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The Idea Of A Critical Theory: Habermas And The Frankfurt School (Modern European Philosophy)

Raymond Geuss

THE IDEA OF A CRITICAL THEORY

Habermas &
the Frankfurt
School



Synopsis

Habermas and earlier members of the Frankfurt School have presented critical theory as a radically new form of knowledge. It is differentiated from the natural sciences as essentially 'reflective': the knowledge it provides guides us towards enlightenment as to our true interests, and emancipation from often unsuspected forms of external and internal coercion. Its first paradigms are in the writings of Marx and Freud. In this book Raymond Geuss sets out these fundamental claims and asks whether they can be made good. Is a science which does not simply describe and explain social phenomena, but also criticizes? The concept of ideology plays a crucial role in this discussion. Geuss carefully analyses it here, its relation to our beliefs and interests, and the account of truth and confirmation required by its critique and the concomitant goal of self-knowledge. The book does not presuppose acquaintance with the works of the Frankfurt School and can serve as a lucid introduction to their central, distinctive theses. But in its scrupulous and incisive consideration of these, and the modified support for them that emerges, it will also interest experts on critical theory and others concerned with the methods and purposes of the social sciences in general.

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Customer Reviews

Gives far too much credit to the college student anti-war, pro-civil rights protests of the late '60's in the development of the American contributions to the creation of "critical theory". I was there on several Midwestern campuses and the students barely knew the names of any theoreticians. The concerns and demands I found were very politically specific.

Good

Written in deceptively simple and lucid prose (despite an annoying habit of sprinkling the text with untranslated bits of Greek and, more naturally, German), this absolutely brilliant, extremely profound, very dense little volume belongs on the short shelf of anyone of any political persuasion who cares about politics, political consciousness, ideology, and needless to say, left politics. It's somewhat misadvertised. Despite a good many unelaborated references to Frankfurt school writers (citations to pages in German texts without comment), this is only in the most nominal sense a book about the Frankfurt school. For that, read Thomas McCarthy or Martin Jay, not Geuss's intellectual equals but more informative on what Habermas, Adorno, or Horkheimer actually said. It's an original exercise in critical theory inspired, somewhat distantly IMHO, by someone deeply steeped in the Frankfurt School and Marxian theory. To my way of thinking it is vastly superior to any of its nominal models or subjects, but I also don't pretend to understand Adorno at all. As an explication of the concepts of ideology and *ideologiekritik* it has no peer, likewise as an account of the way critical theory is supposed to be linked to praxis. (As in "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.") Geuss is, stylistically, an inheritor of the best of high octane analytical philosophy (Columbia grad school, time at Princeton, Chicago, now at Cambridge), without the tedious a priori prejudices and love of jargon that have routed analytical philosophy onto a dead-end railway track. Politically he tilts rather more heavily to pessimism of the intellect than optimism of the will, but that may be part of what drew him to the Frankfurters in the first place. Intolerant of sloppy thing, double-talk and gobbledygook, ruthless towards careless argument, gifted with an ability to cut to the chase, Geuss, here and in other works, is the rare philosopher/political thinker who can be read with profit (pardon the metaphor in the context) by the general reader. I'd say this is one of the half dozen most significant books in my own intellectual development. I have probably read it 25 times, and that is not enough. Full disclosure: Geuss was my senior thesis adviser in college many many years ago. I'm not sure how well we got on. I cannot say we were close. He gave my (late) senior thesis a B-, which was more than it deserved. But this is a fabulous book. Put it at the top of your reading list. Several times.

Certainly, this is not an introduction to the Frankfurt School, although some seem to believe as much. It should be read alongside Horkheimer's essay, 'Traditional and Critical Theory,' Habermas' essay 'Between Philosophy and Science: Marxism as Critique,' and Adorno's 'Why Still

Philosophy?' Like those essays, this book is programmatic: what *would* a critical theory do? And is such a theory possible? So there is not a lot in here about the actual substance of any given critical theory. Nothing much about 'communicative rationality,' not much about 'negative dialectics,' not much about the 'one-dimensional society.' Rather, this book tries to explain what those projects are meant to achieve. Given this aim, Geuss succeeds admirably. The book is clear and precise. It doesn't have that kick of rebellion that you can find in Žižek or Badiou's popular works, or the slightly mystifying air of Adorno's worst work, or the hipness of Marcuse's. Some people will say this is a bad thing, and criticize Geuss for putting these ideas in clear, precise prose. Although that's bizarre anyway, it's even more ridiculous when you consider that Habermas - the topic of the book, after all - himself uses the language of analytic philosophy. One could make the case that Adorno shouldn't be squeezed into the language of analytic philosophy, but Habermas squeezes himself into it, to his detriment. The one downside is that the focus here is on *individuals*, which is necessary for analytic ethical philosophy. 'Society,' which is really the object of critique, doesn't get much of a look in. This is a shame, but on the other hand, the book mainly deals with Habermas, and he too uses this action-theory-esque language. It's also odd that Geuss prefers Adorno's project, but focuses on Habermas. I guess the latter's just easier to write about.

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