Stephen Eric Bronner
Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction.
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If critical theory is tasked with synthesizing theory and practice, it has been disappointing, remaining peculiarly isolated from the masses. With the exceptions of Erich Fromm's influence on the rising New Left, Herbert Marcuse in the later 1960s, and the early Jürgen Habermas in Germany, critical theory has had little public effect, as Stephen Eric Bronner points out in an earlier work (*Of Critical Theory and Its Theorists*, 166). Although critical theorists often offer a narrative of vast influence upon the "generation of 1968," the Horkheimer circle was not engaged in revolutionary politics upon its arrival in the United States, but rather shifted its emphasis from the proletariat to the individual, the inexplicability of human suffering, and the impossibility of the promises of history.

Like the Horkheimer circle émigrés speaking carefully to avoid right-wing attack and—skeptical of the American working class' revolutionary potential—writing for an audience that was elsewhere or yet to come, many introductions to critical theory seem to speak an "Aesopian language" or send "messages in a bottle." More concerned with shoring up some "line" than offering multifaceted accounts, such introductions present controversial arguments to insiders and a deceptively unbiased face to the outsider. The accessibility and straightforward internal critique in Stephen Eric Bronner's *Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction* is a fresh and welcome approach. Bronner immediately clues in the reader that he believes critical theory has abandoned its post: "Concern with organized resistance and institutional politics fell by the wayside in favor of an aesthetic-philosophical form of critique or… a quasi-religious 'longing for the totally other'" (7).

After a brief introduction comes historical context, including the founding of the Institute for Social Research, Horkheimer's subsequent rise to directorship, and a preview of the late conservatism of Horkheimer and Adorno. In addressing Erich Fromm's role in the early Institute, Bronner objects to the dismissive attitude of some critical theorists towards Fromm's work but does not defend Fromm as compellingly as in *Of Critical Theory and Its Theorists* (1994). The topic of "method" follows, beginning with Georg Lukacs's "orthodox Marxism" and followed by Antonio Gramsci, Karl Korsch, and Max Weber. As evidenced by this list, Bronner does not identify critical theory with the Institute for Social Research but includes other thinkers influential upon the Frankfurt School and upon Western Marxism. Bronner then offers an overview of key critical theorists' contributions to method: Fromm's synthesis of Marxism and psychoanalysis, followed by Walter Benjamin on messianism and the *Arcades Project*'s fragmentary style of reasoning, anticipating Adorno's turn away from universals and towards the individual. Again, Bronner's commitments are clear: "But the assault on system, logic, and narrative by Benjamin and Adorno carries a price: it undermines the ability to generate criteria for making ethical and political judgments thereby threatening to plunge critical theory into relativism" (33). Habermas, in Bronner's view, seeks escape from relativism yet becomes mired in liberal establishmentarianism.

Bronner proceeds to an explication of alienation and reification. Like Fromm, he rejects post-structuralism and parallels the early Marx's work on alienation with the fetishism of commodities in *Capital*. Next are the early Ernst Bloch's and Georg Lukacs's early "romantic anticapitalism," Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* on the sado-masochistic character of fascism, and Horkheimer's "The Authoritarian State" on loss of a revolutionary subject (45, 47). Habermas's later search for the ideal speech situation brought renewed hope but also a shift from a politics of class to a politics of identity, Bronner argues, paving the way for Axel Honneth's work on recognition isolated from questions of systemic power (47). Honneth's failure is prefigured in the majority of the Frankfurt School's pessimism and rejection of the proletariat as revolutionary subject.

Next is a scathing critique of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as damningly apolitical and ahistorical, lacking criteria for differentiating between salvageable and unsalvageable aspects of the Enlightenment, and ignoring class interests. A discursus on utopia follows, beginning with Georg Lukacs and Ernst Bloch on expressionism and proceeding to Marcuse. Bronner treats Bloch favorably but perhaps overemphasizes his restorative yearning for a lost Eden, at the expense of Bloch's insistence on the "totally new." Bronner's treatment of Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* is run of the mill and does not explore the subtle pessimism of the text, for which scholars of Weimar Germany like Richard Wolin might be better equipped. Often considered "optimistic" and classified as a synthesis of Marx and Freud, *Eros* has a pessimistic cyclical view of history and suggests that any break from the given must appear in the guise of "barbarism". Its apparent break from Marx and Prometheus in favor of Nietzsche and Dionysus could be addressed by a defender of Enlightenment radicalism like Bronner.

Bronner does address Erich Fromm's critique of *Eros and Civilization*, but he attributes Fromm's critique (along with Fromm's break from the Institute) to Fromm's emphasis on psychoanalytic practice, which gives false credence to Marcuse's charge that Fromm advocated psychological "adjustment" of the individual to capitalism. Although Fromm does argue that Marcuse's lack of formal psychoanalytic training crimps Marcuse's theory, Fromm's critique of *Eros* centers upon its rejection of a forward-thinking revolutionism in favor of psychological regression that hampers revolutionary change. According to Fromm (in *The Revolution of Hope,* 1968), *Eros and Civilization* advocates a rebellion through retreat into the past and immature disobedience rather than revolution that advances by careful, programmatic action. Far from advocating adjustment to capitalism, Fromm argues in *The Art of Loving* that psychoanalysis can uncover seeds of revolutionary potential (love, hope, reason) within the present. (Bronner's account of Fromm's break from the Institute should be read alongside Neil McLaughlin's "Origin Myths in the Social Sciences" and Thomas Wheatland's *The Frankfurt School in Exile*.) Nevertheless, Bronner appreciates Fromm for connecting theory and practice.

Bronner concludes his chapter on utopia with an odd warning about the potential of utopia to cause violence. Utopia must remain a regulative ideal, the yearning for a perfected society always tempered by the conviction that such a society cannot be achieved. Necessary distinctions are missing here: Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, a call for programmatic social change presented in literary form, differs from Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*, with its demand to stop the clock of progress. Erich Fromm distinguished between a "prophetic" and an

"apocalyptic" messianic or utopian impulse. The former (the prophetic) was open to Enlightenment ideals and programmatic planning, while the latter (the apocalyptic) awaited a total break and an intervention by forces experienced as transcendent (see Nick Braune and Joan Braune, "Erich Fromm's Socialist Program and Prophetic Messianism", *Radical Philosophy Review* 12.1–2 [2009], 355–389).

Following the chapter on utopia, Bronner turns to the culture industry, arguing that Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse were reductionist, finding almost nothing salvageable in mass culture. He insightfully points to the conservative progenitors of this critique (Edmund Burke, Gustav Le Bon, etc.), and Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse's affinities with Nietzsche's elitism towards mass culture. Habermas's approach was more nuanced, distinguishing public opinion from publicity. Bronner rejects Marcuse's "Repressive Tolerance," viewing lack of tolerance as a more serious problem, and the "cultural pessimism" of Adorno's infamous condemnation of jazz before transitioning to aesthetics. Benjamin and Adorno's endorsement of "montage," Marcuse's "great refusal" drawn from Breton, and Horkheimer's work on the enduring human longing for the "totally other" show the influence of the modernist artists' stress on the individual and utopian imagination. Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, in its turn to the individual, leads to a total negation that Bronner finds undialectical.

Bronner concludes with a call to action. The Frankfurt School's despair following World War II and its institutionalization in the academy after the 1960s have defanged critical theory. Postmodernism treats power as an abstraction, while Habermas's quest for communication has led "liberals and rationalists to congratulate themselves" on their rational discourse while their reactionary opponents gain steam by privileging emotions over evidence. Critical theory must return to the concrete. Critical theory must temper denunciations of instrumental reason with appreciation for the role of science. Critical theory must reclaim the Enlightenment and recognize the dangers of counter-Enlightenment. Critical theory must recognize the contribution of popular culture in social change. Critical theory must unite fragmented social movements and further the projects of democracy, cosmopolitanism, socialism, and utopian redemption.

This book is a useful introduction for upper level undergraduates or others first encountering critical theory, and it also nicely encapsulates Stephen Eric Bronner's critique for experts. Although it will not inspire the general reader simply to *like* critical theory, the reader may conclude that critical theory is a salvageable project to which she can contribute. Introductions to critical theory are not neutral. Defining critical theory's origin, purpose and method is not a prolegomena to critical theory but constitutive of the enterprise. Bronner's warnings about reductionist readings of the Enlightenment and mass culture, his concerns about the counter-Enlightenment, his attempt to rescue an ethical politics that includes rational planning, and his defense of the category of class are necessary and timely. The book does not challenge the mainstream interpretation as much as one might like with regard to the "origin myths" of the Frankfurt School, nor with regard to the received narrative of the reception of critical theory in the United States in the 1960s. Utopian aspirations are unnecessarily constrained, and more could be said about the influence of Jewish thought on the Frankfurt School. Nevertheless, the book's forthright critique and call to transformation are a breath of fresh air.

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