Relearning Liberation:
Critical Methodologies for the General Crisis

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Abstract: How can critical theory help us to articulate the nature of social suffering in twenty-first century capitalism, and to expand our horizons of possibility for liberation and alternative futures at a moment of apparent impasse? In this essay, we explore how critical theorists across three generations in the European Frankfurt School tradition articulated the 'struggles and wishes' of their age and place, and reflect on the contextual limits and enduring relevance of their negative, utopian, democratic and ethical methods. We then turn to developments of this work in the Latin American tradition, particularly as elaborated by feminists,

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which articulate critical theorizing as a transformative praxis within the material construction of dignified communitarian life. In the final part of the paper, we consider what we might learn about how to theorize our own dominations and liberations through this critical methodology.

Introduction

It is a difficult time to be working for radical social change or theorizing its possible trajectories. Many struggles for basic human dignity and alternative futures have recently emerged within what Nancy Fraser[3] calls a 'general crisis complex' as simultaneous crises in social reproduction and care, economic distribution, ecological sustainability and political authority 'intersect with and exacerbate one another'. As the human and ecological ravages of financialized capitalism intensify around the world, people are struggling to find respite from and alternatives to conflict, destitution and hopelessness. Faith in the basic institutions of liberal democracy, where they were functional, has shattered as militarism, xenophobia and racism have resurfaced as political virtues. At the same time, people's capacities for economic self-determination and self-realization have been eroded by the expansion of multinational capital into social institutions and everyday life. The reproduction of life itself – already so precarious in many parts of the world – has become more uncertain even in nations with substantial material resources and wealth. The severity and complexity of these crises thus demand new political narratives with which to name and theorize the causes of social suffering at this historical conjuncture.[4]

We thus begin this paper by asking: to what extent do the categories used by US and European critical theorists actually articulate diverse political aspirations or express the nature of social suffering today? We

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3   Nancy Fraser, 'Democracy's crisis' lecture given at Erasmus University (Rotterdam, 2014) (accessed at http://www.publicseminar.org/2014/11/democracys-crisis/#.WcUatMiGOHs). See also Fraser's article 'Contradictions of capital and care,' *New Left Review*, 2016, 100 (accessed at https://newleftreview.org/II/100/nancy-fraser-contradictions-of-capital-and-care).

4   Fraser, "Democracy's crisis".

suggest that the political ideals of liberation, democracy, equality and dignity which have oriented movements for social change since the nineteenth century cannot on their own guide us toward emancipatory possibilities. First, while these terms still often appear as universal ideals in progressive political discourse, they emerged from local histories of struggle and hope. Each offers a different analysis of the forms and causes of social domination, immiseration and injustice; each prioritizes different political values and objectives; each opens onto a different horizon of possibility; and each has itself been implicated in oppressions. Second, given the ongoing dismantling of liberal democratic sensibilities and institutions by marketisation, the growing instability of wage-based livelihoods and the dispossession of communal means of production, the fragmentation of organized labor, the weakening of international infrastructures for protecting human and environmental rights, and the institutionalization of authoritarian power at all levels of political decision-making in formerly democratic societies, these terms no longer name easily imaginable futures. Finally, these modern concepts and ideals, like other 'new identities, rights, laws and institutions of modernity such as nation-states, citizenship and democracy were formed in a process of colonial interaction with, and domination/exploitation of, non-Western people'.[5] For these reasons, the categories of analysis that have historically oriented critical theorists do not adequately capture the nature, scope, complexity, intensity, variety or unequal distribution of twenty-first century domination.

However, these terms do continue to play an important role in our thinking. Understanding how their meaning has shifted in time and place through different projects to clarify the 'struggles and wishes of the age'[6] can therefore help us to understand how new vocabularies of

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5   Ramon Grosfoguel, 'Decolonizing post-colonial studies and paradigms of political-economy: transmodernity, decolonial thinking, and global coloniality,' *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Ludo-Hispanic World*, 2011, 1(1): 12. Accessed: http://escholarship.org/uc/item/21k6t3fq.

6   Karl Marx, 'Letter to A. Ruge, September 1843,' in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (New York: Vintage Books,

emancipation have emerged at the intersections of theory and practice. In this paper, we explore how three 'generations' of critical theorists conceptualized social emancipation in historically and geographically specific ways. We take critical theory as our starting point because while no intellectual tradition can claim a monopoly on theorizing responses to domination, critical theory's historical commitment to identifying social contradictions, naming forms of domination and illuminating latent potentials for emancipation makes it a fruitful ground for this investigation. Starting from the notion of liberation as 'negation' that is associated with the Frankfurt school, we map the shift toward an interest in liberal and social democracy in the postwar period and then, given the limitations of this strategy, towards a reconsideration of the foundations of social justice in everyday life and the ontological and ethical politics of recognition and respect. We also explore the resignification of dignity as a practice of liberation by some critical theorists in both the global South and the global North, while noting concerns which have been raised about depoliticized notions of dignity within the 'ethical turn' in European social thought. In the final part of the paper, we propose that the contextualization of such key terms and their critical appropriation into new thinking is a method that might allow us to reopen emancipatory possibility within critical theory. Our hope is that this investigation will contribute to 'imagining this form of life differently by disclosing other possible ways of carrying it forward, other ways of "going on"'.[7]

Liberation as negation

For the early Frankfurt School theorists, both capitalism and fascism barbarized dignity, destroying the moral and political fabric of human relations. The multiple and interwoven forms of domination that surfaced in Germany during the period of National Socialism thus begged a more

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1975), 209. Quoted in Nancy Fraser, 'What's critical about critical theory? The case of Habermas and gender,' *New German Critique*, 1985, 35: 97.

7   Nicholas Kompridis, *Critique and Disclosure: Critical Theory between Past and Future* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 254.

comprehensive theory of liberation than either the critique of capitalist social relations or the psychological and cultural distortions of authoritarianism could provide. The depth and scale of destruction wrought by industrialized war and genocide, combined with the absence of any conceivable possibilities for redemption within modern economic and political institutions, gave rise to definitions of liberation as the triumph over 'negative ontology' where, in Karl Marx's words, 'Man exists as a degraded, exploited, debased, forsaken and enslaved being.[8] In this context, liberation was thus defined as a negation of that which negates and denies humanity and its creative potentials. Seeking to understand why and how people 'by their own toil keep in existence a reality which enslaves them in ever greater degree',[9] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno[10] located the source of domination in Enlightenment reason itself. They argued that instrumental rationality was evidenced in every dimension of modern-day domination –extermination camps, mass mobilizations, psychological repression, anti-Semitism, total administration and the culture industry – and this had dangerous consequences for critique. For if reason was being re-mythologized in Aryan nationalist propaganda and the technological marvel of the death camps; if its instrumentalization was not only necessary for capitalist production but also generative of genocide and torture, then the most important function critique could play would be a negative one – to negate 'realities' that are presented as rational. Axel Honneth[11] later argued that Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* offered a form of 'world-disclosing' critique, in

8   Werner Bonefeld, 'Negative dialectics and the critique of economic objectivity,' *History of the Human Sciences*, 2014, 29(2): 71, has argued that Marx's critique of political economy was a 'negative ontology'. Here, we acknowledge the influence of this argument on first-generation critical theorizations of society and extend it to the concepts of reason and liberation.

9   Max Horkheimer, 'Traditional and critical theory,' *Critical Theory* (New York: Seabury Press, [1937]1972), 213.

10   Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, [1944] 1997).

11   Axel Honneth, 'The possibility of a disclosing critique of society: the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in light of current debates in social criticism,' *Constellations*,

which contradictions revealed through dialectical analysis did not point affirmatively toward a reality or truth behind appearances, but rather disclosed possible worlds both realized and unrealized in their historical configuration. We further read the *Dialectic* as an emancipatory act in its own right, asserting – albeit imperfectly and individualistically – an autonomy of thought and undistorted human subjectivity that the authors believed were on the verge of being entirely liquidated. However, like the high modernist art that Adorno valorized as a rare space of modern freedom, this critique was radical resistance in a vacuum as it was detached from the practices of any concrete social base or community of struggle. In this context, where there seemed so little possibility of translating the spirit of critique into practice without annihilating it, then critique, like art, 'must remain alienation'.[12] Thus was alienation from reality, wrought through actively negating reality, conceptualized as a liberatory activity.

The revelatory power of negative critique became less compelling, however, in the postwar period amidst the material conveniences of consumer capitalism and construction of welfare state democracy. Writing in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, for example, Herbert Marcuse proposed a conception of liberation that had a more affirmative character, as the criterion for social action that 'would conform with the very *logos* of life, with the essential possibilities of a human existence, not only mentally, not only intellectually, but also organically'.[13] This 'pacified existence'[14] would entail a reduction of power and of overproduction, less television, and the practice of a meaningful politics in which people actually direct the social institutions that structure their lives. Yet while Marcuse found more hope for the possibility of praxis, his critique

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12   Herbert Marcuse, 'Art and revolution' in *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 103.

13   Herbert Marcuse, 'Liberation from the affluent society' (1967). Accessed: http://www.marcuse.org/herbert/pubs/60spubs/67dialecticlib/67LibFromAfflSociety.htm.

14   Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

also remained essentially negative as he found few resources to enact such liberation within either capitalism or communism. Instead, both liberal and collectivized freedoms had become institutionalized, one-dimensional and repressive, preserving only the illusion of freedom within different types of totalitarian social relations. Liberation had therefore to proceed dialectically towards the 'definite negation' of the system through a 'total mobilization' that mirrored the mobilization of the dominant policies of the day. This, however, not only had to work with evident and lived social contradictions, but also to 'activate the repressed and manipulated contradiction' through new forms of art and education that 'involve the mind and the body, reason and imagination, the intellectual and the instinctual need, because our entire existence has become the subject/object of politics, of social engineering'.[15]

From liberation to social democracy

Where the first-generation Frankfurt School theorized emancipation in response to fascism and the holocaust, the next generation responded to its aftermath. John Abromeit[16] sees Jürgen Habermas' project, for example, as having been consistent with the need of the postwar German state to reconstruct its ties to liberal democratic traditions after fascism, and it was hardly a unique case. After the revolutionary eruptions of 1968 in Europe, there was a palpable shift in the types of justice claims being made by social movements across the continent, and an 'ethical turn' in social and political thought more generally in which there was less talk of 'liberation'. Vazquez-Arroyo argues that from the 1980s, Anglo-European societies underwent processes of depoliticization during which all radical political projects – represented in the 20th century by both fascism and Marxism – were cast as unreasonable, unethical and at odds with the ideal of a victorious individual humanism. The consequent 'aspira-

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15 Marcuse, 'Liberation from the affluent society'.

16 John Abromeit, 'Right-wing populism and the limits of normative critical theory,' *Logos: A journal of modern society and culture*, 2017, 16(1-2). Accessed: http://logosjournal.com/.

tion to find normative principles outside the political realm'[17] marked a retreat from programmatic politics by altering not only definitions of liberation but the very relationship between liberation and time.[18] Rather than striving to imagine and actualize radically alternative futures – activities that were argued to be courting disaster – critical thought and practice were channeled into redeeming and preventing the repetition of past catastrophe through strengthening democratic culture and humanitarian politics.

'Democracy' rather than 'liberation' – or more accurately, liberation *through* democracy – was promoted as both the frame and the aim of critical theory that was allied to many social movements at this time. In the US, for example, much feminist theorizing turned away from grand narratives of liberation towards concrete struggles for democratic rights, social and economic inclusion, and redistributive power for women and minority populations. This shift is clearly reflected in the change in nomenclature from 'women's liberation' to the 'women's rights' movement. Habermas' conceptualization of democratic politics as the realization of reasoned, egalitarian, discursive deliberation oriented towards systemic social change was influential in this shift. So too was the work of Nancy Fraser, who in 1985 wrote that the struggle for women's autonomy was one for 'a measure of collective control over the means of interpretation and communication sufficient to permit us to participate on a par with men in all types of social interaction, including political deliberation and decision-making'.[19] Yet Fraser and other feminist critical theorists recognized that inclusion and 'participatory parity' were not panaceas. Capitalist workplaces, the public sphere and social movements were rife with informal exclusions and abuses that no discourse ethics could ameliorate. Pushback against struggles for liberation within patriarchal and

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17   Antonio Vázquez-Arroyo, *Political Responsibility: Responding to Predicaments of Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 25.

18   Jacques Rancière, 'The ethical turn of aesthetics and politics,' in *Aesthetics and its Discontents* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity, 2009). 119.

19   Fraser, 'What's critical about critical theory? The case of Habermas and gender,'128.

capitalist institutions therefore occasioned explorations into the deeper ontological and epistemological violence that is inflicted by the denial of human recognition. Some theorists, such as Axel Honneth,[20] defined this primarily as a problem of ethical politics, of how to ensure that all 'subjects are able to experience intersubjective recognition not only of their personal autonomy, but also of their specific needs and their particular capabilities' in society, and thus secure adequate conditions for identity-formation, self-realization, and the good life. Fraser[21] centered political demands for participatory parity and the equitable distribution of material resources and recognition as key conditions for enabling people regardless of individual or group identity to be 'full partners in social interaction'.

As claims for both recognition and redistribution became established in the Eurowestern grammar of social justice by the late twentieth century, they remained rooted in and bounded by liberal assumptions of equality and justice. Yet 'recognition' is often not desirable where it requires or confers visibility and viability within a logic of domination, a point neglected in theories of recognition produced from positions of racial, class, gender and geopolitical privilege. As bell hooks pointedly wrote, 'women in lower-class and poor groups, particularly those who are non-white, would not have defined women's liberation as women gaining social equality with men […] Knowing that men in their groups do not have social, political, and economic power, they would not deem it liberatory to share their social status'.[22] Further, following Silvia Federici, any 'logic of an analysis that sees women's oppression as caused by their exclusion from capitalist relations inevitably results in a strategy for us to enter these relations rather than destroy them'[23] – which is rather

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20 Axel Honneth, 'Recognition and justice: outline of a plural theory of justice,' *Acta Sociologica*, 2004, 47: 363.

21 Nancy Fraser, 'Recognition without ethics,' *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2001, 18(2-3): 24.

22 bell hooks, 'Feminism: a movement to end sexist oppression' in *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (New York and Boston: South End Press, 1984), 19.

23 Silvia Federici, 'Counterplanning from the kitchen (1975)' in *Revolution at*

the point. Conversely, not all experiences of 'misrecognition' are necessarily forms of injustice. When engaged as a pedagogical site, according to Nicholas Kompirids, as 'the occasion of a transformative and critical encounter with another', certain forms of misrecognition can open up 'a decentered space in which to learn about identities, problems and possibilities that are not legible (i.e., cannot be recognized) within the dominant grammars and frames of power.[24] Moreover, 'hidden or disguised processes' and 'new or unnoticed possibilities' for radical alterity may be revealed through such encounters.[25]

Given these complexities, articulating injustice primarily in terms of intersubjective misrecognition reflects a narrow view of the aim of critical theory to serve the 'minimization of relations of domination, not a social world without or beyond power relations'.[26] Yet since the end of the twentieth century, there have been growing criticisms of the desire for recognition or participatory parity within hegemonic social and conceptual systems, and more efforts to understand how we can create knowledge, live, and practice autonomy and justice in everyday life outside these grammars of power. As John Holloway writes, the demand now is 'not for "more democracy" but for a radical reorganisation of our daily activity, without which the call for "more democracy" means nothing at all'.[27]

Grounding liberation in dignity and social reproduction

Situating the theorization of liberation within the everyday problem of how to create, sustain and reproduce life demands engagement with 'a

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Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction and Feminist Struggle (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012), 29.

24 Nicholas Kompridis, 'Struggling over the meaning of recognition: a matter of identity, justice or freedom?' *European Journal of Political Theory*, 2007, 6(3): 283.

25 Nicholas Kompridis, 'From reason to self-realisation? Axel Honneth and the "ethical turn" in critical theory,' *Critical Horizons*, 2004, 5(1): 351.

26 Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), xiv.

27 John Holloway, *Crack Capitalism* (New York: Pluto Press, 2010), 86.

politics of knowledge that is both ingrained in the body and in local histories'.[28] It also therefore requires that we disentangle theories of liberation from assumptions about the primacy (or possibility) of rationalist, individualist and institution-based approaches to social justice and pay more attention to intergenerational and ecological ethics, collective and communal care, and co-operative labor in which democracy is a means rather than an end. This approach departs from Enlightenment ideals such as achieving liberal representative democratic consensus, as was so important for Habermas in postwar Germany, and signals not a retreat from democratic politics but a more inclusive and materially grounded commitment to democracy's democratization.

This mode of critique has recently been advanced in the global periphery[29] and spaces of 'structural exile' throughout the capitalist world system.[30] While it engages with classical critical theories of domination, it stretches beyond the Eurocentric horizons of the Frankfurt School, which Enrique Dussel argues 'ceased to be truly critical' in its second generation.[31] In his view, while critical theory had once accounted for the com-

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28 Walter Mignolo, 'Geopolitics of sensing and knowing on (de)coloniality, border thinking, and epistemic disobedience,' *Transversal* (2011). Accessed: http://eipcp.net/transversal/0112/mignolo/en.

29 Enrique Dussel, 'From critical theory to the philosophy of liberation: some themes for dialogue', *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, 2011, 1(2). Accessed http://escholarship.org/uc/item/59m869d2. Dussel defines the contemporary global periphery as that which is 'identified with those oppressed by or simply excluded from the world system' in *Ethics of Liberation In the Age of Globalization and Exclusion* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013), 47.

30 Andre Grubačic and Denis O'Hearn, *Living at the Edges of Capitalism: Adventures in Exile and Mutual Aid* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 250. 'Structural exile' is a term used to describe nonstate spaces in which, 'although people work, produce, and trade in the capitalist economy, they also do activities that are not fully incorporated into the structures of capitalist accumulation' and live in a contradictory relationship to the state and the capitalist system; see Andre Grubačic and Denis O'Hearn, 'Capitalism, mutual aid, and material life: understanding exilic spaces,' *Capital & Class*, 2016, 40(1): 152.

31 Dussel, *Ethics of Liberation In the Age of Globalization and Exclusion*, 208.

plex dynamics of dehumanization in the domains of 'will, affectivity and emotions, unconscious drives, and economic requirements' in its time and place, the later discursive and pragmatic turns in critical theory neglected the experiences and needs of 'victims of social evil' throughout the world who face nothing less than the need of constructing a 'new, postcolonial, postcapitalist and transmodern social order'.[32] Dussel thus proposes a praxis of liberation which is based not upon the development of autonomous reason or the 'liberation of inherent possibilities' within existing social systems, but upon ethical commitments to the defense of life, social consensus with respect to decisions affecting collectives, and non-domination in all proposals or courses of collective social action.

Today's feminist critical theorists go further to argue that knowledge and practice of liberation is rooted not only in the defense of life but in its creation, through 'processes and human activities that favor the dignified reproduction of life, even amidst the devastation imposed by capitalism'.[33] In these emerging traditions, it is the human 'capacity of giving form',[34] that is, of choosing and shaping our own sociality and future, that is the starting point and source of critical understanding. When people, overwhelmingly women, create and sustain life within systems of life-threatening oppression, they create counter-realities and concrete utopias that attest to the possibility of alternative realities, even when they are met with forms of violence which negate their legitimacy. Rather than focusing on the negative critique of capitalism's totalitarian logic, these theorists articulate and affirm the different kinds of knowledge that are needed to 'self-determine the goals, rhythms and forms

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32   Dussel, 'From critical theory to the philosophy of liberation: some themes for dialogue,' 17, 24.

33   Raquel Gutiérrez-Aguilar, Mina Lorena Navarro Trujillo, and Lucia Linsalata, 'Producing the common and reproducing life: keys towards rethinking the political' in Ana C. Dinerstein (ed). *Social Sciences for An Other Politics: Women Theorising without Parachutes* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). 80.

34   Bolivar Echeverría, 'El "valor de uso": ontología y semiótica in Bolivar Echeverría, *Valor de uso y utopia* (México: Siglo XXI, 1998).

of everyday life' that exist within, despite and in defiance of capitalist, patriarchal and racist-colonial oppressions. This knowledge is not produced in order to advance academic debates or to inform imagined political subjects and institutions, but created in collaboration, alliance and solidarity with embodied communities of struggle as part of the 'real insurrection of women' against heteropatriarchal capitalism across the world today.[35] This mode of critique as affirmative praxis 'negates by means of affirming life in, against and beyond capital'. As Ana Dinerstein explains, 'while negative praxis ignores the tensions and contradictions that exist between the compulsion to reproduce life through money and the need to destroy value-money in order to live, affirmative praxis navigates those contradictions encountered in the process of venturing beyond capital'.[36] Today, this form of critique is being developed by feminist scholar-activists working in Latin and South America, but it resonates with women's resistance movements and commoning practices across the globe. The critique of heteropatriarchal capitalism emerges through the socialization of childcare and domestic labour, the reclamation of land for subsistence farming, and the collective organization of the defense of life against physical and emotional violence, the rise of popular feminisms[37] and above all, the 'active cultivation and nurturing of relations among those who are part of a communitarian weaving, and of relations of protection and healing between that communitarian weav-

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35 Raquel Gutiérrez, 'Because we want ourselves alive, together we are disrupting everything: notes for thinking about the paths of social transformation today', *Viewpoint Magazine*, 7 March 2018. Accessed: https://www.viewpointmag.com/2018/03/07/want-alive-together-disrupting-everything-notes-thinking-paths-social-transformation-today/.

36 Ana Dinerstein, 'Concrete utopia: (re)producing life in, against and beyond the open veins of capital,' *Public Seminar*, December 7, 2017. Accessed: http://www.publicseminar.org/2017/12/concrete-utopia/.

37 See Silvia Federici, 'Feminism and the politics of the commons,' *The Commoner* (2011). Accessed: http://www.commoner.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/federici-feminism-and-the-politics-of-commons.pdf. and Gutiérrez, 'Because we want ourselves alive, together we are disrupting everything: notes for thinking about the paths of social transformation today'.

ing and it surroundings'.[38] The promise of this critique is not that we can refuse the social totality or refine democratic processes and sensibilities, but that it places the collective reproduction of dignified life at the heart of emancipatory knowledge production. It assumes that liberation requires negation (of that which negates life), but also nurtures an affirmative drive towards social reproduction that habilitates life beyond and against capital (which uses life as a means for its own reproduction).

Relearning liberation

'Dignity, for me, is always the starting point for political and moral autonomy; […] dignity is always necessary, but not sufficient for the unfolding of struggles for social and political transformation. The *"what else is needed?"* constitutes, I think, the heart of the contemporary militant political debate.'[39]

This brief reflection on how critical theorists have attempted to articulate the 'struggles and wishes' of their age and place illustrates that creating adequate understandings of liberation is a temporally and spatially contextualised activity that is interwoven with shifting relationships to different forms of reason. It proceeds not only by adapting existing categories and methods of analysis to new situations, but also as individuals with complex positionalities create new concepts in dialectical encounters between theory and practice in everyday life. The difficulty of this work is now felt acutely in places where the ongoing 'crisis complex' of capitalism has left not only the organization of society but also previous imaginaries of its liberation in shambles.

In the global North, just as traditional mechanisms of democratic power have been eviscerated and new ones have not yet emerged, so theo-

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38 Gutiérrez, Linsalata, and Navarro, 'Producing the common and reproducing life'.

39 Gutiérrez, in Veronica Gago, 'Rebuilding a dissident common sense: an interview with Raquel Gutiérrez', translated by L. Mason-Deese, "Making Worlds: A Commons Coalition" (2013). Accessed: http://www.makingworlds.org/rebuilding-a-dissident-common-sense-an-interview-with-raquel-gutierrez/.

retical capacities are under strain and new political narratives have not yet come into being. Here, capital has become such a strong 'organising principle of society' that it governs 'not only human powers but also the institutions through which human life is dominated' and the concepts through which we form our understandings of them.[40] A particular difficulty in the theorization of contemporary liberation here is that many critical theorists working within modernist rationalities and institutions struggle to conceive of a world-making agent that is genuinely collective or communal rather than individual or institutional, and in which dispossession by state or market power might be countered with self-reproductive activities. This is not simply a problem of positionality or a deficit of reason; within advanced capitalist societies, political subjects are individualized, divided and fragmented, and they often do not share material such as land held or worked in common, or live in self-organizing communities, which offer spaces for realizing and creating theory in practice. We thus cannot appropriate the theories of our colleagues in the global south, as we do not share the experience of the material production of life from within which these are emerging. Yet we can, and indeed must, follow their method of disembedding concepts of liberation from their universalist assumptions and asking if they might be put back together in an emancipatory form more fitting for our time and place, developing new critical tools as needed.

We can also learn from the radical critiques of domination, the radical theorizations of liberation that are happening every day. As racist violence, austerity politics, ecological destruction and the marketisation of social institutions intensify, people across the global North are struggling to proliferate possibilities for liberation; to understand how to effectively affirm and defend the dignity of life, community and social reproduction. We can see 'the production and circulation of relatively au-

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40 Ana C. Dinerstein and Michael Neary, 'Anti-value in motion: Labour, real subsumption and the struggles against capitalism,' in Ana C. Dinerstein and Michael Neary (eds) *The Labour Debate: An Investigation into the Theory and Reality of Capitalist Work (*Aldershot-Burlington: Ashgate, 2002). 207.

tonomous and partially incorporated exilic spaces and practices' in localized struggles for food sovereignty, public and common space, housing, education and health within what Andre Grubačic and Denis O'Hearn call the 'infra-politics of the world economy', where people are slowly building new foundations for militantly dignified thinking, acting and learning.[41] The Spanish *indignados* (M-15) mobilizations saw alienated, disposable and discarded workers embodying dignity by rejecting government-imposed economic 'austerity' (deprivation and dispossession) and demanding decent conditions for livelihood, labour, housing, education and political participation. In the US, Black Lives Matter and the #SayHerName campaign have revolutionized the collective defence and affirmation of Black life, dignity and justice by articulating the struggle against racial violence, genocide and dictatorship and asserting the right to a safe, just and dignified human existence.[42] Revolutionary energies are not 'exhausted' in the North, even within the general crisis complex of financialized capitalism. On the contrary, there is a palpable hunger; a felt 'lack of something and also escape from this lack', which – according to Ernst Bloch – signals 'the beginning of every movement towards something'.[43]

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41 Andre Grubačic and Denis O'Hearn, 'Capitalism, mutual aid, and material life: understanding exilic spaces,' *Capital & Class*, 2016, 40(1): 160.

42 #BlackLivesMatter is described by Alicia Garza (who co-founded it with Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi) as an 'ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise' and an 'affirmation of Black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression'. The women founded it as a 'call to action for Black people after 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was post-humously placed on trial for his own murder and the killer, George Zimmerman, was not held accountable for the crime he committed. It was a response to the anti-Black racism that permeates our society and also, unfortunately, our movements'. For more information about the herstory, principles and activities of the movement, see 'About' Black Lives Matter (2017): http://blacklivesmatter.com/who-we-are/.

43 Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1959/1995). 306.

Within this movement for twenty-first century liberation, however, it is important to critically theorize the conceptual repertoires with which we are working. This cannot be a case of merely applying existing critique in order to reveal the distance between our ideal of a liberating society and its instantiation. This dissonance is already clear. Nor can it be only a matter of seeking to further democratise liberal democracy, because it is hard to know what democracy *can* mean in a context of corporatized institutions, or how it is relevant to struggles for the basic dignity within formally democratic societies. Noting the exhaustion of utopian energies in the early 'aughts', Kompridis asked: once we have used theory to critique everything to death, including critique itself, what do we take forward from the tradition and what must we leave behind?[44] In response to Fraser's call for new political narratives, we return to the core concern of critical social theory from its inception – to give voice to and ease social suffering – and seek paths towards liberation from there.

As economic and political conditions in the US and Europe deteriorate, the contours of possible futures become visible in the suffering of those who live on the outermost edges of this system, who suffer its ravages without being pacified through reaping its privileges. If existing theories of democratic deficits, denials of dignity and inequality cannot adequately communicate and explain the nature and diversity of social suffering in our time, then we need to find new words that do. These words must enable us to both articulate and hear suffering caused by impediments to individual autonomy, self-realization or social recognition, as well as the reality of people's struggles to ensure their own survival and face challenges to a liveable life; that is, to living a viable life with others. Theories of community, connectedness and collectivity are needed to balance the more structural theories of class and status, race and gender that on one hand provide insight into the dynamics of social groups and capitalist social relations, but on the other also legitimize our separations. We are also reminded here of something Susan Sontag wrote about liberation in the 1970s: that sexual liberation wasn't about women *having more sex*, but

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44　Kompridis, *Critique and Disclosure: Critical Theory between Past and Future*.

about *what kind of* sex women were being liberated to enjoy.[45] Similarly, the task of critical theory today is not only to assess possibilities for more equality, democracy or dignity, but to again strive to articulate the kind of life we want to be liberated to live. Neither 'liberation from the affluent society' nor liberation from immiseration can be accomplished through sheer negation or refusal; today, as ever, liberation advances also through the recognition and affirmation of possibility.

   Two moves at least are required to make room for this work. One is to decentre the intellectual gravity of Europe and the US in critical theory to make conceptual space for alternative epistemologies to become visible. For example, 'identity' might be experienced as a 'mutual belonging (cobelonging) to a common world' rather than 'a relation among similar beings';[46] the 'human' might be understood as a historically specific and dynamic collectivity that decentres the European notion of 'man' as autonomous individual;[47] and 'commoning' can refer to the ongoing activity of producing our social lives in common, that at the same time produces ourselves as a common subject.[48] Another is to learn from existing but repressed or devalued imaginaries that are part of our own historical-theoretical repertoire. This includes art, which once had a very central place in critical theory. Adorno wrote eloquently and often about how and why art expresses suffering. If connecting deeply with social suffering rather than simply analysing it is part of liberatory theory, then art is a potential resource for that understanding, whether because it 'opens the established reality to another dimension: that of liberation'[49] or it aims to repair the bonds of community, as does the range of art practices identified with the recent 'ethical turn'. These lessons are hard, for

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45   Susan Sontag, 'The third world of women,' *Partisan Review*, 1973, 40.

46   Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017). 1.

47   Sylvia Wynter, 'Unsettling the coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom: Toward the human, after man, its overrepresentation – an argument,' *CR: The New Centennial Review,* 2003, 3(3): 257–337.

48   Federici, 'Counterplanning from the kitchen (1975),' 145.

49   Marcuse, 'Art and revolution,' 87.

just as Eurocentrism in critical social theory has invisiblized the knowledges and experiences of those in the global south, so too have we have cut ourselves off from critical aesthetic experiences of the world. Yet it is clear that at this critical conjuncture, new methods of theorizing liberation are needed. We still agree, as Horkheimer claimed in 1937, this 'will not take place via solidly established practice and fixed ways of acting, but via a concern for social transformation'.[50]

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50   Horkheimer, 'Traditional and critical theory,' 241.