back to structural conditions in terms of casualization and precarity. If you've gone through your Ph.D. and you've taken three or four years to do that, and you don't earn a lot during that – even if you're on a prestigious stipend – and then

you're casualized for a few years and you're maybe doing hourly-paid work or you're doing work which is one-year contracts, and you can't plan anything and you can't necessarily rent a great place, that's not great, is it? So your strategy, Simon, presupposes the idea that you *can* work at home. Not everybody can do that, especially if you're precarious and sharing a house and you don't have a lot of cash. There are more and more people at the junior levels in academia who just don't have any money. And so how are they – *we* – supposed to produce substantive and substantial intellectual work?

WO: Yeah, if you're on a series of nine-month contracts you don't get paid for May, June, and July.

SB: Precisely – you don't get paid for June, July, August. You might get that time to work because you're not employed, but you don't get paid for it, which makes it increasingly difficult. So there must be concern regarding what sort of critical theory we're losing, especially given that the people who are most likely to suffer from casualization, and from precarity, tend to be working-class academics, they tend to be women, to be people of colour. If those people are being lost from critical theory, then that's going to be something that is shaping the future of the work into being more of the "elites" that you get at your Prague conference.

SS: Yes, this is one of the contradictions of critical theory conferences. You go there, and you realize that most participants are at least relatively privileged. A lot – if not most – of them have permanent jobs, have a decent income, and are part of – if you like – "the elite". Most of them, but not all of them! Having said that, I went through the same thing for many years: being employed on a short-term contract, year after year, and then hoping to land a permanent position at some point. But, of course, the whole situation creates a sense of anxiety, because you are constantly thinking: "Oh, what is going to happen next?" – You just don't know!

SB: Do you think there's a difference between the sort of work you produce now, or that you can produce now, and what you were doing when you were on your fixed-term contract?

SS: Undoubtedly. Once you have the luxury of a permanent position, you don't need to worry about getting the next job – at least not to the same extent. In most cases, it's up to you to stay or to move.

SB: Moving towards talking about critical theory in contemporary institutions, its longevity and suchlike, where do you think we are at the minute in terms of the tenability of critical theory within the university system? [*Laughter.*]

WO: I'm post-institutional, so I'm silent.

SS: There is the *teaching* bit, and then there is, if you like, the *research* bit. In terms of teaching, I find it increasingly difficult to teach critical theory, particularly the early stuff. I often find – and I do not mean to be patronizing – that I have to trivialize things, in order to be able to convey some of the key ideas. In my view, it is a contradiction in terms to teach Adorno on the basis of a PowerPoint presentation. Adorno would probably…[*laughs*] – well, it's problematic, to say the least. It's not an easy task, and it just makes me think that maybe we're getting it wrong. Maybe we're holding onto something to which most contemporary undergrads cannot relate. I don't know about your experience – that is, your *teaching* experience…

WO: Yes, I know what you mean. I mean, to be fair to Adorno, he did give first-year lectures where he said "this is totally over-simplified but you could say…", and then produce a beautifully clear sentence which would be twenty pages of difficult stuff in the book from which it was drawn. I was thinking that in the late 1960s and 1970s we were all saying that Talcott Parsons was impossible to read, but we were reading Althusser and Lacan – all this stuff which was vastly more…but it had a kind of resonance, and that made us prepared to get into it. So I think if there's a way somehow of packaging things to bring out their relevance, you can bridge that gap. But you know, we're talking about people beginning to write nearly 100 years ago. We're sort of far away from that. And further away than they were then from the Kant or Hegel generation.

SB: Do you think this is a problem of complexity – that we're no longer doing things that are tending towards the complex, and towards texture and nuance in universities? Have we got to a situation in which the university is a business and students are customers and consumers, so they don't really want to be dealing with something that is so complex?

SS: I am quite brutal in terms of what I include in my reading lists. Yet, I do try to be as accessible as possible when I teach social theory,

especially in the lectures. And I think the key to success, if I can call it that, is to provide the students with examples to which they can relate. The problem, of course, is that a lot of them do *not* read, unless they can access the relevant material on their mobile phones! It seems difficult to convince some of them that reading is important. Sometimes, if you are lucky, ten percent of them do the reading, and then you can pitch it at the right level, so that they can grasp it. But you have to make sure that everybody can understand what you are saying, so they can pass the assignment. Let's face it: a large proportion of students are instrumental about learning. Consider, for example, Habermas. I must say that it is actually not all that difficult to teach his "theory of communicative action", because everyone can relate to language. I reckon fifty percent of our students are bi- or trilingual. These multilingual students (as well as most of the monolingual students) have an interest in language. If you make sure you teach it in a way that takes *their* perspective into account (that is, in a way that *they* find interesting, because it resonates with them), then it works *without* having to trivialize the material. Admittedly, it does not always work, but often it does.

SB: William, do you feel there's a big difference in how you would have taught critical theory or even social theory when you were starting out, in the late 1970s/early 1980s versus what you were doing before you retired?

WO: Yes. I think towards the end of my teaching career I was certainly packaging stuff much more. There was less time available, it was a short module, it was one term rather than a whole year. And there was pressure to try and find illustrations rather more than perhaps we'd have bothered with in the past.

The Political Ends of Critical Theory and
Questions of Renewal in the Neoliberal Academy

SB: Critical theory, with its attention towards things like domination and emancipation, is obviously a deeply political way of thinking, doing, and understanding of the world. It seems that – given the catastrophic employment prospects, and economic, environmental, and political conditions – critical theory should be something central to the university. And yet, it feels like it's not central to the university

at the minute. We've talked about things like the *TCS* editorial[29] and the Meg Stacey BSA address[30], and whether there's actually been any change in terms of if critical theory has always been kind of marginalized, or if we now have a particular new and difficult sort of position. Where do we place *ourselves* in terms of that, do you think?

WO: I remember when *TCS* was being set up, SAGE must have written to me and said "what do you think of this proposal?". And I said "great idea, I'm not sure it will be a big success". [*Laughter.*] And it has been. So already then, there was a sort of anxiety about a theoretically oriented journal. So yes, I don't think that in those ways the scene is that much worse now than it was quite a long time ago.

SS: The same applies to the journal I co-edit with Bryan S. Turner – the *Journal of Classical Sociology*. One prominent British social theorist once told me that, when *JCS* was launched, a lot of sociologists thought it was not going to survive – mainly because they thought it was just going to cover Marx, Weber, and Durkheim. But somehow we did survive, which is great – possibly because of our (deliberately) broad definition of "classicality"!

WO: I think the other thing that's happening is that sociology is being increasingly sort of pulled apart in other directions. Political science, particularly, is tending to colonize areas of social policy. So public policy suddenly becomes a subsection of political science, and is kind of coordinated in a very much tighter sort of way, leaving the sociologists with an interest in social policy not knowing quite where they're supposed to fit.

SS: I think "human rights" is another example. At City-Sociology we ran several modules on human rights for many years. Eventually, however, these were moved to another department at the university.

WO: And those things are somehow more marketable. I mean, at Newcastle, Politics was much, much bigger and more popular than Sociology. And the students would come in to do Politics with Sociology and would then sort of say "can I drop the Sociology…"

And sociologists I suppose, have just not been terribly good at standing up for the specificity of their discipline, because actually

29 Featherstone (1982).

30 Stacey (1982).

we don't think it does have a particular specificity. I mean, it's a much broader enterprise than that.

SB: We've got a bit of a paradox here, in that we're constantly throwing up our hands and saying how neoliberal and instrumental universities have become, how very difficult it is to get any funding for social theory or critical theory projects. But at the same time, you're talking about the start of *TCS* and whether it was going to survive – and of course it has, and it's a very established and prestigious journal. Social theory itself continues to be established and prestigious: it's got a whole stream at the BSA annual conference. It has foundations, it dominates the sociology canon, it has a lot of space.[31]

Are we making too much of this – are we creating a problem where there actually isn't one? Is it really qualitatively different, or are we just spending a lot of time wrapping ourselves in knots?

WO: Yes, and I think partly again, we don't want to treat social theory as a specialism with its own entity and its own resource base and so forth, because we see it as broader. And if you look at the way social theory is defined in the US, it's much more narrow, I think. When I was editing the *Blackwell Dictionary of Modern Social Thought*[32], we had Americans saying "It's a great dictionary, but you've put in all this stuff about the family. What's the family got to do with social thought?" [*Chuckling.*]

SB: Does critical theory rely on exclusivity and intellectual prestige to gain traction in academia, in university spaces? How does that come about?

SS: When conducting my "Recherche doctorale libre" at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris, France, where Luc Boltanski was my care-taking supervisor, I noticed something really peculiar: a lot of French "big names" – if you want to call them that – have a tendency to write in a rather obscure language, because – if they teach at research-focused institutions, such as the EHESS – they do not communicate with undergraduate students. They might be exchanging ideas with a few postgraduate students

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31 See Burton (2015).

32 Outhwaite (2003).

and postdoctoral fellows, but they are part of these "expert tribes", in which they speak a very codified language, which is accessible only to insiders. A commendable aspect of undergraduate teaching – as most academics working in British universities will know – is that we are obliged to explain our ideas in a clear, concise, and comprehensible manner. For obvious reasons, the stuff we lecture has to be more or less accessible to our undergraduate students. A lot of research-focused academics I met in France do not face the same challenge. It seems to me that what and how we *teach* has a significant impact on the way we *write* and, in a more fundamental sense, on the way we *think*...

SB: You always strike me as quite good at doing that, William – that your writing's really accessible. [*Noise of agreement from SS.*] The piece you wrote for *Network* on the European Union[33] was very accessible. It was very clear, very precise, but it also had a lot of intellectual underpinning to it. And I wonder if there's an onus on people like us to be writing things like that – short pieces that are very easily accessible.

WO: Yes. At the beginning of my career, somebody said "you're a popularizer, William" [*laughter*]. I didn't like it at the time, but it's nice to be able to do that, among other things.

SB: Returning to the former part of Simon's remarks, do you think that part of the reason that critical theory might be losing a bit of its purchase in universities is that we're a bit comfortable and we're a bit privileged?

SS: Yes, I think this is part of what you may call "a general depoliticization". Perhaps this is a sweeping statement. I did feel, however, that both the students and the members of staff I encountered in Mexico – where I spent a year as an international student – were more politicized than their British counterparts, although this was a while ago and things might have changed.

WO: I remember seeing on a wall in San Cristóbal in Chiapas somebody had painted, "the solution, social sciences" [*laughs*]. I doubt anybody would do that in this country.

SS: No!

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33 See Outhwaite (2018).

WO: I mean, a lot of students now, their career prospects are pretty dire. But I suppose it's true that their situation at a particular time is fairly comfortable. I mean, maybe the smaller size of a lot of UK universities and the smaller size still of seminar groups and so on provides a slightly cosier environment. Whether that should depoliticize people I don't know. I think the difficulty with present generations of students really is seeing any connection between the sort of catastrophic job prospects and the catastrophic environmental background and so forth and anything *they* can do, other than signing online petitions and so forth.

SB: What about the idea of critical theory as praxis – Bourdieu's phrasing that sociology is a martial art? Considering what we were saying about the politicization/depoliticization of universities, academics, and students, what's the role of critical theory in promoting a more politicized environment and bringing people together in forms of solidarity? One of the things I noticed during the UCU strike [fourteen strike days from 22 February 2018 to 20 March 2018] was that we all started to talk to each other a bit more, to have more political conversations about changing the university and about how dissatisfied we were, in a way which was much deeper and much more significant and more radical than the sorts of conversations that we would have while we're making a cup of coffee at work with each other. I wonder whether you both can see a role for critical theory re-emerging in the neoliberal university through some of these struggles of solidarity and things? Could it be a foundational or practical element of this struggle?

WO: Yes, practice was always a weak point of first generational critical theory, and I guess has continued to be. And yet, there is a kind of engagement. You use the Bourdieusian phrase "martial art". Bourdieu has been rebuked, I think wrongly, for being too deterministic and stressing structural determination. But then a lot of people who focus on those determinations are also very concerned to transcend them, as he was. So yes, I think those kinds of solidarities presumably do change the kind of work that people want to do, or the way they understand their work.

SB: But maybe those conditions, where we start to talk about domination and power in much more open ways with each other

– whereby critical theory suddenly seems more relevant in a neo-liberal and instrumental institution, rather than being hived off and not considered with value, monetary value and that sort of currency – that maybe there's room for introducing critical theory elements into those sorts of conversations again.

WO: Yes, I mean, it breaks down the division between "I'm do-ing my union work for an hour" and "then I'm going to write my paper".

SB: It brings that whole "the personal is political" back into play.

SS: Some people were cynical about the strike. You might say: "People are on strike because it's going to affect their situation, it's going to affect their income. It's because they have personal or in-dividual interests to go on strike." It reaffirms, if you like, the pre-dominance of the neoliberal system. I think that people who, for this reason, were cynical about the strike had a point.

WO: You're not *allowed* to have a political strike against neoliber-alism…

SS: Exactly [*laughter*]. Exactly.

WO: …in the UK.

SS: I can only talk about City – I must confess that I had mixed feelings about the strike. On the one hand, it generated a sense of sol-idarity and a sense of community; suddenly, you got to know people with whom you hadn't interacted before, especially those from other departments. I remember talking to colleagues in Psychology and International Politics to whom I had never even spoken before the strike. In that sense, it was great! On the other hand, it was some-what illusory. It was sort of "well, well…". Then the strike was sud-denly over, you moved on, and you went back to your "conventional way of functioning".

SB: There was a sense in a way it was handled towards the end that we just went back to a reset.

SS: Yes, that's true. Generally, I notice that especially informal en-counters, rather than institutional environments, *really* shape what you do, how you think, and what kind of work you produce. Of course, these informal encounters are often embedded in institution-al environments. Still, these encounters – which escape, at least part-ly, the logic of social institutions – tend to be the most productive,

and the most inspiring, sources of inspiration.

SB: On this structural-institutional level, employment as a social or critical theorist is itself very precarious. It's very difficult to present yourself as a social theorist and then get a job.

SS: That's right. It's a risk, it's a big risk.

SB: Given this landscape, let's think, finally, about critical theory's role and significance within contemporary academia. It's often seen as a very intellectually-oriented work, and I'm wondering if we could end by saying a little bit about the way that it is, or isn't, understood with value and legitimacy within academia – and also maybe link that to some of the wider public sphere, media, cultural interpretations of the significance or the applicability of the intellectual. We're living in a post-Brexit, post-Trump age where – according to people like Michael Gove – "we don't need experts anymore".[34] Equally, right-wing positions have elided ideas like "post-truth" and "fake news" with schools of thought such as critical race theory and queer theory in attempts to undermine them as both ridiculous and predatory.[35]

What's the relationship between what's going on in a political, media and cultural sense and what's going on in terms of universities? Is there just a general denigration of the intellectual, where it's seen as too privileged, too airy-fairy, too unconnected to peoples' everyday lives? Is the (alleged) devaluation of critical theory in the university part of a crisis of neoliberalism in the university, or is it part of a broader crisis of the intellectual and expertise in society?

SS: It seems to me that there are three things that need to happen in order for critical theory not only to survive but also to have a positive impact on what is going on in society in general and in academia in particular. *First*, we need to recognize that – as highlighted in Luc Boltanski's work – critique, far from being reducible to an epistemic privilege of scientists or experts, is shaped and articulated by "ordinary" people in their everyday lives. In other words, we need to establish a link between critical theory and social praxis. We need to explore the ways in which critique is used in everyday life. As "ordi-

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34 See Burton (2018b).

35 See Robbins (2020).

nary" actors, we are not necessarily experts. Yet, as non-experts, we are able to make valid and insightful points about all sorts of things, when engaging with the world.

SB: And re-defining the idea of what an expert is within that.

SS: That's right. This is not to deny that experts are important and that they may be able to provide us with powerful epistemic frameworks in certain areas. We do need them, and there is an epistemic gap between "ordinary" and "scientific" ways of engaging with the world – there's no doubt about it. Yet, to use Boltanski's phrase, *we have to take people seriously*. So that's one thing. Of course, you could suggest that scholars such as Habermas[36] and Forst[37] deliver on this promise, precisely because they assume that communicative action or justification is something in which we *all* engage, on a daily basis, when attributing meaning to, or justifying, our actions. Rosa also delivers on this, because – according to his sociological framework – the search for "resonance" is an integral component of our everyday lives.[38] So that's one thing. We need to accept that there is an epistemic gap between "ordinary" and "scientific" knowledge, but *without* endorsing a patronizing attitude. Ordinary actors are equipped with important – if you like, species-constitutive – competences, such as critical, reflective, imaginative, and moral capacities.

The *second* thing, and that's a tricky one, is to engage with "the world out there". If we, as critical theorists, fail to accomplish this, then people "out there" will not want to relate to critical theory! And who would blame them? For instance, I think that one of the reasons why Žižek is a bit of a "pop star" is that people can relate to him. They find him funny and entertaining – a trickster! You might not always agree with what he has to say, but people can – and do – relate to him. And not just intellectuals! [*Noise of agreement from WO.*] In Germany, Rosa, although he is not in the same category as Žižek, is now a "rising star", precisely because people can relate to what he is saying, especially with regard to "experiences of resonance" [*Resonanzerfahrungen*]. He is not just talking about "cognition" or "com-

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36 See Habermas (1987a [1981]) and Habermas (1987b [1981]).

37 See Forst (2012 [2007]) and Forst (2013 [2011]).

38 See Rosa (2019 [2016]). Cf. Susen (2020b).

municative rationality" in abstract terms. His approach, although it is – in my view – conceptually very sophisticated, is much less technical than, say, Habermas's *TCA* or Forst's theory of justification. Arguably, "resonance" is something to which everyone can relate. "Resonance" resonates with us! It seems to me that, unless we put our finger on some of the key issues to which we can relate – not just as experts but also, crucially, as everyday actors –, we have already lost the battle. This is not a matter of trivializing critical theory, but, rather, of engaging with what is going on in the world.

The *third* task, which builds on the other two points, is to speak a language that does not end up being a "private language".[39] Often it is. Let's be clear: I am partly guilty of that myself. It is important, however, that we, as critical theorists, speak a language that is accessible – not just to "group members" or to those who are already part of the circle, the clique, as it were, but also to the wider academic community and, although I have reservations about the use of this term, to "the general public". Granted, this is not an easy task!

Concluding Remarks: Complicity, Criticality, and Fashioning (Better) Futures

The cross-generational conversation above suggests both scope and space for critical theorists across disciplines, geographies, and generations to connect, and to create, in ways that are equal parts dynamic and daring. Despite this, we would appear to share the recognition that the position of critical theory – and, more broadly, intellectuals and intellectual practice – has been tenuous in the academy and the structural composition of universities for some time and is becoming more precarious.[40] These working conditions of the contemporary university have prompted repeated demands for a more humane and generous academy[41], and it is clear from our fruitful exchange that a key aspect of critical theory enduring and thriving within contemporary academia is open dialogue and support across generations of thinkers. We could draw here on David

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39 See Felski (2013).

40 See Back (2018) and Gill (2015).

41 See Gill (2018) and Lynch (2010).

Inglis's identification of a dangerous "presentism"[42] in sociology and suggest that a certain historical vigilance is vital in maintaining the conditions necessary for both the making and the productive use of critical theory. This analytical position is essential to comprehending the machinations and effects of past events, systems, and cultures, while positioning ourselves recognize the subtle distinctions of our current moment. What is especially apparent in this respect is the necessity of careful reconsideration and reconceptualization of what it means to perform academic work in "public" and as "public intellectuals".[43] We have recently seen the manipulation, and arguably wilful misunderstanding of critical theory – particularly with respect to race and (trans)gender conversations.[44] Critical theory's noted focus on power and power relations places it as consistently fundamental to everyday lives *and* macro-level social, political, and economic debates. Securing traction for critical theory in the academy means demonstrating its relevance to social life, but also necessitates working with an awareness of how such theorization is received and understood by "the general public". This itself requires us to think and to act boldly, to resist instrumental forms of "impact", and to work in cross-generational solidarity against further neoliberal incursions on intellectual practice by cultures of precarity, bureaucracy, and managerialism. As this conversation shows, these possibilities are achievable and rewarding – and the first steps in crafting futures that offer hope, optimism, and the ability to resist and to rebuild in neoliberal times.

Acknowledgement

Dedication

The authors would like to dedicate this piece to three recently deceased thinkers who have been at the sharp edge of developing criti-

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42 See Inglis (2014).

43 See Burawoy (2005).

44 See Trilling (2020).

cal theory as a vital and lively intellectual project: Robert Fine, David Held, and Couze Venn.

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