

Spheres of action

Art and politics

In the anglophone context of the last thirty years, the phrase ‘critical theory’ has been used in two quite different ways. On the one hand it refers to the project of the Frankfurt School, in its various formulations, over a fifty-year period from the early 1930s (from early Horkheimer through to ‘middle period’ Habermas). On the other hand it has come to denote a far broader but nonetheless discrete tradition, with its roots in Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and Saussure, and its primary manifestations in France in the period from the late 1950s to the end of the 1990s, with Barthes, Lacan, Althusser, Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard as its main representatives. In the first case, the phrase is both self-designating and the object of explicit theoretical reflection. In the latter case, however, it was the result of the reception of a theoretically heterogeneous tradition into the literary departments of the Anglo-American academy, where ‘criticism’ was an established professional activity. Consequently, while the conceptual emphasis in the reception of the Frankfurt School has been on criticism or critique (*Kritik*) – the main opposition being between ‘Traditional and Critical Theory’ (Horkheimer, 1937) – the emphasis in the reception of the French tradition was placed heavily on ‘theory’, the main opposition being between theoretical and a- or anti-theoretical (historically, aesthetic) interpretative practices. Yet ‘theory’, here, is not a name for an alien philosophy (in the way in which ‘critical theory’ was initially an alias for a certain philosophical reception of Marxism) but a purportedly post-philosophical pursuit, occupying the place, but not the mode, of a Heideggerian ‘thinking’.

What these two bodies of thought share is a suspicion of the self-sufficiency of philosophy, an orientation towards inter- and trans-disciplinarity, an openness to the general text of writing, and a critical attitude towards the institutions of Western capitalist societies. Where they differ is in their relations to the philosophies of Hegel and Heidegger. The former is self-consciously post-Hegelian and anti-Heideggerian, while the latter is insistently anti-Hegelian and generi-

cally post-Heideggerian. As Jean-Luc Nancy put it at the end of the 1980s: “‘French’ thought today proceeds in part from a “German” rupture with a certain philosophical “France” (which is also a rupture with a certain “Germanity”).’ It was this displaced Germanicism of French thought that was the object of attack in Habermas’s polemic *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1985) – a book that appeared in the wake of the extraordinary success in Germany of Sloterdijk’s *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983).

The philosophically ‘Germanic’ character of much French critical theory is thus well established. Less attention has been paid to the influence of French thought – including that which proceeds from ‘a German rupture with a certain philosophical France’ – on the German critical tradition. Yet some of the most productive developments within the orbit of Frankfurt critical theory have been driven by a reflective intensity in the relationship to intellectual and artistic events in France. (This is true not only of Benjamin, but also of aspects of early Horkheimer and Adorno’s mature thought too.) More recently, there is a ‘post-Frankfurtian’ German thought of the 1980s and 1990s that has been profoundly influenced by currents of French theory of the 1960s and 1970s: French Nietzscheanism, structuralism, Barthes, Foucault, situationism, Deleuze/Guattari and Baudrillard. This problematizes the nationalism of German philosophy in a quite different way from Habermas’s identification with American pragmatism and his concern to reformulate normative issues within the terms of post-analytical philosophy. It is notable that these currents have all been concerned in some way with aesthetic aspects of political action and the political meaning of art; and that they have been able to flow more freely, in Germany, in the art school than the philosophy department.

The papers that follow* are by a trio of thinkers from Karlsruhe, whose writings are marked by different aspects of the French thought of the 1960s: *vitalism*, *structuralism* and *deconstruction*, in Sloterdijk, Weibel and Groys, respectively.

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*These papers were presented at ‘Spheres of Action – Art and Politics’, Tate Britain, London, 12 December 2005, organized by the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy, Middlesex University. List of Weibel’s images appears on p. 56.