Fred Rush, ed.  
The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory.  
Pp. xx + 376.  
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One of the most fruitful currents of ‘Continental philosophy’, from the interwar years up to the present, Critical Theory first emerged in the work of the early Frankfurt School (notably, T.W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse). It introduced a potent mixture of neo-Marxism with radicalized Freudianism on the one hand and pessimistic culture criticism on the other. By the 1960s it began to take a new and fruitful direction in Jürgen Habermas’ innovative research program, culminating in his theory of communicative action. Today it continues to evolve in the socio-political theories of Axel Honneth, Seyla Benhabib, and Nancy Fraser, among others, playing a central role in debates about social movements and, even more so, in deliberative-democratic theory. Extending as it has across these ‘three generations’ of theorists, and still generating innovative and influential ideas today, the Critical Theory tradition has been a rich one indeed.

But just what is Critical Theory? There are good reasons to hesitate before offering a definition, given the diversity of aims and methods that distinguish its various versions. And yet, there is something to be said, too, for working with a provisional picture of what unifies participants in a movement like Critical Theory. Here, then, is one characterization, about as plausible as any: Critical Theory is a cluster of philosophically informed, politically engaged, interdisciplinary social science research programs, associated historically with the Institute for Social Research founded in Frankfurt in 1923. Its subject matter is a society in which injustices are insulated from public scrutiny by their tendency to block insight into, or distort communication about, social reality. An important effect of this self-concealing feature of modern relations of inequality and domination is that the capacity of the victims of such injustice to discover the nature of their situation is systematically impaired — a fact which motivates the ‘consciousness-raising’ aspirations for which Critical Theorists are well-known.

Rush’s selections reflect his aim of both introducing and critically assessing the Critical Theory phenomenon, especially in its earlier phases, when it was most closely associated with the Institute, and the circle of ex-Institute émigrés produced by the Nazi rise to power in the 1930s. The contributions fall into three partly overlapping categories. First, there are a number of historical surveys of how Critical Theorists, over the years, addressed a certain theme. These include Joel Whitebrook’s lucid discussion of the series of Marx/Freud syntheses attempted by Critical Theorists (‘The marriage of Marx and Freud’), Raymond Geuss’ fascinating review of the vicissitudes of the concept of revolution in the Frankfurt School’s work and in radical thought generally (‘Dialectics and the revolutionary impulse’), and Simone
Chambers’ attempt to evaluate the contributions of Critical Theorists to political theory, notably democratic theory (‘The politics of Critical Theory’). Second, there are a number of reinterpretations of particular works or debates drawn from the history, above all the early history, of Critical Theory. These include Michael Rosen’s recounting of the different conceptions of the relationship between art and politics held by Adorno and Walter Benjamin (‘Benjamin, Adorno, and the decline of the aura’), as well as Julian Roberts’ review and reassessment of the Dialectic of Enlightenment, one of the central (and most politically ambiguous) texts of the Critical Theory tradition (‘The dialectic of enlightenment’). Finally, there are a few essays, mainly toward the end of the book, that attempt to situate Critical Theory in relation to contemporary intellectual debates. These include Kenneth Baynes’ systematic elaboration of Habermas’ self-description as a ‘Kantian pragmatist’ (‘The transcendental turn’), Beatrice Hanssen’s review of the Habermas/Foucault debate (‘Critical Theory and poststructuralism’), and two tendentious projections of possible futures for Critical theory, one by Stephen K. White (‘The very idea of a critical social science: a pragmatist turn’) and one by Axel Honneth (‘A social pathology of reason: on the intellectual legacy of Critical Theory’).

In matters of detail, that is, in exploring various conceptual innovations and key debates within the Critical Theory tradition, the volume is very strong. Rush’s own major contribution (‘Conceptual foundations of early Critical Theory’) offers a useful review of just how the notion of ‘critical theory’ was understood in the early days of the project, notably in contrast to various negative reference points like Vienna School positivism and Dilthey’s and Heidegger’s ‘irrationalism’. If nothing else, this reminds us of how far Critical Theory and its central concerns have traveled since then. And Baynes’ paper on Habermas’ ‘Kantian pragmatism’ helpfully introduces the concept of ‘the deliberative stance’ (200) — a variation on Brandom’s discursive score-keeping stance — to develop a systematic elaboration of how Habermas’ notion of context-transcending validity claims raised in utterances relates to contemporary work in ethical theory (notably Korsgaard) and the philosophy of mind (notably Davidson and Brandom). The chapter by Chambers captures well the implicit political project of Adorno and Horkheimer — ‘a Socratic enterprise of cranky admonishment and moral dressing-down’ (223) — and intelligently explores the dilemmas of contemporary democratic theory, defending Habermas’ questionable credentials as a critical theorist, given that his main project is now the defense of the central institutions of liberal capitalism against their radical critics.

The greatest weakness of the book, however, is not to be found in flaws affecting the chapters individually. Rather, it is a problem of the book taken as a whole, and in that sense an editorial defect. The overall picture of Critical Theory that emerges from the Companion is that of a museum artifact, fascinating from a nostalgic or antiquarian perspective, but doing little to demand serious attention from contemporary philosophers. Obviously, much of the important work in Critical Theory was published in the 1930s and
1940s, and Axel Honneth is right to point out that much of those early texts exude 'an atmosphere of the outdated and antiquated, of the irretrievably lost' (336). The historical and political context, not to mention the intellectual context, has been massively transformed in the intervening decades, and this is bound to open up a certain distance between these works and today’s reader. But why not balance the backward-looking stance of the intellectual historian with a similar insistence on presenting Critical Theory as a living tradition, with important contemporary achievements to its credit, and constituting a distinctive voice to which contemporary political thinkers must respond. The Companion fails in this respect. One reason is the almost complete omission of any discussion of the work of two of the leading contributors to Critical Theory today: Nancy Fraser and Seyla Benhabib. Both are briefly discussed in the contribution by Simone Chambers, but beyond that neither is acknowledged in the book as an important contributor to the ongoing vitality of Critical Theory.

This book should be read, certainly, but it should be read alongside such important works of contemporary Critical Theory as Nancy Fraser’s exchange with Axel Honneth, Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange (Verso, 2003). Otherwise one could get the impression that Critical Theory is primarily and not just among other things an important ‘movement’ in the history of twentieth-century philosophy, alongside existentialism and logical positivism.

Stephen D’Arcy
Huron University College