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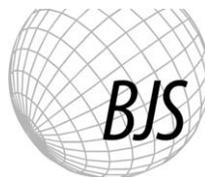
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Book review

Thompson, M. J. **The Domestication of Critical Theory** 2016 Rowman and Littlefield International 230 pp. £80.00 (hardback) £24.95 (paperback)

The central thesis of this book is that contemporary critical theory is in urgent need of repair if it is to once again fulfil its task of calling into question the nature of domination in advanced capitalist societies. Classical critical theory – as represented in the writings of the first generation of scholars associated with the Frankfurt School – advanced a vexing critique of the rise of authoritarianism and the concomitant consolidation of social domination in capital. But according to Thompson, the later twentieth-century linguistic turn in critical theory evades the central problem of reification and, in doing so, unwittingly participates in the very same structures of social domination it seeks to move beyond. In light of this, *The Domestication of Critical Theory* advances a rigorous reformulation of critical theory in the tradition of the early Frankfurt School. This is an important book which should be of interest to historians of sociology, social theorists, and critical theorists in particular. The book's key contribution to critical theory revolves around the author's 'organic-functionalist' reinterpretation of Marx's base-superstructure hypothesis, which, as Thompson demonstrates throughout the latter half of the book, gives contemporary critical theorists a way to provide a cohesive theory of socialization, power and norms.

The book's seven chapters are organized into three major parts. Part one provides a critical and historical account of the shift in critical theory away from the Weberian-Marxist critique of ideology and domination and toward what Thompson calls 'neo-Idealist' themes of cognition and intersubjectivity. As Thompson explains, 'The central weakness of the neo-Idealists is their core assumption – drawn largely from Mead and reinforced by Habermas – that sociation rather than social domination is the central characteristic of socialization and social relations' (33). Whereas classical critical theory was concerned with the dialectic of social structure and consciousness and, more specifically, with the power of capital to penetrate cognition and shape the personality structure of the individual accordingly, contemporary critical theory assumes 'the Ideals of the norms and values of justification [are] enough to overcome all forms of domination and help us create a more human, democratic ethical life' (32–3). Thompson argues that the result of the intersubjective-communicative turn – exemplified by Habermas's discourse-theoretical approach and, more recently, the ascendancy of Honneth's recognition paradigm – is a 'domesticated' critical theory that is unable to adequately capture the nature of power and domination in the contemporary world. For modern capitalist societies to remain stable over time, large segments of the population

2 Book review

must embrace certain value-orientations that legitimate the relations of domination and exploitation which underlie the social order. Contemporary critical theory, however, mistakenly presupposes a separation between material power (rooted in economic dominance) and the moral-cognitive and intersubjective dimensions of social action, imbuing the latter with emancipatory potential. In doing so, contemporary critical theory falls into what Thompson calls a 'neo-Idealist fallacy' (5). As he explains, '[contemporary critical theorists] place the cart before the horse and fail to see that the real need is to shatter forms of reification and acritical, affirmative, or alienated consciousness that gives support and legitimacy to the social order' (5).

In Part two Thompson sets out to reconstruct the logic of critical theory. At the heart of this reconstruction is Thompson's 'organic-functionalist' reinterpretation of Marx's base-superstructure hypothesis. Thompson conceptualizes the base-superstructure dynamic as a tripartite relation between: (1) the imperatives of capital and economic relations; (2) institutional norms and logics; and (3) subject-formation, 'in which each level of societal functioning is able to impress its imperatives onto subsequent normative orientations' (101). Thompson adopts Parsons' concept of value-orientations in order to specify further the structural and agentic dimensions of the base-superstructure model. It may seem odd that Parsons figures so heavily in Thompson's attempt to revive the Hegelian-Marxian and Weberian roots of critical theory. For although Parsons' theory allows crucial insight into the social-normative dimension of social power, there is also a social-ontological dimension that his theory does not touch on. However, by reconstructing Parsons in tandem with Hegel and Marx, Thompson's approach is able to overcome this deficit, giving contemporary critical theorists a more analytically vexing way to capture the dialectic of social structure and consciousness.

Indeed, Thompson's organic-functionalist model, and his critical reinterpretation of Parsons in particular, is one of the book's greatest strengths. For Thompson (132), Parsons' contributions to critical theory revolve around his insights into the most basic processes responsible for the adaptation of the individual to systemic imperatives. In this sense, as more institutions are harnessed toward the goals of economic logics, social practices are routinized accordingly as more individuals are 'reprogrammed' and, in the process, these individuals lose the ability to critically recognize that this is indeed the case. Thompson's 'organic-functionalist' reinterpretation of the base-superstructure thesis therefore offers a model of the dialectic of consciousness and social structure capable of specifying, with a high degree of rigour, the mechanisms responsible for such compounding reification. Thompson's model is one that emphasizes the ways forms of socialization correspond to institutional logics. The adaptation of these institutional logics to the imperatives of capital in turn affects cognitive patterns, epistemic capacities, and evaluative powers to produce a state of false consciousness characterized by defective forms of reasoning. The increasing ineffectiveness of radical politics and the mass integration of social life along neoliberal lines are current examples of this state of false consciousness.

The final two chapters of the book turn to consider the linkage of critical theory, epistemology and ontology. Having shown the power of capital to shape consciousness, Thompson must now explicate how critical knowledge of the world and its objects is possible. In Chapter 6 Thompson tackles the relationship between facts and values in an attempt to revive the classical critical theory approach, according to which facts and values are seen as 'dialectically related *and* sublated' (156–7). Thompson argues that Erich Fromm's notion of normative humanism provides a starting point for reviving the classical critical theory tradition. Furthermore, Thompson demonstrates how Fromm's concept of critical theory can be developed further to establish an objective ethics based on ontological principles. In the concluding chapter Thompson attempts to ground his conceptual reconstruction of critical

theory in a social ontology. Here Thompson returns to Hegel and Marx to sketch a critical social ontology capable of providing a foundation for critical cognition, including the critique of reification and an emancipatory theory of society. This space, according to Thompson, is also the ground in which discursive, intersubjective, and recognitive approaches must be rooted if their insights are to contribute to critical theory in a meaningful way.

In short, *The Domestication of Critical Theory* is pathbreaking and, more critical theorists should follow that path to find out how far it will take them.

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