Critical Theory:

Public Administration and Emancipation

by

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Introduction

In the 19th century, Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud elucidated theories of society and the individual based on economic and unconscious processes, respectively, that initially seemed to hold the promise of personal and political liberation. However, by the 1930’s, Marxism had been appropriated by a repressive communist regime in Russia, leading Marxists with more liberal and democratic leanings to question whether the working class revolution that Marx had predicted was a realistic possibility for human emancipation. Western democratic societies likewise showed little sign of living up to their egalitarian rhetoric and creating more participatory democratic processes and less alienating and oppressive economic systems. Critical theory thus evolved as a reaction to the failures of both party communism and democratic capitalism to create authentic political and social structures within which human potential could be realized. It additionally sought to span the gulf between reductive materialism and idealism, between positivism and irrationalism (Rush 2004). In his 1930 inaugural speech as Director of the Institute for Social Research, Max Horkheimer articulated the integrative aims of a new kind of social philosophy:

Chaotic specialization will not be overcome by way of bad syntheses of specialized research results, just as unbiased empirical research will not come about by attempting to reduce its theoretical element to nothing. Rather, this situation can be overcome to the extent that philosophy – as a theoretical undertaking oriented to the general, the ‘essential’– is capable of giving particular studies animating impulses, and at the same time remains open enough to let itself be influenced and changed by these concrete studies (Horkheimer 1991, 7).
The Frankfurt School and First Generation Critical Theorists

By strict definition the term critical seems harsh, focused, and almost judgmental. In actuality, critical theory can be viewed as the “hippie” of all theories. It is free, it is diverse, and it imparts a new light on the schools of thought it touches. Critical theory looks at other schools of thought, e.g., psychology, philosophy, sociology, and seeks to liberate individuals from the restrictive theories within those schools of thought. There are no absolutes. Critical theory brings one to question the things always held as truth. Immanuel Kant “provided critical theory with its definition of scientific rationality, and its goal of confronting reality with prospects of freedom (Bronner 2011, 1). These prospects of freedom are the foundation of the Frankfurt School.

The German Institute for Social Research was founded in 1923 (Bronner 2011, 9). Its original goal was to encourage the development of radical ideas that were not based in the academic teachings or political parties of the time. In 1930, Max Horkheimer joined the institute, and it became the Frankfurt School. Hitler’s rise to power in the mid1930s prompted Horkheimer to move the school from Frankfurt to Geneva, to Paris, and finally to New York City, at Columbia University. The members of the Frankfurt School had varied strengths, but all had a common commitment to intellectual freedom. Since much of the foundation for critical theory was based in Marxist theory, as émigrés to the United States, initially the members of the school kept a low profile. In Marx’s time, “…humanity had created means to produce enough for all people, potentially liberating them from compulsive toil, so that they might now enjoy the spare time necessary to refine their humanity – to be free, in other words” (Baradat 2011, 179). Capitalism made prosperity possible but it shackled the worker to their job. Marx wanted people to be aware that they were being controlled and with this awareness they could exercise their
freedom. Personal freedom, emancipation from societal chains and expectations was the goal of the members of the Frankfurt School. The first generation of theorists of the Frankfurt School includes Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin, and Max Horkheimer.

Max Horkheimer brought together the brilliant minds of the Frankfort School to create the basis for critical theory. They were all different with regard to their disciplinary focus within critical theory, but they had a common goal. Horkheimer writes that

Critical theory in its concept formation and in all phases of its development very consciously makes its own that concern for the rational organization of human activity which its task is to illuminate and legitimate. For this theory is not concerned only with goals already imposed by existing ways of life, but with men and all their potentialities (Bronner 2011, 19).

Horkheimer in particular sought to critique positivist science. He felt that the mistake of positivist social science was that “social phenomena are viewed as external to the viewer” (Rush 2004, 220). Also, because science can only deal with observable, concrete facts, it cannot set ends. In Eclipse of Reason Horkheimer notes: “The philosophical systems of objective reason implied the conviction that an all-embracing or fundamental structure of being could be discovered and a conception of human destination derived from it” (Horkheimer 1974, 12). Science can only tell us what is, and only within our socially constructed world. It cannot tell us what ought to be, or imagine what we desire and lack.

Horkheimer did not support the idea that there was one method or one set of criteria that could be used to determine truth. According to Horkheimer, “Critical theory [was] interested in the radical transformation of society and human emancipation, and it conceives of itself as an active element in a process leading to new social forms, forms that will result from and be based
in the creativity, spontaneity, and consciousness of free individuals” (Alway 1995, 27). He is best known for his establishment and advancement of the Frankfurt School and for outlining the concepts of critical theory. His writings support social justice for the masses. He believes that society and industry strip people of their individuality and make them one of the nameless, faceless many.

Later in his career and in writings during that time, he seemed to lose hope and becomes increasingly pessimistic with regard to the world. In *Dawn and Decline*, he writes that “Radical evil asserts its dominion over all created beings everywhere and reaches as far as the sun” (Alway 1995, 57). He appears to become disillusioned and his faith that a better world can be realized begins to wane. His seeming abandonment of his foundations of belief is puzzling to those in the field of critical theory.

Consistency was not an issue with Horkheimer’s successor, Theodor Adorno. Throughout his career and his affiliation with the Frankfurt School and with Horkheimer, Adorno stayed true to critical theory tenets. Theodor Adorno’s early primary interests were music and philosophy. He met Max Horkheimer in college in 1922. He formally joined the Frankfurt School in 1938. Adorno believed that “what people are and how their needs and desires are organized changes throughout history and thus can be determined only through reference to their social context” (Alway 1995, 36). He also believed that the truth could never be fully known. While critical theory is based in Marxism, Adorno never fully embraced it. Instead his work consistently reflected hope and possibility. Horkheimer and Adorno collaborated to write *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in 1944. It has more of a Horkheimer negativity pervading it. It questions why in a world full of social freedom are we so bound by restrictions and a lack of freedom. Most of Adorno’s work was motivated by the “desire to fashion
perspectives distorted by neither desire nor violence, which would provide new ways for knowing and understanding the world” (Alway 1995, 60). These are the ideas that lead to social change, that lead to a better world. Adorno believed that a truly free society is one in which “people can be different without fear” (Alway 1995, 69). In his “free world”, the difference between people, between environments, and culture were needed and were normal components. Perhaps his creative side, not his intellectual side gave rise to this way of thinking. Diversity was not the way of Germany in the late 1930s and early 1940s however. Auschwitz was the defining moment that destroyed optimism about progress. “It appeared to the Frankfurt School as if Western civilization had generated not human development but an unparalleled barbarism. They knew that something more was required from radical thought than the usual stale critique of capitalism” (Bronner 2011, 5).

Initially, the agenda of critical theory was twofold: to show how facts are socially constructed, and to use this knowledge to break free from oppressive social, political and economic structures. However, eventually Horkheimer along with Adorno came to believe that the domination of individuals in society was so great that there was no way it could be overcome. One can only describe the domination and contradictions that exist, because if one tries to act, one is co-opted by entrenched social and political structures. Fred Rush terms this “engaged withdrawal,” and likens it to the Socratic tradition of talking about political matters while refraining from engaging in them actively (Rush 2004).

While Adorno waivered in his emotional perspective on mankind and the possibility of change, his colleague Herbert Marcuse maintained an optimistic outlook on the possibility of positive social change. He is perhaps the most well-known or most popular member of the Frankfurt School. Marcuse joined the Frankfurt School in 1932. Unlike some of his fellow
members, he never abandoned his belief in Marx. “His work is an enduring commitment to the most radical and concrete impulses of critical theory” (Bronner 1994, 236). Marcuse was true to his Marxist roots, but embellished the ideology a little with the introduction of Freudian concepts. Human existence at its most basic gave Marcuse a layer of complexity that did not exist for him in basic Marxism. It gave him insight into what initiates human activity, and what the goal of human existence is. Freud’s concept of Eros or the life drive was the branch that was missing from Marx. Libido and sexuality for Marcuse can go a long way in explaining the human condition.

Marcuse is possibly best known for his role as “Father of the New Left” in the 1960s in the United States. The 1960s were a time of political revolution, speaking out, personal expression, and sexual freedom. The young people of that time did not buy into the standardization of culture. They wanted to experience life for themselves. An East German author, Rudolf Bahro, introduced the concept of “surplus consciousness.” Bahro defines this as “that free human capacity which is no longer absorbed by the struggle for existence” (Alway 1995, 88). It is the piece of one that demands contentment and fulfillment. For Marcuse, all of these levels of consciousness and awareness are necessary to exact radical social transformation. The student movement of the 1960s and the feminist movement of the 1970s gave Marcuse an expansive audience and made him the intellectual voice of the time. The voice given to those movements set the tone for the fight for equality for future generations. Marcuse was a prolific writer and continued to contribute up until his death in 1979.

The thought of Walter Benjamin can be contrasted in many ways with that of Herbert Marcuse. Walter Benjamin was born in Germany in 1892. He struggled professionally and was poverty-stricken for most of his adult life. In a letter to his friend Gershom Scholem in 1930 he
writes, “The goal is that I be considered the foremost critic of German literature. If you want to carve out a reputation in the area of criticism, this ultimately means that you must recreate criticism as a genre” (Gilloch 2002, 1). In 1933 he began an affiliation with the Frankfurt School, but he was never officially a member. That same year he fled Germany to Paris to escape the Nazis. He committed suicide in 1940 when the Nazis invaded France. He was, at that time, an unknown. Benjamin believed that Utopia could be found in the simplicity of life. Things that we pass over as common actually hold the richness of our lives. These random, diverse topics (forced emigration, art, government, and Charlie Chaplin), gave rise to a host of eclectic articles of observation from Benjamin. In 1968 Hannah Arendt wrote an article about him in The New Yorker. Benjamin was well received. His work was rediscovered nearly 30 years after his death, and he posthumously rose to fame. His thought continues to be a mainstay in the literary community.

It is difficult to categorize Benjamin’s fragmented collection of work. Not only are his subjects varied, but his vantage points are as well. A concrete belief is sometimes elusive in his writings. Benjamin added to the critical theory discourse with pieces on revolution, Marxism, cultural industry, the relationship between politics and religion, Kant, and Kafka. “Critical theory asserts that the activity of thought and the independence of theory are crucial in maintaining the possibility of change” (Benzaquen 1998, 159). He like many other critical theorists sought to restore hope, to inspire reflection, to simplify.

Jürgen Habermas: The Second Generation of Critical Theory

According to David John Farmer (2010, 80), the second generation critical theory movement represented a change to the expansive and communicative. The name associated most with this transition toward an emphasis on the importance of communicative language and
discourse was Jürgen Habermas. To him, “knowing” in the workable sense is best served through the embodiment “found in cognition, speech and action” (Habermas 1984, 10).

Habermas believed that to be truly free and have better understanding, communication was paramount to a belief system rooted in the consciousness. This stance broke from the first generation’s holistic approach to understanding through the discounting of the macro approach in favor of the individualistic (Ingram 1990).

Habermas believed that breakthroughs in comprehension and the cognitive sciences occur through participatory deliberation, thereby creating better understanding across and within organizations and groups. Put simply, no “yes” men exist to push along a broken policy. To Habermas, true democratic debate was the optimal means to discover meanings distributed across and within organizations, while the generalization of group ideology should be shunned (Habermas 1996).

In the mid-twentieth century, Habermas ignited an explosion of debate over the public sphere. The spark was lit with his work, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1962), in which Habermas proposed an intelligent public with the capacity for reason.

This frame of thought opposed that of Walter Lippman, who believed that the public had very little ability to participate constructively and effectively in democracy. Lippman goes as far as to state in his 1925 work, The Phantom Public (13), the public sphere is essentially a “deaf spectator in the back row” with the illusion of participation by the public. He believed the public’s lack of understanding of public issues, or just simple apathy, make the masses non-participants. It is up to the educated public professional to make the decisions.

Hearkening back to early social contract theorists, John Locke and Thomas Hobbes, Habermas holds Lockean tendencies, while Lippman has Hobbesian roots. In his 1966 book,
*Theory and Practice*, Habermas verbalizes his distance from Jean-Jaques Rousseau’s belief that a republican-based democratic political model is necessary for a successful public. In contrast to Rousseau, Habermas argues for a normative approach to critical social theory to serve his rational and logical public where all are involved in the conversation, one which takes into account the inherently amorphous nature of communication throughout the ages. This new approach exists as a complement to a system of understanding based on empirically stated fact.

Through Habermas’ discourse theory, communication amongst the masses is open to all and flows in a free manner, wherein participatory democracy is essential and imposed ideology is an impediment. Full and open communication avenues must be open between all aspects of the public sphere, in order for it to be that – public - a place where all voices are heard. Habermas suggests that only through this painstaking process can each individual’s thoughts be understood and true growth-advocating and consensus building dialogue occur to strengthen the public sphere (Martin 2005, 366).

Habermas is an interdisciplinary virtuoso in the shaping and honing of his body of critical theory work. He draws from many sources, including action theory of sociologist Talcott Parsons (1975), who applied action theory to systems theory. In particular, Habermas agreed with Parsons’ idea that a “subjective dimension” is omnipresent and must be taken into account when exploring and creating new sociological theory. Parsons does acknowledge that scientific theorizing must accompany the subjective.

For example, people are individuals and exist within organizations as parts of a whole. Likewise, it follows that individual organizational units make up a larger institution. Look no further than individual people that make up a division, multiple divisions that create a bureau, and the numerous bureaus that make up an agency. It is imperative that these individual working
parts come together so that the entire system functions. In more thoroughly understanding each part, the study of these parts and the value-laden subcultures that accompany them must be taken into account (Jermier et al 1991, 191). Subculture study is a burgeoning field in sociology and organizational behavior and has direct connection to Habermas communicative version of critical theory.

Habermas also, drawing on the work of Marx, foresaw a number of crises besetting capitalism. The first is Marx’ traditional view of the economic crisis, which reflects the basic conflict for producers of paying the lowest possible wage to workers, but at the same time needing markets for their products in the form of affluent consumers. In order to prevent market failure from this type of crisis, governments must increasingly intervene in the market, which mean a growth in the size of the state. However, this growth in the size of the state must be funded by modest taxation in order to not adversely affect consumer spending and private profits. This results in the rationality crisis. As the state grows and expands to impact every aspect of life, citizens increasingly place more demands on it. When the state cannot fulfill those demands, it faces a legitimation crisis. The legitimation crisis occurs because the state must secure the loyalty of the bulk of middle-class and working-class voters while acting in the interest of the wealthy and large corporate interests. The motivation crisis affects workers by eroding traditional bourgeois values, such as civic-mindedness and voluntarism, religious commitment, belief in individual industry, and loyalty to employers. Habermas believes that to survive, capitalism must overcome the inherent contradictions of class that create these crises (Held, 1980).

Habermas did not shy away from religion in his critique of culture. He embraced it as tool to help bridge the communicative gap between the secular and the religious spheres.
Religious language is a way to discuss morality and differing spiritual viewpoints and stances. Habermas did note that the religious sphere should become more understanding of the languages of other religions, as well as that of the secular, to make certain that dialogue, understanding and the growth and coalescence of the masses continue (Habermas 1979). Tolerance is essential to this process.

Finally, but definitely not the last of Habermas’ wide swath of critical theory application drawn from other schools and fields, was the common ground he and other second generation theorists shared with pragmatists. Habermas and his peers used the term “technocratic” in reference to any social investigation only devising the most efficient and effective problem-solving approaches in the absence of actual knowledge or experience with any resulting outcomes (Habermas 1973). Individual and hands-on knowledge and experience is needed in the optimal decision-making process, regardless of existing macro theory. One must also realize that this knowledge and experience is fallible as it based on the viewpoint of the individual actor, is subject to observer interpretation, and also subject to change as a result of new knowledge constantly becoming available.

Connecting communicative theory and pragmatism, existing knowledge and experience can always be built upon. Once this new knowledge is unearthed or experience occurs, the discoverer needs to communicate their findings to the public for that of the greater good of society. This latter model is reminiscent of Plato’s dictum of the greater good of society achieved through service of the Sophist “ideal” (Benardete 1993, 774).

Thus, according to Habermas, dialogue within the public sphere is critical to the basal establishment of law, both legal and administrative. For the most part, law culminates from the desires of the masses through the adoption of social mores desired by the citizenry. These laws
are created through the judicial process, but also through political pressure to appease the voters. This process comes to fruition through the open and unfettered communication originating with the average citizen, spreading throughout the public sphere and reaching the political decision-makers. Once policy or administrative law is in place, it is up to the public administrator to implement and oversee.

Habermas’ and his fellow second generation critical theorists works on discourse and communicative theories, with legitimacy placed on the normative while acknowledging the need of scientific empirical methodology, demonstrate this process as a reality. Open communication lines and the ability for full debate is necessary for public sphere cohesion and positive growth. Everybody may not agree, but each must have his say. Dissenters must exist on order to create true consensus, occurring naturally through idea vetting and optimal solution adoption and implementation.

**Third Generation Critical Theorists**

Critical theory has deep interdisciplinary roots, and that tradition continues today. In addition to providing a framework of inquiry for scholars who have been identified as the “third generation” of the intellectual work begun by the Frankfurt School, critical theory has influenced and been impacted by a number of other emancipatory intellectual movements, including feminism, Marxism, and post-colonialism, and also branched into new subfields, such as critical pedagogy and critical race studies. It has additionally made its mark on and been shaped by work in postmodernism and poststructuralism. Among the prominent contemporary scholars who have been identified as critical theorists are Axel Honneth, Douglas Kellner, Seyla Benhabib, Chantal Mouffe, and Nancy Fraser.
Axel Honneth has been the director of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt since 2001. Honneth’s work has addressed power relationships in society in moral and philosophical terms, developing the concepts of recognition and reification. His *Critique of Power* discusses Horkheimer’s focus on developing an evolutionary critical theory of history based solely on production, and his subsequent neglect of creating a social theory that explained the history of civilization. Honneth then compares Habermas’ and Foucault’s histories of society, which he posits as competing alternative theories that avoid Horkheimer’s “economic reductionism” (Honneth 1991, 24). Foucault bases his theory of power in society on competing systems in unending conflict with each other, while Habermas bases his theory of society on modes of communicative action. Honneth believes that Habermas’ theory has superior possibilities for the analysis of social interactions than Foucault’s because it accounts for the consensual activity and accomplishment of groups, and not merely conflict between them.

In *The Struggle for Recognition* (1996), Honneth outlines a critical theory of how power relations develop in society. Honneth believes that the key to individual autonomy and identity lies in the development of self-esteem through recognition at various crucial stages. Honneth begins with Hegel’s ideas about recognition. Hegel believes that the development of recognition in individuals is a two step process. The first recognition that individuals learn is that of parents and caretakers. Children are recognized by their parents when their needs are satisfied and they accord their parents recognition in return. Self-confidence is formed, not through evaluating one’s own abilities but through having one’s basic needs met. The second stage of recognition is when the child begins to recognize rights and locate him or herself as a moral agent. This results in the formation of self-respect. Self respect is based on recognizing the universal of human dignity within oneself.
Honneth then turns to the work of the social psychologist Mead, who believed that identity is developed on the basis of our uniquely valuable characteristics and abilities in relationship to others. Honneth points out that Mead overlooks the fact that these abilities are not equally valued by society as it currently exists. The ideal society would be the one in which everyone would be able to develop a sense of self-esteem by solidarity with others based on common values and appreciation for each individual’s contribution to the common good. Thus Honneth’s three types of recognition are love (developed in the family, and fosters self-confidence), rights (developed in relationship to the law and fosters self-respect), and solidarity (developed in society and fosters self-esteem).

Honneth believes that all historical struggles are really struggles for recognition. Lack of recognition he termed disrespect: “What the term 'disrespect' [Mißachtung] refers to is the specific vulnerability of humans resulting from the internal interdependence of individualization and recognition, which both Hegel and Mead helped to illuminate” (Honneth 1996, 131). Types of disrespect may violate a person’s physical integrity, deny their rights, including socially ostracizing them, or negatively affect the status of themselves or the social groups they belong to. Honneth’s theory of recognition has been used to describe how historical marginalization of groups such as women or minorities can affect the self-esteem of individuals belonging to those groups.

Another scholar generally considered part of the third generation of critical theory is philosopher Douglas Kellner. Kellner is best known for his work on postmodernism and media studies, particularly on the function of spectacle in modern political and social discourse. Kellner and coauthor Steven Best’s work, The Postmodern Turn, identifies shifts towards postmodernism in multiple disciplines and posits that we are now undergoing a Kuhnian
paradigm shift from the modern to the postmodern that is being felt throughout all social, economic, and political structures and phenomena, and is evidenced in border crossings between disciplines, the breakdown between mass entertainment and high culture, and theories of indeterminacy and complexity in the sciences. In a chapter on postmodernism in the arts, the authors note how consumer culture “dedifferentiates” or blurs boundaries in art:

“In contrast to the differentiating impetus of modernism, postmodernism adopts a dedifferentiating approach that willfully subverts boundaries between high and low art, artist and spectator, and among different artistic forms and genres…science and money, as vehicles of social power, increasingly encroached on the autonomy of other social spheres in a process that Habermas terms the ‘colonization of the lifeworld’” (Best and Kellner 1997, 132).

Kellner believes that in modern civilization, media culture is a socializing, even colonizing, force through which people create identities as consumers in an industrial society. It presents as factual a mythologized view of the world and its power relations that supports the status quo, and that is furthermore consciously constructed and intentional in its ideological aims. In contrast to culture studies theorists of the 60’s and 70’s, who tended to see the media as monolithic and dominating, Kellner sees media as a space in which cultural values are both created and contested; consumers of media culture can and do resist and appropriate media texts in their interactions with them, and in the case of social media, even “talk back” (Kellner 1995). Nevertheless, he sees a culture of media consumption as overall detrimental to the awareness of social problems and inequities: “the conditions of everyday life, even in the metropoles of the United States, are deteriorating rapidly…but those who are most exploited and oppressed by the
social order can afford little more than the ‘free’ entertainment provided by media culture, especially television” (Kellner 1995, 332).

Kellner has contributed much to the study of the phenomenon of the media spectacle and its discursive role in politics. He traces the history of spectacle back to its Roman roots and believes that it is alive and well today, functioning then as now as an organizing and legitimizing force. Kellner is a strong proponent of media literacy as a vital part of education, and also thinks that the best way to learn about how media operates as a system for the creation of individual and social identities and a force for economic and political domination is to examine individual examples of media, especially media spectacles, for their ideological content.

Thus, Kellner has analyzed events such as the Gulf War, the contested Bush election of 2000, and the September 11th attacks as media spectacles. For example, in his analysis of the Gulf War, which he calls the “Gulf TV War,” Kellner describes the “Crisis in the Gulf” which preceded the war as a “media construct,” created by replacing most Americans’ ignorance of the Middle East with manipulated images, disinformation, and omission of critical facts. The Gulf War itself was executed with spectacle in mind, breaking out during the evening news with highly dramatic footage of apparently bloodless aerial bombings at night. Kellner believes that our preoccupation with such spectacles, the failures of the media in not challenging disinformation and questioning the assertions of politicians and other public figures, and the presentation of image rather than substance in public debates are threatening to democracy (Kellner 1992).

Another critical theorist who has written on the challenges of democracy is post-Marxist political theorist Chantal Mouffe. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, she attempted with coauthor Ernesto Laclau to address some perceived failings of classical Marxism. First of all, it
has been pointed out that Marx focused too exclusively on economic determinism and processes of production, placing too much emphasis on class as a structuring force for struggle in society and not enough on other social forces, particularly those which shaped individual identity. Remarkng on the lack of recognition by orthodox Marxists of the heterogeneity of class, Mouffe and Laclau state, “The starting-point and constant leitmotiv is clear: the subjects are social classes, whose unity is constituted around interests determined by their position in the relations of production” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 118). Laclau and Mouffe integrated the thinking of the Italian neo-Marxist Gramsci, best known for first articulating the concept of cultural hegemony as a means of state domination, with poststructuralist and psychoanalytic thought to propose a more pluralistic and heterogeneous conception of social identity and a vision of social and economic struggle that involves compromise and common cause as well as conflict.

Mouffe thus challenges the concept of deliberative democracy with a radical construct that she terms “agonistic pluralism.” Deliberative democracy, in which the laws of a society get legitimacy from free and inclusive public debate, has been espoused by Habermas and others as a way of addressing the lack of access to the political process that has in recent years disenchanted many with modern democracy. This model is based on equality of access to public debate, in which both the topics of debate and the rules of procedure are open to discussion. Its proponents postulate that rational deliberation will substitute for the interest-based and primarily economic model of democracy now existing. However, Mouffe argues that there are ontological as well as practical reasons that this will not work. In the first place, she argues, that there is no such thing as a purely rational or values-free dialogue; in the second place, citing Lacan, she posits that the very act of discourse is inherently authoritarian, because it requires the imposition of meaning in ways that constrain alternative interpretations. With agonistic pluralism, Mouffe advocates that
rather than having the idealistic aim of being totally inclusive, political systems should have the aim of creating “democratic designs,” institutionalizing ways in which “agonism between adversaries” results in hegemonic consensus (Mouffe 1999, 276-277).

Seyla Benhabib, on the other hand, has been a supporter of the Habermasian concept of deliberative democracy. She notes that this political model is particularly attractive to historically marginalized groups, because it holds the promise for them of “not only inclusion but empowerment” (Benhabib 2010, 280). Among the claims against deliberative democracy that she disputes is that of incommensurability, since she points out that most political disputes do not, as is the case with empirical disputes, have seamless or conclusively provable grounds, and at any rate the usual goal of public deliberation is not to challenge the validity of others’ beliefs, but to advocate and negotiate for policies that support our own beliefs and interests. Like Nancy Fraser (see below), Benhabib argues for a pluralistic view of the public sphere, one that accommodates many viewpoints as well as ways of knowing, and she defends this view against critics who charge that public discourse has historically been biased and exclusive, pointing out “Publicity entails the normative requirement that for a principle, law, or a course of action to be deemed acceptable it must be judged to be so from the standpoint of all affected” (Benhabib 2010, 283).

An immigrant to the US from Turkey, Benhabib has been much preoccupied with cosmopolitanism, the idea that people have individual rights as part of a common humanity that supersedes national boundaries or cultural commitments. Benhabib has also written on the problems of migrants and refugees, believing that such cases bring up very basic issues about what it means to belong and have citizenship: “Political philosophers have paid little attention to citizenship as a sociological category, as a social practice that inserts us into a complex network
of privileges and duties, entitlements, and obligations” (Benhabib 1999, 719). She notes that there is an asymmetry and lack of reciprocity between the rights to leave one’s own country and the right to enter another, and favors porous borders.

Benhabib has also written on feminism and the need for a universalism in human rights that is not based on Enlightenment ideals of rational subjects who are free moral agents detached from an historical time and specific social milieu, but rather centered on a reflexive “moral point of view” that is capable of asking hypothetical questions about the applicability of claims that transcend one’s own standpoint. Her view of universalism is less based on traditional moral absolutes than on an interactionist and widely inclusive contingency. She also believes that moral claims need to be “engendered,” that is, considered from feminine as well as traditional masculinist viewpoints: “…there is a relationship between the neglect of the problem of moral judgment in universalist moral theories and the neglect of women and their activities…women in their role as primary caretakers have had to exercise insight into the claims of the particular” (Benhabib 1992, 14). She believes this attention to the particular lends itself well to the perspective-taking that her vision of universalism advocates.

Another contemporary critical theorist associated with feminism is Nancy Fraser. Fraser has argued that critical theory and poststructuralism can be united in a way that is useful to feminist aims and analyses: “In fact, dereifying processes and reifying processes are two sides of the same postfordist coin. They demand a two-sided response. Feminists need both deconstruction and reconstruction, destabilization of meaning and projection of utopian hope” (Fraser 1995, 71). She has also observed how many of the discourses on feminism turn to linguistics, which she sees emblematic of postmodernism’s preoccupation with the construction of meaning and thus away from philosophical grand unified theories, and argues for a new
feminist pragmatism that synthesizes relevant and useful features of the perspectives of Habermas, Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida (Fraser 1995, 157-168).

Fraser has critiqued the concept of the public sphere, both from a historical and a contemporary perspective. In the first place, she notes, there was never a single public sphere but rather a multiplicity of them, many of them oppositional to the bourgeois liberal public sphere envisioned by Habermas; she cites the examples of women’s progressive reform societies and worker’s groups. She points out that the liberal public sphere has always been, from its inception, exclusionary, and also that it has selectively defined as “private” issues that affect women and other marginalized groups. In theorizing a solution, Fraser speaks to both the possibility and necessity of discussing the interactions between weak and strong publics, noting that “in stratified societies, arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public” (Fraser 1990, 66).

IV. Critical Theory: Implications for Public Administration

From a social perspective, how critical theory fits into public administration is not well-defined. At its core, critical theory "analyzes constraining power … with the aim of guiding human action toward emancipation" (Farmer 2010, 79). The critical theory perspective attempts to push the field of public administration to seek emancipation in an effort to address the problems of bureaucracy and the bureaucratization of state and society. In doing so, there are several implications that exist regarding how an emancipated public impacts the role of administrators in strategic planning, management, one-dimensional views, the boundary line between the public and administration as well as creativity in thinking.
It is implied by critical theory that public administrators should seek emancipation through the strategic planning process. Box (2005, 3) describes critical theory as more of a process than a blueprint for change. To encourage emancipation, public administrators would ideally increase community participation in the strategic planning process. This opens the door for emancipation, as it enables individuals to actively control the power and dominion of bureaucracy that can often be seen in economic and/or political mediums. Farmer (2010, 83) highlights that emancipation is furthered by communicative action and suggests the "systems world consists of systems governed by nonlinguistic institutions like power, money and the media" which impede communicative action derived from "shared understandings shaped by shared circumstances" (Farmer 2010, 83). While he does not detract from the importance of systems, he reiterates it is the prioritizing of systemization that comes at the expense of individuals within the society. The goal should be "emancipation by privileging self over system" (Farmer 2010, 84). To this end, when looking at it from a critical theory perspective, public administrators are tasked with finding the balance between systems and selves - leveraging bureaucratic systems' needs while ensuring the freedom of individuals within the public are not compromised or infringed upon, resulting in inequalities.

Further, critical theory affects the management aspect of public administration. While critical theory seeks to emancipate, the residual impact on management is one of anti-administration. Farmer (2010, 84) highlights the goal is to "emancipate clients, subordinates and ideas" while "including not only mainstream ideas and people, but also ideas and people that are other - excluded or marginalized." This perspective offers public administrators an opportunity to place the "service" back in "public service"; in the modern public sphere the emotional connection of those in public service to its constituency has become weathered. Further,
Cunningham and Schneider (2001, 573) note there is a persistent negative attitude toward public employees not as a result of just degraded bureaucratic performance but due to a dissatisfaction with the direction of public policy in the last half century. The current administrative model no longer has legitimacy in the eyes of the people, which opens the door to a mindset of anti-administration (Cunningham and Schneider 2001, 584). With such a perspective, public administrators can disengage a mindset of distrust by acting anti-administratively, which in turn enables marginalized or vulnerable groups within a constituency to be aided. Actions such as gifting or witnessing "involve sharing uncomfortable truths, making self vulnerable to the other by taking risks, breaking organizational norms by telling the truth and going beyond what is normally expected in providing or refusing the service" (Cunningham and Schneider 2001, 580). Farmer (2010, 85) notes the anti-administrative approach unveiled in the critical theory perspective stands to not only benefit the marginalized group but also advances the mainstream or dominant group. It alters public administration thinking by reinforcing that all groups, from the top down, realize a benefit by removing the element of domination.

Related to the anti-administration approach, Lisa Zanetti has advocated a role for the public administrator with critical theoretical sympathies as a “tempered radical,” practicing an emancipatory ethics within the confines of administrative practice. She identifies the tempered radical as a public servant who refuses to bow to the Recht, meaning the system of law and custom that supports domination. According to Zanetti, “Tempered radicals function as what Gramsci called the “mediating group” in society. It is this mediating process that produces what Cornell West calls a ‘fecund criticism’ — that is, critique in which the primary aim is to discern possibilities in the existing order” (Zanetti 2004, 147).
Critical theory also compels public administrators to eliminate one-dimensional thinking. The one-dimensional society mindset emphasizes "the increasing power of capitalism over all aspects of social life and the development of new forms of social control" (Kellner 1990, 25), and one-dimensional thinking "is limited to the uncritical and conformist acceptance of existing structures, norms, and behaviors" (Farmer 2010, 86). Marcuse (1964) argued, "Independence of thought, autonomy, and the right to political opposition are being deprived of their basic critical function" and continued "If the individual were no longer compelled to prove himself on the market, as a free economic subject, the disappearance of this kind of freedom would be one of the greatest achievements of civilization." From a critical theory perspective, it is suggested the constituency not concede but rather refuse to conform to a system of social control, such as that rendered by a capitalistic drive. In such an instance, those in public administration capacities must be universal in thinking to accommodate society's refusal to conform. Farmer (2003, 205) contends the role of public administrators should shift from "speaking from power" to "speaking to power." In traditional public administration, the inclination is to have a hierarchal relationship in which administrators speak from power; Farmer suggests a shift from this one-dimensionality. By speaking to power, public administrators "give identity to citizens" and "offer visions of how governmental systems empower the lives of the citizens that belong" (Farmer 2003, 206). By changing public administration thinking from a position that reduces the power mindset, citizens in society are given an identity and, in essence, are freed; from the critical theory perspective, oppression and domination is lessened, and emancipation is realized.

As a field, the extent of the public's participation in public administration is also brought into question by critical theory. The boundary line that exists between the role of the public and the function of public administrators is one that has been considered a socially constructed
model. Existing boundaries do not support an emancipated society; rather, it invokes a system of power in which the public plays little role in the vision that is crafted or implemented. Farmer (2003, 226) highlights the concept of "citizen-ing" which "refers to living where … as many lives as possible are lived without accepting as primary the manipulation and domination of systems and on behalf of systems." Farmer purports a citizen should be an active part of the public administration process; he or she develops the vision and lives the vision. "Citizen-ing" will bring about "visions and envisioned living of varying quality" which involves "a radically open form of consciousness … that encompasses unknown depths, areas not filled in" (Farmer 2003, 228). The open and varied consciousness invokes emancipation. In essence, to conform public administration to the critical theory perspective, the boundary line between the role of the public and the function of administrators must be redrawn to enable the public to become an active participant in an administration to which citizens hold a significant vested interest.

Lastly, critical theory places an overwhelming weight upon public administrators to be more creative in thinking; with a goal of emancipation, the role of public administrators would be to creatively shift views from the inward benefit that bureaucracy provides to the outward benefit beyond bureaucracy. Farmer (2010, 88) highlights a renewed creativity is necessary which "requires imagination to shift from primary concern with the bureaucratic machine toward primary concern with the human-in-society." It is often unclear what direction public administrators are headed; in most cases, while they may purport to be focused on outward benefits (advantages to be realized by the public), critical theorists would argue the objectives of public administrators are unpredictable. Cunningham and Schneider (2001, 578) note public administrators are "targeted because they implement legislative decisions, favoring some, constraining others. They are criticized by some for being too rule-bound, by others for
compromising principals too much, and by all sides for being inefficient." To realign its course, public administration needs to be consistent, and as Farmer (2010, 87) highlights, "to see through what we currently count as common sense truths." Further, to align itself with critical theory, the end objectives - the ultimate goals - of public administration need to ensure the public is placed first, with an outward benefit being the driving force. Anything less stifles the emancipation from oppression and domination that critical theory calls for in the field of public administration.

**Conclusion**

Eighty years after Max Horkheimer spoke of his vision for a new philosophy of the social sciences, critical theory remains a vibrant method of inquiry for studying the workings of society and human culture. While critical theorists argue over the viability of socialist and democratic forms of government, and lament the overdetermination of social behavior by capitalist consumerism and mass media saturation, they agree that those who study human society have a responsibility for exploring and describing not only how underlying social and political structures are actively created and power structures maintained, but how they should be.

“Critical theory,” says Honneth, “…in a way that may be unique to it---insists on a mediation of theory and history in a concept of socially effective rationality” (Honneth 2004, 337). As Robert Denhardt has said, in considering the possibility of a new paradigm of public administration in which critical theory plays a role,

As individuals seek conditions of autonomy and responsibility there is no discontinuity between reflection and evaluation on the one hand, and purposeful action on the other. By engaging in a critique of conditions of excessive domination we may be led to new possibilities for more effective public action, possibilities that present themselves close at hand (Denhardt 1981, 634).
The admixture of measured rationality, social critique, and individual action for awareness and social justice, mean that a critical theory perspective has much to offer the thoughtful public administration practitioner.
References


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