

---

## 10.8 The Frankfurt School: Culture Critique

---

To try to understand war and oppression people often examine governments and government officials, financial interests, and explicit political ideologies. So, to understand the Iraq War, analysts often consider the political ideas of President George W. Bush, characteristics of US policy, the strategic power struggles playing out among the world's great powers, national interests such as security in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, economic interests in oil and weaponry, and more. Interpreters may even consider explicit cultural ideas related to war – for example, xenophobia and religious intolerance, a militant gun culture and the relatively recent conquest and struggles with its frontiers, ideas of American exceptionalism and preeminence, etc.

But what if the sources of war and oppression are far more pervasive in a society? What if they are rooted in the most ordinary aspects of daily life, in consumer goods, in films, music and other media, manufacturing processes, and in consumer-industrial-commercial culture generally? Critical thinking in the form of “culture critique” developed by Frankfurt School philosophers such as Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), Theodor Adorno (1903–1969), and Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979) undertakes to investigate just these questions. Influenced by the massive outburst of industrialized violence in World War I and then the horribly oppressive totalitarian systems that emerged with World War II, the Frankfurt School (so-called because of its origins in the Institute for Social Research at Goethe University in Frankfurt) synthesized elements culled from a host of disciplines – including Marxism, Freudian psychoanalysis, philosophy, art, and even modern physics – in developing their new forms of critical thinking.

### Lipstick is ideology

Theodor Adorno famously declared that objects such as lipstick are themselves ideological. He didn't only mean by that what feminist critics and others have argued – that the norms of female beauty (e.g., social demands on women to wear lipstick) can be harmful and oppressive. He meant that in the shiny, plastic, refined, obviously mass-produced object called lipstick, it is clear that the object is manufactured and sold through large-scale, highly regulated, modern, capitalist, industrial processes. The slick, smooth, sexy, polished, and glossy qualities of the stick of lipstick, repeated in the millions of lipsticks that have been sold, themselves announce the backstory of homogenized mass production through offices, roads, shipping, wage labor, industrial-technological industry, advertising, shopping malls, women's magazines, electricity, fossil fuels, and fashion institutions that inform the object and make it possible. More importantly, the socially accepted desirability of the cylinder of lipstick turns around to legitimate and make acceptable, even desirable, all that stands behind it. Lipstick, in short, legitimates modern capitalist society in general and creates appetites for it. To desire something is to desire the social relations that

produce the object of desire, that produce the desirability of the object. Critical thinkers, therefore, must work to understand the ideologies that inform the everyday objects that surround us and the networks of desire in which both those objects and we are immersed.

### Makers who are made

The critique runs even deeper, however. It's not just that those objects and cultural artifacts legitimate all that make them possible. It's that they shape us, and they shape us in ways that lead often to oppressive and violent conduct. It's not just that we desire a manufactured object like lipstick and the system behind it but also that our desire is itself manufactured. Our desires are not antecedent to the social order in which we live, and they are not independent from it. It's not just that lipsticks are themselves mass produced, homogeneous, repeated, and regularized through modern capital and culture but that we are, too. The processes that churn out mass-produced consumer goods also mass produce consumers – mass produce us. The discipline that it takes to work and consume and even participate in manufactured enjoyments (films, amusement parks, computer games) requires disciplined and regularized people; and that regularization prepares people to accept the disciplined and organized systems of war, policing, and control characteristic of totalitarianism, etc. The adulation that people are cultivated to express toward celebrities prepares them to adore state leaders.

### The Dialectic of Enlightenment

Perhaps one of the Frankfurt School's most trenchant critical claims is that the rationality we've inherited from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment is not (only) a force for liberty, equality, and community but (also) ultimately the source of concentration death camps and other forms of oppression that characterize more recent history. Modern rationality becomes increasingly "instrumental," and it transforms us all into mere instruments, disposable in service to other ends. It demands the subjection of the world (including others and non-humans in the world) to its demands for utility, efficiency, and technological power. Are totalitarianism and cultural imperialism, then, the antithesis of modern reason or its natural result?

### *Exercises and study questions*

1. How can one use Frankfurt School-style forms of critical thinking to think critically about mobile phones and social media?
2. How might the very form and material properties of Hollywood blockbuster films, especially those that heavily employ computer graphics technologies, be criticized from a Frankfurt School perspective?

3. Did the role of technology and modern industrial practices make the Holocaust different from mass killings in the ancient world, for example, Alexander's destruction of Tyre or the Roman destruction of Carthage?
4. In what way is air conditioning ideology?
5. How might a Frankfurt School analysis connect popular music, fast food, slaughterhouses, and forest clear cutting?

## SEE ALSO

- 10.9 Class Critiques
- 10.10 Feminist and Gender Critiques
- 10.13 Ecological Critiques

## READING

Jeffrey T. Nealon & Caren Irr, *Rethinking the Frankfurt School: Alternative Legacies of Cultural Critique* (2002)

Stephen Eric Bronner & Douglas MacKay Kellner, eds., *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader* (1989)

Andrew Arato & Eike Gebhardt, eds., *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (1978)

---

## 10.9 Class Critiques

---

One of the most important tools of critical thinking is what we'd like to call "class critique." By this we mean criticizing texts, theories, artwork, practices, etc. on the basis of the ways in which they serve or subvert class hierarchy or class struggle.

### Classical Marxism: superstructure and substructure

There are a variety of prominent forms of class critique. Perhaps the classic formulation of this critical tool is to be found in the work of German philosophers Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895). Most philosophers before Marx and Engels held that philosophy and other elements of human culture develop through the action of the thoughts, ideas, and intentions of individuals, independently of the economic order in which they were produced. Marx and Engels challenged this idea, arguing instead that a society's "mode of production" (e.g., feudalism or capitalism) acts as a kind of *substructure* that determines the attributes of the cultural *superstructure* built upon it.

For Marx and Engels it is not the dynamics of ideas that determine social arrangements (a view Marx attributed to Hegel); it's the dynamics of the economic base that determine our ideas. A bit more bluntly, if you want to understand some text, etc., figure out how it supports or undermines the mode of production in which it was written and in which it's read. For example, the US Civil War, which Marx covered as a journalist, was not from a classical Marxist perspective fought to end chattel slavery but rather to clear the way for a profit-generating system based on wages – wage-slavery. Similarly, a Marxist might argue that US racial segregation ended not because of the political savvy and clever arguments of activists such as Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., but because ending it served the interests of capitalism. This strict, traditional reading of Marx, however, has largely given way, even among Marxists. Another version of class critique in the work of Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) rejects the classical Marxist thesis that this determination is one-directional, arguing instead that the culture reciprocally affects the economic substructure, too.

### It's the class hierarchy, stupid

Another prominent class-based form of criticism is rooted in the anarchist rather than the Marxist tradition. While Marxists root class struggle and the many forms of oppression in the fundamental division between those who own or control the means of production and those who work the means of production, for anarchists economic domination is not basic. Rather, domination *per se*, in any form, is the problem. American anarchist Emma Goldman (1896–1940), for example, objected to the hierarchies created not only by private capital but also by government and by religion. Other anarchists have objected to the hierarchies of patriarchy, of racism, of humans over non-human animals, and of Western culture over non-Western societies. This leads to an important difference in prescriptions: while Marxists accept a positive and important role for the state in creating a post-capitalist society, anarchists do not.

### Exploitation, alienation, and class struggle

Two of the most powerful tools class-based forms of criticism have developed are the concepts of “exploitation” and “alienation.” *Exploitation* has a fairly precise meaning in Marxist analyses. It's the expropriation of wealth from workers who ought to own that wealth, principally because they have produced it through their labor. *Alienation* is a complex and less precise idea, but the nub of it is that certain social orders stifle, damage, and deform human beings, preventing people from developing and flourishing in the ways that are best for them. Humans exist today not in the best ways they can but instead in a diminished state – alienated from others, from the natural world, from their work, and even from their true selves.

Marxists understand the Protestant Reformation, for example, not fundamentally as a theological innovation but as a change in thinking demanded by the newly burgeoning capitalist institutions of Europe. Because capitalism needed to break the communal, local ties characteristic of feudalism, it developed new conceptual superstructures that emphasized individuality and personal conscience over communal, feudal church authority. This atomized way of living is alienating to people, and alienation is painful. Of course, feudalism entailed its own forms of alienation, and in the Middle Ages religion was used to justify the divine right of royals and aristocrats to rule and expropriate from the poor. That kind of domination and exploitation is alienating, too, and in both cases pain marks the potential for rebellion. So, Marx explains, religion has also functioned as a tool to dull the wounding the alienated endure. Religion is, says Marx in his 1844 *Contributions to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*: “the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people.” It is the work of critical thinking, then, from a Marxist perspective to expose the ways that texts and social arrangements exploit and diminish us, the ways we are alienated, and how we respond to that alienation – either by coping, resisting, masking, or profiting from it.

### False consciousness

Class-based criticism, therefore, often works to expose and explain what Marxists call *false consciousness*, the false and misleading ideas foisted upon the exploited and dominated to convince them to support the very order that oppresses them. One common target of false consciousness criticism is the set of liberal political and economic rights –with examples such as free speech and the free market. The exploited often take solace in the understanding that even if they are weak and poorly compensated, they at least compete on a level playing field and enjoy precisely the same freedoms as the ruling class in political action and the marketplace. Marxists criticize this view, maintaining that these rights were developed for the ruling class and are effectively enjoyed only by that class. Perhaps most importantly, liberal rights and freedoms mask the real power imbalances that determine social outcomes.

### Criticizing class critique

The importance of class critique is that, historically, it has influenced a great deal of political rhetoric and social policy. And since rhetoric and policy affect all of us, we have an interest in asking hard questions about whatever influences them. For instance, is society actually structured the way Marxists critics claim? Should we accept Marx's definition of “exploitation”? Can wages compensate or eliminate what Marxists call “alienated” labor? Have workers' lives improved under capitalism? If so, how much of that improvement can be attributed to capital investment and how much

to labor? How much to class struggle through, say, strikes, and how much through market forces? Is there any empirical evidence to suggest that socialism or communism would improve people's lives or, instead, make people worse off? The empirical facts matter for Marxism, so we can at least in part test it for accuracy.

*Exercises and study questions*

1. In what way does Christopher Nolan's *Batman* trilogy of films help serve or subvert the interests of capital? Is his film *Inception* about false consciousness?
2. In what way does "race" figure into the class struggle? How did ending legal segregation serve the interests of capital?
3. How does religion help manipulate and exploit subordinate classes, relieve their suffering, or blunt their resistance?
4. Develop a class-based analysis of the Iraq War.
5. What are the principal forms of class struggle today?
6. In what ways has the exploitation and alienation of people changed since the mid-nineteenth century? How has globalization affected exploitation and alienation?
7. What are some of the hierarchies that exist in today's society? Are they good and justifiable or wrong and exploitive?
8. Can a class-based critique be made of the Internet and social media?
9. Is religion still the "opium of the people"? Or can religion also promote positive social change, even revolution? Give a class analysis of militant religious movements.
10. How from a Marxist point of view are racism and sexism and ecological harm related to class oppression?

SEE ALSO

- 10.7 Foucault's Critique of Power: Microphysics of power and biopower
- 10.8 The Frankfurt School: Culture Critique
- 10.10 Feminist and Gender Critiques

READING

- Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (2010)
- Peter Singer, *Marx: A Very Short Introduction* (2001)
- Emma Goldman, "Anarchism: What it Really Stands For" (1910)
- Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848)
- Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845)
- Friedrich Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany* (1850)

---

10.10 Feminist and Gender Critiques

---

German athlete Dora Ratjen placed fourth in the 1936 Olympic high jump competition and took the gold medal in the 1938 European championship, but three years later Ratjen was arrested and the medal returned. Her name was changed to Heinrich. Why? Because Ratjen was determined not to be female. For a variety of reasons, social and physical, however, many have argued that it was also wrong to call Ratjen “male.” Perhaps Ratjen’s trouble wasn’t fraud, or an error made by her parents and childhood physicians at all. Perhaps the difficulties Ratjen faced were cultural and conceptual; perhaps they were rooted in the very ideas and practices of the ways we think about gender?

Among the most important ideas around which human life is organized are those of gender and sex. The roles and rules of social conduct, the distribution of wealth and power, psychological and political identity, protocols and manners, as well as many other dimensions of life are determined or inflected by ideas of male and female, man and woman, girl and boy, heterosexual and homosexual, feminine and masculine. So, critical thinking about texts, institutions, and practices must include criticism of matters of sex and gender.

It used to be the case that people made what they thought was a clear distinction between “sex” and “gender.” “Sex” was biological and had to do with the behavior and physical structures of animals and plants that reproduced, well, sexually, ultimately through the combination of DNA from what biologists call a “male” and a “female.” “Gender” was cultural and had to do with the social roles, styles, manners, and customs contingently associated with the biological reality. Today, however, theorists have become reluctant to make that distinction, at least in a clean way. For one thing, the biological concepts themselves have been, upon closer examination, found to be less clearly separable from other cultural ideas. And, moreover, the biological binary has become problematic insofar as the world seems less clearly divided along two well-demarcated sex lines.

Some creatures are biologically intersexed, exhibiting biological traits associated with both sexes, and that in a variety of ways – some snails and worms, and spotted hyenas, for example. Humans with Klinefelter syndrome possess XXY chromosomes (whereas most humans called “male” possess XY and most called “female” possess XX chromosomes). Some living things shift sex from male to female and from sexual to asexual forms of reproduction. Aphids are female for most of their lives but sometimes shift to being male, so they can reproduce asexually or sexually. Bluebanded goby fish and Amborella shrubs shift back and forth between female and male, and Australian bearded dragon lizards can shift sex when temperature changes. And, of course, different species bear and raise young in many different ways. Male seahorses are just one species where childcare is not the job of females.

Understanding the problematic dimensions of a simple binary and of forcing people into it, today people like Ratjen often prefer to be called “genderqueer,” exhibiting the

physical structures and other traits (e.g., dress, ornament, and speech) associated with both sexes – or neither.

These distinctions become relevant because we often treat one another differently based on how we perceive one another sexually. Religious convictions may make us critical of some sexual orientations or even biological conditions. Political convictions may bias us against certain groups before we fully understand what is at issue. Even the structure of our daily lives might make it difficult for some people to pursue their interests. Consider that the workday is typically 8am to 5pm, while school runs from 8am to 3pm. This means that the primary caregiver of a child either cannot work or must make arrangements for childcare between 3pm and 5pm. If, as has traditionally been the case, the primary caregiver is female, then the very structure of the workday excludes more women than men from the workplace.

### Politics and gender

Thinking critically about the gendered dimensions of a social institution or practice will involve asking how it is organized. Are different roles or practices associated with one gender or another? If so, how are those roles enforced? Are resources, power, privilege, wealth, credibility, and stature distributed in gendered ways? In what way do participants enact their roles and perform their gender in these institutions? What is it to be a proper “man” or “woman” in these conditions? What rules and standards govern gendered conduct? Who is excluded?

Some critical thinkers scrutinize and then decide that some practice or institution is gendered and properly so. Others thinking critically about these matters, however, adopt a subversive or restive posture. Can questions or ideas or forms of conduct be formulated that interrupt or challenge or subvert the gendered dimensions of an organization, a theory, a ritual, a culture, a practice? Can androgyny, cross-dressing, role reversals, rule transgressions, body modifications, linguistic alterations, diversified sexual practices, carefully chosen social improprieties, etc., “jam” or obstruct the operation of oppressive gendered norms and cultures, especially those that are patriarchal and hetero-normative?

The practice of “queering” is to do just that with “hetero-normativity.” Hetero-normativity is the privileging of heterosexual norms, values, and identities while excluding what is non-heterosexual – e.g., lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, asexual, or queer (though these categories and terms are themselves somewhat in flux). To open a space for transgender people of whatever sexuality, some have begun to add the prefix “cis” (from the Latin for “on this side” of) to the terms male and female, establishing *cisgender* such that those who retain and who are publicly acknowledged by the gender they have been assigned at birth are *cisgender*, principally *cis male* and *cis female*, while those who have transitioned to another gender are *trans male* and *trans female* (where “trans” is drawn from the Latin for “across” to) – though of course this may establish another binary.



Critical thinking about gender can involve thinking about what sorts of concepts and conduct can “queer” or interrupt or open new spaces of self-understanding, identity, and behavior beyond those defined by the gendered ways of being, thinking, and doing that currently exist. Would it be possible to eliminate gender entirely from society and just consider each human being without gender? Can there be more than two genders such as the “berdache” or Native American “two-spirit”? If so, is there a limit to how many genders, or can people define their own gender in perhaps a countless variety of ways? What practices of sexuality are to be identified, permitted, and excluded? How best should the fluidity and dynamism of gender and sexuality be acknowledged? How much does nature and biology determine or restrict an individual’s or society’s gender and sexual divisions?

That all sounds pretty abstract. So, let’s consider a few examples and critical questions that might be used to illuminate them. In a given organization (say a family or a business or a school), what roles do men and women and genderqueer people play? Do men hold more or different kinds of power? Are compensation rates equal, vacation time, and parental leave? Are women expected to be the primary caregivers of children, the sick, and the elderly? Are men discouraged from that role? Are men allowed to show emotion, and do they show emotion, besides anger? How are those who are not heterosexual but rather transgender treated? How are toilets and other private spaces arranged? Why do women wear certain kinds of clothing but men others? Are women sexualized, subjected to sexual violence, or harassed in ways men are not? Are men subject to violence and punishment in ways women are not? Are women and men expected to behave differently in different situations? Are standards of evaluation different for the different genders? Are work assignments different? Are forms and modes of speech different? What practices reinforce standard forms of gender? Is one gender given greater credibility, regarded as more knowledgeable, more rational, more responsible, more capable, better suited to some roles than others? Are one gender’s opinions and judgments treated differently?

In one of the Western tradition’s first philosophical arguments for gender equality, Plato wrote in Book V of the *Republic* that both men and women are fit to serve as philosopher-kings and -queens of his ideal society because being male or female, while relevant to other functions, is irrelevant to ruling. The idea that males and females are politically equal has gained serious acceptance in the West, especially since Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) started defending women’s rights in the 1700s and 1800s. Indeed, the idea that biological differences ought to make no difference in most contexts is a commonplace in liberal societies. Nevertheless, in many cases gender and sexuality continue to prove complicated, undesirably restrictive, and otherwise problematic for people. The goal of critical thinking in relation to these problems is to clarify and to structure thinking about these issues, perhaps especially in those areas where obstacles or exclusions persist, in order to help eliminate those that are improper and wrong. The very act of critical questioning, too, may open up new possibilities for gendered and sexual ways of thinking and acting.

It's certainly not always true that gender is irrelevant in life. The fact that maternity wards cater exclusively to women is not discriminatory against men any more than the fact that children's hospitals cater exclusively to children is not discriminatory against adults. It remains important in medical research and healthcare to distinguish male and female human beings. In these cases, gender matters. But there have been challenges to the idea that mothers receive paid maternity leave while fathers do not. In response, some companies and countries such as Iceland and Norway now extend paid parental leave to fathers. When, then, is gender and sexuality properly considered in making moral, political, economic, etc. judgments and when not?

### Feminist critique

Feminism has developed a spectrum of critical approaches. It's impossible to cover them all here, but we might say that in contrast to queering and jamming gender, feminism focuses more specifically on subverting "patriarchy" or more broadly what feminist thinker bell hooks (1952–) has called "sexist oppression." Patriarchy can be defined roughly as the domination of women by men (and of some younger men by some older men). Defining feminism, hooks writes in her 1984 essay, "Feminism: A Movement to End Sexist Oppression":

Its aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any particular race or class of women. It does not privilege women over men. It has the power to transform in a meaningful way all our lives . . . . Feminism as a movement to end sexist oppression directs our attention to systems of domination and the inter-relatedness of sex, race, and class oppression. . . . The foundation of future feminist struggle must be solidly based on a recognition of the need to eradicate the underlying cultural basis and causes of sexism and other forms of group oppression.

So, thinking critically about a text will involve considering questions such as: In what ways does this text reinforce or resist patriarchy? How are women and girls depicted here? Do they have a voice? Is violence against women eroticized or made somehow a pleasing spectacle? Is force and violence the solution to problems? Do the actions of females in the text express agency? How are their desires understood? Are sexual double standards invoked? How are parenting and childcare depicted? Do evaluative concepts determined by patriarchy, such as "honor" or "beauty," control or punish women? What relationships of power between men and women are valorized or undermined? Who controls the wealth? How are reason and feeling, authority and passivity, command and nurture, civilization and nature related to male and female in the text? What norms of gender govern any expression related to divinity or the sacred? Feminist philosophers have argued that even some of our most basic philosophical (and other) categories are inflected in sexist ways – e.g., good/evil, truth/opinion, science/superstition, public/private, freedom/oppression. Indeed, perhaps these binaries, as binaries, are themselves patriarchal.

While the driving motivation of the feminist movement is political and moral equality, the strategies for achieving that equality fall on a continuum between two endpoints. Some feminists have emphasized *equality* and argued that women are just as capable as men and can do what they can do, whether it involves physical labor, academic scholarship, or corporate or political leadership. The danger of this approach is that, if the social structure really is patriarchal, by simply placing women in these roles without reforming them we may be embracing patriarchal social structures as socially and politically correct. Others, emphasizing difference, have argued that women are distinct from men, perhaps essentially so, rejecting the norms of abstract thinking, reason, and careerism as patriarchal. The danger of this option is that at the extreme it can define males and females as virtual aliens, unable to find common ground even on something as basic as logic. Perhaps a middle ground might be found between these two poles, highlighting the fact that, while men and women share much in common, women possess capacities and dispositions that are both distinctly feminine and important for understanding reality, even though they've been devalued and excluded from too much of life.

For critical thinkers, the important question here is how we might discern whether a feminist critique is accurate. Are binaries such as good/evil, truth/opinion as they're commonly understood gendered? How might we know? If we argue against moral and epistemological binaries, are we simultaneously implying that women do not or cannot think or act like men – and vice versa? What are the indicators of patriarchal structures? In what ways might society look different if it did not have these structures? How might we start moving away from a power imbalance between genders? Can men be involved in the process without reinforcing that power imbalance? The ability to test claims through the tools set out in this volume sets the critical thinker apart from those who succumb merely to the rhetoric of the loudest voices.

### Text and gender

To be clear, we don't mean just texts on mobile phones and social media, but "text" in the sense of something read and interpreted: feminist and gender critics have raised important questions about whether the form of texts itself exhibits masculinist and heteronormative biases. To think critically about patriarchy and gender consider questions such as: Does the text speak in a male or binary voice? Does it take a male gaze upon the world and upon women? Does it assert a single, authoritative truth and move to a single definitive climax, or does it express multiple perspectives and a polyclimactic structure? Are moral judgments determined by moral principles, or do they emerge from networks of personal relationships, as psychologist Carol Gilligan famously suggested is more commonly female?

In general, to use this tool, ask how the text, practice, or institution under scrutiny is informed or inflected by concepts related to gender and sex such as male and female, masculine and feminine, heterosexual and queer, perhaps regardless of the intent of its authors or those participating or enacting the practice.

*Exercises and study questions*

1. What would have been the best way to handle the Dora/Heinrich Ratjen case? Should M to F trans women be allowed to compete in athletic contests against cis women? Should sport be organized by the gender binary at all? Perhaps some sports but not others?
2. If someone possesses physical structures typically associated with one sex or gender but self-identifies as another, what if anything is the best way of thinking or acting in relation to that person? Does context make a difference: primary school, university, employer, prison, military, or toilets?
3. Can the gender binary be disrupted or subverted? Partially or totally? If so, why and how? If not, why not?
4. Is patriarchy the best way to describe existing gender relations?
5. In what sense might governments be described as patriarchal?
6. Are the Abrahamic religions patriarchal? If so, are they intrinsically or just accidentally patriarchal?
7. Is family typically patriarchal today? If so, how can it be altered to become less so?
8. Are contemporary forms of paid employment patriarchal? If so, how can they be altered to become less so? Should there be paid paternity as well as maternity leave?
9. Are males intrinsically more violent than females? Is masculinity more violent than femininity? How is violence differently practiced and experienced among the different sexes/genders?

SEE ALSO

- 10.9 Class Critiques
- 10.8 The Frankfurt School: Culture Critique
- 10.5 Semiotics: Critically Reading Signs

READING

- Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sex/Gender: Biology in a Social World* (2012)
- Cordelia Fine, *Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society, and Neurosexism Create Difference* (2011)
- Miranda Fricker & Jennifer Hornsby, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Feminism in Philosophy* (2000)
- Bell Hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody* (2000)
- Rosemarie Putnam Tong, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*, 3rd edn (2008)

---

## 10.11 Critiques of Race and Racism

---

There's little dispute that modern history has been racialized, that people have been classed according to concepts of "race," and that the ideology of "racism" has been used to organize various social institutions, practices, and distributions of goods. There is less agreement, however, about exactly what race and racism is. Racism may be *overt* or *explicit*, evident in overt statements and intentional acts of racial discrimination, abuse, or violence. South African apartheid institutions, US Jim Crow segregation laws, and the French *code noir*, as well as lynchings and the burning of crosses by the Ku Klux Klan, exemplify overt and explicit racism. Racism, however, may also be *covert* and people may be influenced by *implicit bias*, even without the conscious intent or understanding of those who engage in racist practices. That may be the case, according to some, because of the *systematic* and pervasive character of racism – that is, the way racism pervades the very structures and organized systems of our societies, our languages, our customs, our conceptual schemes, and our dominant institutions so that they may function to produce racist effects even without people (any longer) consciously intending them to do so. There are a variety of critiques that thinkers have developed to confront race and racism. Critical thinkers today will be well advised to gain facility with them.

### Scientific critique of race

One way of thinking critically about race has been to subvert or deconstruct the very idea of it by showing that sound scientific inquiry actually falsifies or resists the concept. Although race was until recently accepted and cultivated by scientific authorities, contemporary biologists have scrutinized race and largely shown that the *scientific racism* of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries is not well grounded in the empirical data or otherwise in scientific theory. The concept of "race" doesn't illuminate biological facts. Instead it obscures and distorts them. So, racialized biological claims are false or, at best, misleading. Call this the *scientific critique of race*. You might say that while the natural and social sciences failed in the past by falling for the ideologies of racism, the sciences have also redeemed themselves by self-critically overcoming and falsifying racist ideas. The sciences are vulnerable to *ideological science* (see 9.8), but they are also well equipped for self-correction.

### Liberal critique of race

Another way of criticizing racialized practices, ideas, and institutions is by arguing that they conflict with our most cherished moral and political ideals – often ancient religious precepts or modern political ideals of human equality. Race may not

adequately express biological facts, but it certainly expresses social reality. One might call criticisms of racialized social reality based on the liberal ideal that all people are equal and should be treated equally as individuals the *liberal critique* of race. US Supreme Court justice John Marshall Harlan, from the once segregated and former slave state of Kentucky, articulated a liberal criticism of race when he argued in his dissent to the 1896 Supreme Court ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that:

Our constitution is colorblind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law. The humblest is the peer of the most powerful . . . . The arbitrary separation of citizens on the basis of race, while they are on a public highway, is a badge of servitude wholly inconsistent with the civil freedom and the equality before the law established by the Constitution. It cannot be justified upon any legal grounds.

Racism, according to this way of thinking, is a failure to live up to social-political ideals. It's a shortcoming and a corruption of modern republican government and democratic egalitarianism. Martin Luther King, Jr., and others involved in the US Civil Rights movement are often, along these lines, credited with helping the US live up to its own political principles, with helping the nation to understand that the existence of slavery and legalized racial segregation represented inconsistencies and imperfections of US political aspirations.

### Marxist critique of race

Marxist theorists have argued that racism, while inconsistent with liberalism, is not inconsistent with the economic system that underwrites both race and liberal ideals for the purpose of advancing and sustaining itself – namely capitalism. As South African anti-apartheid activist and University of Cape Town professor Jack Simons argued, racism is a “special form of colonialism,” and modern colonialism, according to Marxists, was a project of capitalism. While, for liberals, racism can be confronted independently of a critique of capitalism (and very probably *should* be confronted independently of a critique of capitalism), according to Marxists, doing so can only prove insufficient to the task because race and class are inextricably intertwined.

For Marxists, ideologies of race exist because they make it possible to divide the working class against itself and thereby inhibit workers from uniting against capitalism. Race convinces white labor that even if it's exploited, it can be contented at least with the understanding that it's better off than the workers of other racial groups. Rather than making demands upon capital, white labor in that way can be made principally to fear and to expend its energies resisting the gains of racial minorities. Race also gives a social legitimation to the exploitation of racialized groups. It was permissible to enslave some people or to drive others into horribly exploitative sweatshop, railroad, or agricultural work because their “race” legitimated it; and those racialized

as non-white expanded and contracted as it suited the demands of capital. Race, for Marxists, is a tool that capitalism uses (1) to undermine the solidarity and unified demands of the proletariat and (2) to justify exploitative labor practices. Call this the *Marxist critique of race*.

### Critical race theory

There's another radical approach to the criticism of race in modern society, however, a more recent approach called *critical race theory* that began with the work of a number of legal theorists, in particular Derek Bell (1930–2011). There are several critiques developed by this movement that critical thinkers about race will find useful.

1. *Race is intrinsic and central.* Critical race theorists argue that race and racial discrimination are not aberrations, imperfections, inconsistencies, or distortions of otherwise noble and fine political ideals but rather that race is intrinsic to modern US and European cultures and institutions. Racism, by this account, then, doesn't represent a failure of those ideals but actually the social arrangement proper to them. Racism, in short, is normal in contemporary Western society. Criticizing modern racism requires, then, criticizing not only the failure of people to live up to dominant ideals but instead the ideals themselves.

2. *Race is principally a social rather than biological matter.* Critical race theorists agree with those advancing scientific critiques that concepts of race are not well grounded biologically. They emphasize, in addition, even more broadly than Marxists, that although race poses as biological it arose for social-political-economic reasons and has been frequently reconfigured for social-political-economic purposes. English common law was inverted, for example, in colonial Virginia in 1662 so that children would follow in slave status and race from the condition of the mother (appealing to the Roman principle of *partus sequitur ventrem*) rather than the father. (This made it possible for male slaveholders in Virginia to produce more slaves simply by impregnating the women they owned.) The Irish were configured as a non-white race, when it suited. In some circumstances, "one drop" of "black" blood (a single ancestor at any point) was enough to define someone as black. Racial position was defined elsewhere by who sat at which table. As a result, critical thinkers will do well to understand that "race" is not a single concept but a family of concepts that applies differently to different groups and even differently to what seems to be the same group across time and space. Blackness is not an essence or a trans-historical singularity but, rather, a complex, variegated, and often inconsistent network of ideas and practices.

3. *Race has epistemic implications.* Race, according to critical race theorists, produces epistemic standpoints of the sort we addressed in 7.6 when we discussed social-political standpoints and their implications. Critical thinkers, therefore, might wonder whether or not knowledge claims about social reality can be complete and objective without including the judgments of groups marginalized or excluded on the

basis of race. One might even consider whether standpoint critique prevents epistemic agreement about social facts, perhaps because of the effects of *white privilege* – e.g., whether the police treat whites and non-whites equally. Critical race theorists are suspicious, even resistant, to the idea that race can today be transcended and that a strictly neutral view of social reality is under current conditions possible – at least without considering the racial standpoints of the claims being entered. Criticism of race cannot itself be “colorblind” but instead must employ race itself as a category of critical analysis.

#### SEE ALSO

- 9.8 Bad Science
- 10.9 Class Critiques
- 10.8 The Frankfurt School: Culture Critique

#### READING

- Michael Omi, *Racial Formation in the United States* (2014)
- Richard Delgado & Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge* (2013)
- Richard Delgado & Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd edition (2012)
- Ali Rattansi, *Racism: A Very Short Introduction* (2007)
- George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (2003)

## ————— 10.12 Traditionalist and Historicist Critiques —————

A few days after the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and the Pentagon, President Bush characterized the response the US government was about to undertake as a “crusade.” It was a choice of words critically received in Europe and across the Middle East, largely because the president seemed to have forgotten the provocative historical meaning the word “crusade” carries, especially for those whose ancestors were on the receiving end of the Crusades. (See 10.5.)

Some forms of critical thinking turn upon considerations of logic, evidence, and the justification of knowledge claims. Other forms of critical thinking turn upon ethical and political considerations of justice, power, oppression, liberty, and liberation. Still others advance criticisms using what might be called “conditions of meaning.” We’ve seen that critical thinking about meaning can employ critical lenses that focus on matters of semiotics (that is, signs, signifiers, and reference), voice, perspective, and poetic tropes. Traditionalist and historicist forms of critical thinking also consider condition of meaning, but in a different way. One might say that these approaches criticize forms of forgetfulness.



### A history of thinking about history

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) described human beings as “thrown” (*geworfen*) into a world not of their own making. Unlike stones, which simply exist across “time” (*Zeit*) unconsciously, human beings are “temporal” (*zeitlich*) and “historical” (*geschichtlich*), thrown into a world in which we must define our present and project ourselves into the future in relation to the world’s history. Heidegger was certainly not the first philosopher to have noticed this. In the nineteenth century, German thinkers like G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831) as well as, later, British thinkers like F. H. Bradley (1846–1924) and R. G. Collingwood (1889–1943) speculated about the importance of history in human life. Earlier Europeans like Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) and David Hume (1711–1776) were also sensitive to the way in which human life is deeply and essentially historical.

Among the historical dimensions of human existence one might identify specific, customary lines of meaning and practice called *traditions*. Traditions may be relatively unreflective – such as the traditions of speech and ornament. Or they may be more consciously developed – such as the traditions of theology. Tradition has also, of course, been very important among Asian thinkers. Confucius (551–479 BCE), for example, rooted virtues of *li* (proper conduct) and *jen* (benevolence) in an appreciation of traditions and customs.

### Views from nowhere

An important line of criticism argues that many texts and theories are flawed because they pretend to have transcended or escaped history, custom, habit, and tradition. Critics like Michel de Montaigne, Edmund Burke, Karl Marx, Michael Oakeshott, and more recently Chantal Mouffe advance, in various ways, this sort of criticism. They point out the way many speciously claim to have achieved, usually through what poses as reason, some sort of transcendence beyond, independence from, and authority over customs, opinions, and traditions. They pretend to have achieved a God’s-eye, absolute point of view on reality, a view Benedict Spinoza (1632–1677) called approvingly “a view from eternity” (*sub species aeternitatis*) and Thomas Nagel, by contrast, called critically “a view from nowhere.”

Nagel’s point is well taken, for how is it possible for a text, a writer, a speaker, a theorist, etc. to become independent of history, culture, custom, and tradition if humans are inescapably historical, cultural, and customary beings? The concepts people use, the languages they speak, the architecture and disposition of their feelings, their attitudes, beliefs, and habits are informed by history and tradition – ethical concepts, beliefs, feelings, and habits among them. Isn’t it specious, then, to pretend to be a “citizen of the world,” as some stoics and other cosmopolitan thinkers claim to be? Isn’t it presumptuous to argue, as early liberals like Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson did (and many liberals since), that they have discovered universal human rights that apply to all people at all times and in all cultures? Can anyone make claims about what

is just, beautiful, right, and true for all times and places? (Curiously, however, some traditionalist critics, e.g., Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998), argue that an appreciation of the deep traditions from which modern society has departed can actually reconnect us with the divine.)

### The harm in forgetting

One might think critically, then, about a text by considering whether and how it pretends to demonstrate an ahistorical point of view, or at least how it positions itself in relation to what is traditional or customary. The text's shortcoming, however, may be more than an issue of pretended knowing. It may be existential, since sometimes a practice or set of ideas may even wrongly threaten another culture or tradition by not honoring its history. Criticism might, for example, be brought to bear against prohibitions of African or Appalachian or First People's speech patterns as "improper" or "ungrammatical." Or, for another example, perhaps critics might wish to challenge the way some practices of gender, marriage, religion, cuisine, and healthcare have been judged inferior when they have sprung from other, unfamiliar traditions.

### The importance of careful listening

All this is not to say that tradition is always good or that change is impossible. People aren't stuck in the past, and traditions are not strictly speaking always conservative. There are, after all, traditions of resistance and rebellion, even, as we'd like to emphasize, traditions of criticism. And we don't mean to argue for a strict relativism that holds it's impossible for people with different histories and cultures to communicate with one another or even to criticize one another meaningfully and properly. Histories and cultures are not hermetically sealed but move within and across one another like currents interweaving and intermixing in the sea. There are long traditions of inter-cultural exchange and meaningful critique. Sometimes, in fact, the most trenchant criticisms come from those who possess critical distance from a tradition. Mahatma Gandhi, for example, effectively criticized British colonial traditions when he responded to an English reporter who asked him what he thought of Western civilization with the retort: "I think it would be a good idea." Gandhi himself appealed to Indian traditions of weaving one's own clothing and spinning one's own thread to guide and sustain his independence movement.

Attending to history and tradition implies thinking and writing sensitively. It means that one must listen hard and carefully to others, paying attention to the different histories that inform their ways of thinking and doing. It also means taking care not to speak and write as if from a transcendent point of view, outside of any historical location. It's not wrong, intrinsically, to speak for others, especially others who cannot speak for themselves, but one must do so carefully and without the claim to transcendent authority.

Careful attention to history does not ensure tranquility. Sometimes understanding something's history results in seeing how dangerous and intolerable it is – for example, the long history of anti-Semitic demagoguery. If one is to criticize historically rooted practices, however, one will do well to consider instruments of criticism grown in the right soil of history, custom, and tradition. To present meaningful forms of criticism, persuasion, and argument one must speak in recognizably meaningful ways, one must sympathize with others' customs and habits of feeling and reasoning, and one must attend carefully to the deep historical resonance ideas, symbols, words, and images carry for people. Doing all this requires understanding and appreciating people's histories, others' and your own. It's no easy task, but good critical thinking requires it.

### *Exercises and study questions*

1. Is consumerist and capitalist society anti-traditional?
2. How might traditionalist and historicist criticism address the question of whether or not to prohibit polygamy, arranged marriage, or child marriage?
3. How might practices of female genital cutting be well or poorly defended or criticized in light of traditionalist and historicist criticisms?
4. Is it meaningful to characterize natural science and deductive logic as Western?
5. Are human rights properly described as universal?
6. How might historicist and traditionalist criticism be brought to bear on controversies about the purchase and sale of lands inhabited by tribal peoples?
7. Is there a way using traditionalist and historicist forms of critique to resolve the conflict between Muslim traditional religious practices of *hijab* and French Republican political traditions of *laïcité*?
8. Is reason contrary to tradition?

### SEE ALSO

- 9.2 The Purview of Science
- 10.7 Foucault's Critique of Power
- 10.8 The Frankfurt School: Culture Critique

### READING

- Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, *On Reason: Rationality in a World of Cultural Conflict and Racism* (2008)
- Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* (2003)
- Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition, and Reason* (1987)

Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (1962)

Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790)

---

### 10.13 Ecological Critiques

---

It may seem a strange question, but is the acquisition of a refrigerator, air conditioner, or clothes dryer a sign of becoming better or worse off? In terms of immediate creature comforts, the answer seems obvious, but considered from an ecological perspective things become less clear. People have become increasingly aware of the substantial impact that human activity has had on the Earth's biosphere, and that impact has in many ways been negative (see 9.2). Thinking critically today, therefore, must involve thinking about the ecological dimensions of human ideas, institutions, and practices.

#### Consumption and pollution

One of the most important environmental considerations critical thinking can raise is that of resource consumption. When examining a practice or theory, raise questions about how many resources are likely to be consumed in its realization. Will the building of a road through a forested area lead to the consumption of more land and energy as travelers and commercial interests grow up along the roadside and the adjacent areas? Should individual homeownership be encouraged given that individual, detached homes use more land and energy resources than row houses, apartments, and condominium blocks? What sorts of foods are the least resource intensive to produce? Can we find forms of entertainment that don't require electricity? How much water and cropland does beef production require, and can that be changed? Is that the most efficient means of food production? In general, how can we change our institutions, ideas, and practices so our lives consume less of the world? Are market systems more ecologically responsible than non-market or socialized economies?

When one listens to policy makers and analysts speak about the economy, it's nearly always about growth. But since growth is generally correlated with growing resource consumption, is, say, GDP growth really a good measure of economic progress? Should, under the present ecological circumstances, economic growth be encouraged at all? Isn't there enough wealth already and the problem just that it's poorly distributed? Why don't policy makers consult an environmental well-being index such as the GGEI (the Global Green Economy Index) along with (or instead of) standard economic indexes that ignore the environmental effects of economic activity?

Consumption has risen with wealth increases in many societies. More wealth means more consumption. And so it has become an ecologically relevant question

to ask whether too much wealth is ecologically acceptable. Consumption has also risen, as population theorist Thomas Malthus (1766–1834) argued, albeit inaccurately, it would with population. How much population is too much? Has the Earth already exceeded its ecologically sustainable carrying capacity? Should we be working to reduce human population? Is it responsible to have more than one child? How do contemporary practices and ideas help encourage and justify expanding human populations?

Since the processes that consume resources always produce effluents, it's important that critical thinkers also consider pollution. Climate change has been in part driven by the release of carbon compounds into the air, but these compounds are just one form of pollution among, unfortunately, many others. The land, air, and seas have been polluted by all kinds of effluent: plastics (the vast extent of which has only recently been understood), carcinogens, sewage, ozone-eroding agents, pharmaceutical products, pesticides, fertilizers, radiation, and even artificial light and sound that can disrupt plant and animal life. Can food be grown and raised with less effluent and less soil erosion? Should plastic food packaging be eliminated? Should we continue to eat food shipped across such enormous distances? Are there ways to cool and warm and illuminate living spaces that require less energy? Are personal automobiles and trips for pleasure that require air travel justifiable when both release so much carbon?

### Ecological justice

“Cancer Alley” is a stretch of the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans that has experienced extraordinarily high cancer rates, apparently as a result of pollution. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the area is poor and populated predominantly by people of African descent. Cancer Alley and the many places in the world like it raise one of the most important social-political dimensions of ecological thinking – namely, how the negative environmental effects of modern life are distributed. Environmental impacts are not equally distributed to all people. Often environmental effects have a disproportionately negative impact upon minority populations. Sometimes there are greater environmental impacts upon one gender or another. As it has been in Cancer Alley, pollution has a greater and disproportionate impact upon the poor than the rich. Rising sea levels resulting from global warming, for example, are likely to affect the poor more adversely. The poor, also, are often housed in areas with little greenery or exposure to wildlife. In short, critically thinking about environmental impacts will involve asking about who will bear those impacts the most.

Who should pay to stop and remedy the effects of pollution, especially the pollution that's caused climate change, is an important question of ecological justice. Some argue that those countries that have been most responsible for the problem over the preceding centuries, the United States and the countries of Western Europe, should pay most of the cost. Others have argued that the cost should include developing and more recently developed countries, such as China.

### Non-human life

Of course, those impacts are often biggest upon non-human populations of plants and animals. For many people, human beings enjoy a kind of privileged position. We are, in this view, categorically more important than the members of other species. Some have even argued that non-human living things have no moral standing whatsoever – that moral considerations do not apply to non-humans, so that humans may use them in whatever ways we choose. But are these justifiable positions? Ecological thinkers have challenged the idea of human privilege. They've criticized both the idea (1) that non-humans have no moral standing and (2) that humans possess a superior standing. Philosopher Peter Singer, one of those critics, coined the term *speciesism* to describe the unjustified belief in human superiority, just as “racism” and “sexism” are used to criticize unjustified beliefs and practices associated with racial and gender superiority.

Thinking critically about a text or practice along these lines might raise questions about how it affects non-human animals and what implicit or explicit statements of human superiority or privilege the text advances. Historian Lynn White, Jr. has, for example, argued that the Bible has enabled ideas of human superiority in the passages from Genesis that speak about God's creating “man” in “His” image and giving human beings “dominion” over the rest of the natural world, as well as in instructing humans to “subdue” the natural world. So in the Bible's Book of Genesis 1:26–28 you'll find:

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

Others have argued that this passage has been inflected by translation and that ideas of “stewardship” and “creation” offer a strong environmental basis for environmental responsibility. What qualities of any text might reinforce or legitimate undesirable ecological conduct?

Critical thinkers ought also to ask whether a particular practice will cause suffering or disruption to non-human life. Must we eat non-human animals, and is veganism the only responsible dietary option, at least for those in economically wealthy societies? Can we eliminate leather? Is it possible to conduct medical research without laboratory testing on non-human animals? Is laboratory testing on non-human animals good science? Do non-humans possess certain rights to territory/habitat that limit human property rights – such as rights to limit building upon and altering the landscape? Are zoos morally justifiable? Circuses? Domestic pets? Why is zoophilia prohibited? Should military practices take non-humans and their habitats

into account (for example, in targeting considerations and as casualties)? What dis-analogies might be found between speciesism, sexism, and racism?

*Exercises and study questions*

1. Examine from an ecological perspective some form of human entertainment – e.g., amusement parks, fireworks, hunting.
2. Should non-humans possess moral standing? If non-humans possess moral standing, should it be equal to that of humans? Why or why not?
3. How might we assess the performance of our economies in ecological ways? What criteria of performance might be used instead of or in addition to GDP, equities and commodities market values, and employment rates?
4. Are there ecological injustices taking place in or near your home? What policy changes might affect ecological injustices?
5. How ought the world deal with massive population growth? With climate change?
6. Who should pay the costs associated with remedying climate change caused by human activities?

SEE ALSO

- 10.7 Foucault's Critique of Power
- 10.9 Class Critiques
- 10.10 Feminist and Gender Critiques
- 10.11 Critiques of Race and Racism

READING

Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: The Definitive Classic of the Animal Movement* [1975], (2009)  
Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2007)  
Joni Adamson, Mei Mei Evans, & Rachel Stein, eds., *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, and Pedagogy* (2002)