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# SYMPOSIUM – THE PARALYSIS OF CRITICAL THEORY

## Introduction: Reflecting Paralysis

Andrew Poe

**Abstract** What is the contemporary task of criticism? This essay proffers a response to this question through a rereading of Herbert Marcuse's short essay "The Paralysis of Criticism: Society without Opposition." While Marcuse once used this essay to critique an endangered oppositional imagination, this essay asks what is the form of contemporary opposition, and how productive is that opposition today? By way of an answer, this essay introduces readers to the concept of paralysis as a central facet of critical theory, understanding paralysis as the necessary "loosening" that critical theory deploys in political thinking, and a vital resource in identifying modes of political opposition. This essay also serves as an introduction to the essays included in this special section, entitled *The Paralysis of Critical Theory*, which together work to develop reimaginings of critical theory in response to the rise of those new forms of capitalism and fascism that occupy the present moment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### In Reflection

"Critical Theory" – the mode of political theorizing that once positioned itself as a direct resistance to fascist politics – has recently become confused and maligned.<sup>1</sup> The original moniker, meant to proffer a new critique of capital from within capitalist societies, now faces contemporary challenges, both in the neoliberal transformations of capital, the new functions of the administrative university that supposedly house and protect "critical theorists," as well as in the rise of new modes of fascism.<sup>2</sup>

The contemporary need for critical theory would seem incredibly strong. The last half-century of transformations in industrialized countries seems to have culminated in a period of sustained crisis – whether through the permeation of everyday life by regimes of biopower, the continued dominance of neo-liberalism even in the face of increasing inequality, the emergence of new patterns of authoritarianism and militarism, the growing dysfunction of existing political institutions, the inoperativity of established modes of production, the triumph of the forces of reaction in the struggle for racial equality, or the pervasiveness of debt across a variety of populations. If traditional theory was a

form of thinking which read as scientific positivism divorced from the society in which it operated, critical theory was that form of thinking meant to take society as its central object. As Max Horkheimer once famously exclaimed, “Critical thinking is the function neither of the isolated individual nor of a sum-total of individuals. Its subject is rather a definite individual in his real relation to other individuals and groups, in his conflict with a particular class, and, finally, in the resultant web of relationships with the social totality and with nature.”<sup>3</sup> Yet the historical development of “critical theory” has evinced a transformation, just as capitalism itself has transitioned into new modalities, and contemporary critical theory may not be so easily defined by its original contrast with traditional theory.<sup>4</sup>

Imagine contemporary “critical theory” caught in its critics’ reflection: “A line was becoming clear. Marx and Hegel had paved the way for the Progressives, who in turn had paved the way for the Frankfurt School, who had then attacked the American way of life by pushing “cultural Marxism” through “critical theory.”<sup>5</sup> In the middle of his popular memoir, the American reactionary editor Andrew Breitbart offers a critical appraisal of so-called “critical theory.” As he reflects, “The Frankfurt School thinkers had come up with the rationale for radical environmentalism, artistic communism, psychological deconstruction of their opponents, and multiculturalism. Most of all, they had come up with the concept of “repressive tolerance,” aka political correctness.”<sup>6</sup> Here Breitbart reads a paralyzing structure in what he labels as “critical theory,” pointing to it as the source for the dangerous utopian imaginaries of the contemporary left.<sup>7</sup> In this reflection, critical theory seems to promote a paralysis of thought, limiting discourse by foreclosing the speech of the right.

What would it mean to take up the energy of this anxiety—the energy latent in the worry that there is a mode of critical theory that is paralyzing? Not the form of the anxiety—that the energies of the critical left have been exhausted, or are paralyzing civil discourse—but rather the framing: a potency in critical theory to paralyze. Read politically, this potency might be directed at critics or friends. What is this power of critical theory, and how might it best be utilized to resist fascism today?

The collection of papers presented in this symposium come from a conference titled *The Paralysis of Critical Theory*, held at Amherst College as part of the inauguration of the Amherst Program in Critical Theory. These papers take up this logic of paralysis seriously, borrowing the name from Herbert Marcuse’s short essay “The Paralysis of Criticism: Society without Opposition,” which serves as the introduction to Marcuse’s *One Dimensional Man*. This essay questioned the efficacy of “criticism” and the potency of its critical intent in an “advanced” industrial society. Marcuse’s investigation of the social and political

development of advanced industrial society was meant to expose historical alternatives, and in this way, offer a critical theory of contemporary society — a theory, as he put it, which would encounter society “in light of its used and unused or abused capabilities for improving the human condition.”<sup>8</sup> In the course of his investigation, Marcuse posed an important, but overlooked, question — “What are the standards for such a critique?” In this collection of essays, we ask this question again.

### Extortion

How seriously must we take the question of contemporary critical theory before such “seriousness” becomes a danger — before it becomes our own paralysis? Marcuse, for us a now *ancient* authority, begins his *One-Dimensional Man* with such an anxiety of seriousness: “Does not the threat of an atomic catastrophe which could wipe out the human race *also* serve to protect the very forces which perpetuate this danger?”<sup>9</sup> That “also” is remarkable. Taken from one subjective vantage point, the threat of an atomic catastrophe, which could wipe out the human race, would be enough (more than enough). For the entire simultaneous — or near-simultaneous — destruction of oneself and one’s world, and one’s “not-self” and one’s “not-world”, would seemingly be enough to stand as a serious threat — perhaps the most serious threat, the threat to take most seriously. And yet, at least as Marcuse asks us to imagine it, that very threat — the most serious threat — has, in our modern way of thinking, taken on a necessary corollary — serving to protect the very forces which perpetuate this danger.

Not only is the most serious threat possible — and as possible for a reader of Marcuse in 1964 as a reader of Marcuse some 50 years later — but the threat contains within it a double: precisely how we take the threat — how we face the danger — may inadvertently make the danger even more dangerous, transforming it into another sort of threat. The very “*also*” that we amend to the threat of the total annihilation of humanity works to uphold the value of that threat. This upholding, even in the face of such a singular catastrophe, results from our self-extortions. (The house is on fire — quick put it out!!! Why are you standing there doing nothing? Don’t you see this is serious? Very serious.) Having identified the danger, we aim to prevent it. And yet Marcuse warns us, that such efforts — such preventions, and the false agentic standing of such preventions — reveal a fundamental pathology: “The efforts to prevent such a catastrophe overshadow the search for its potential causes.”<sup>10</sup> Such causes remain “unidentified, unexposed, and unattacked”<sup>11</sup> precisely because of the “obvious threat” — a threat, which is not at all benign, but is also held up to be useful by industrial societies and political regimes which draw power from such utility.

## Modes of Paralysis

Marcuse concerns himself with the particular negation of the “un-” – the failed responsiveness to causes in the un-identified, the un-exposed, and the un-attacked. Here we see his conception of “paralysis” embodied. In the face of such a crisis – an actual total existential threat – we have refused to deploy criticism. (Instead, we have gone running into the fire. Or maybe we just stood in the fire, and let it burn.) Marcuse’s introduction to *One-Dimensional Man* – “The Paralysis of Criticism: Society Without Opposition” – raises for us the danger of living in such paralysis, in such a frozen condition, in such a standstill.

And yet in this very conception of paralysis – which contrasts the impotency of prevention with the potency of refusal – Marcuse may inadvertently have left us, his inheritors, with another problem. Not only are we allowed to see the danger of the strategy of prevention, but also we receive some articulation of the paralysis we face in not deploying criticism against such a strategy. What was wrong with us, that we didn’t deploy such critique? Why, after Marcuse’s introduction, or his theorization of one-dimensionality, or his articulation of refusal, was there not an explosion? An emancipation? A running free? A free movement? 1968 was a long time ago.

Whatever was wrong then, is now doubly wrong with us, for we have all read Marcuse, and survived 1968, and yet we still stand in the dyad between a truly emancipatory action and paralysis.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps this is because we have not yet taken the energy of paralysis seriously (which is to say we have taken it too seriously). The ordinary contemporary conception of paralysis is to have lost the use of one’s body, and by metaphorical analog, to become unable to move. The paralysis of criticism would then be, in the face of true danger, such criticism remains unable to move. But paralysis (*παράλυειν*) can also mean – in a much more ancient way – simply a “loosening” or even an “opening.” Rather than presuming the more common usage of it as a “disabling” or as a “paralyzing,” the ordinary meaning we might usually take from it today is that the muscles have been let loose from the skeleton, unable to move against themselves, what if we reread paralysis? If we take the loosening itself to playfully be the condition of paralysis, we might begin to see an opportunity – a freeing up from the constraints of the logics of criticism we have inherited.

If the originary problematic Marcuse calls us to in *One-Dimensional Man* is the inability to attend to causes – and a seriousness in our own desire to preserve ourselves that engenders our domination – the inheritance of such an observation must raise for us the question, in what specific ways are we too focused on prevention instead of cause. How have we – in our contemporary world – become distracted with the power of prevention? The power of preservation? In the university? In

the neo-liberal order? In our homes? In our seminars and lectures? In this symposium? As Benjamin reminds us, “when the chips are down, criticism must penetrate beyond predicates, and focus on something they have in common.”<sup>13</sup>

### Hope, Contemporary

The problem we face, and one these essays reflect, is the meaning of reviving the work of critical theory at our contemporary moment of crisis. Rehearsing Marcuse’s question, though, does not necessarily entail recapitulating his answer. While Marcuse contrasts the beginnings of industrial society with the completion of tendencies in the most highly developed advanced industrial capitalisms of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the authors in this symposium ask what is happening that is new or different in our own contemporary world, especially in view of political and social pathologies produced by our own condition. The aim here is to re-think the paralysis of critical theory as an opportunity, taking seriously an uncommon – and more ancient – use of *paralysis* as a “loosening” and thus as an “opening.” Reading Marcuse’s essay “The Paralysis of Criticism” as a point of departure, these papers reflect upon the contemporary response we might offer, and along the following lines of questioning: What grounds, if any, does Marcuse’s essay give us for re-introducing critical theory today? How, if at all, might one repeat Marcuse’s gesture now? If one had to write Marcuse’s Introduction in our contemporary view, how – if at all – might it be necessary to re-write it? With Marcuse’s *One-Dimension Man* as a starting point, these papers ask the question of contemporary critical theory, and all its complications – in and out of the contemporary university, in and out of capitalist forms of life, in and out of Western modalities of subjectivity.

Robyn Marasco and Andrew Knighton both take up the question of an education in “critical theory.” In “Critical Theory and the Task of Political Education” Marasco attunes us to the place of critical theory in a contemporary university education. How independent can the voice of critical theory be today, given its place in the neo-liberal university? While the originary Institute for Social Research was located directly across from the University of Frankfurt – an effort to maintain independence and distance from a state university system that it was critiquing – the current incorporation of a critical theory into university education may pose a fundamental problem for that originary mode of critique.<sup>14</sup> Rather than turning to early Frankfurt School theorists as an opportunity for instruction in political action against the state, we might instead turn to the history of critical theory for pedagogies and reflections on how to relate theory and praxis. Marasco argues

for an educative model that can attune itself to “subjective experience and objective forces, the love of freedom and the seductions of power,” showing how the new experience of political education in resistance to fascism may require a reimagining of the history of critical theory. Knighton continues this line of argumentation, inquiring into how contemporary higher education might operate its “cultural and political function.” In his essay “Beyond “Education in Sickness”: A Biopolitical Marcuse and Some Prospects for University Self-Administration,” Knighton uncovers the perversion of left utopian imaginaries made manifest in the post 1970 managerial university. How the public mission of the modern university became coopted by neoliberal logics, and how critical theory might respond from within the university itself, revealing a key danger that the academic study of critical theory might face: If critical theory is now central to many disciplines within the university itself, how can we engage that radical history without exhausting the critical energies once at play?

Daniel Loick and Zhivka Valiavicharska take aim at the inheritances initiated in the previous generation of critical theorists, wondering how we can now re-inherit and reimagine the trajectories of the previous generation of critical theorists. In “21 Theses on the Politics of Forms of Life” Loick explores Marcuse’s move from *paralysis* to *liberation*. Moving against the neutralities he finds in previous modes of critical theoretical engagements with liberation, Loick seeks to uncover new forms of life that can themselves politicize. Turning to alternative modalities of critical theory that might allow for this resurrection of political life, Loick develops a polemic for forms of life that could be political, against those which purport an agnosticism. In this way, it is not simply liberation, but a political liberation that needs to become the centerpiece of a resistance to new forms of fascism (especially those resting in liberal disguises). Valiavicharska adds to this uncovering, revealing how previous exclusions (from feminist to black liberation movements) might now find potencies in a rereading of critical theory’s interventions. In “Herbert Marcuse, The Liberation of Man, and Hegemonic Humanism” Valiavicharska magnifies this context with a global lens, revisiting Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man*, not just as part of the history of the Frankfurt school Marxist tradition, but within a larger Marxist-humanist turn that we can now reimagine. Accelerating the “decentering” of these resurrected critical theories extends the radicalism of critical thought beyond the center of hegemonic power. Uncovering the complicated narratives of “race- and gender-blind critiques of capitalism,” Valiavicharska shows how a new mode of critical theory can and must be turned against the ambiguities latent in early modes of critical theorization, and that this is as important as the critique of capital itself.

Moving beyond the radical inheritances of critical theory, and asking the question of contemporary critical theory's own modalities of criticism, Adam Sitze and Christian Thorne engage the contemporary life of criticism and the potency of criticism today. In "The Paralysis in Criticism," Sitze argues that, as the forces of biopower—of what politics allows to be livable and unlivable in the contemporary moment—become commingled in their own self-perpetuated crisis, a rereading of the early Frankfurt School theorists may be useful as a means to engage the limits and possibilities of previous hopes for emancipation. Sitze turns to Marcuse's work especially to uncover paralysis as a core antithesis to life—beyond death or that which is un-lived. This critical reading of paralysis in relationship to life grounds an argument wherein new potentialities through biopower might manifest themselves. Thorne elaborates on this mode of paralysis of life today, highlighting the place of critical theory in contemporary power pathways. In "We Thinkers from the Gilt-Edged Margins: Six theses on critical theory" Thorne worries about the negation of critical theory, and—perhaps counter Andrew Breitbart—the incorporation of logics of critical theory into an uncritical theory of the fascist or neo-liberal modern professional life. If political life allows for this transformation, critical theory as political thought might just as easily become a resource for fascism as a critique of it. How could we work to resist the uncritical theory of critical theory? Provoking the reader with an intricately laid out complexity of voices, Thorne aims to highlight a pathway by which the un- could be separated from uncritical theory, pointing the way to the resistance that might be necessary in the formation of a critical theory that can resist its own exhaustion.

### Not Yet an Artifact

By the conclusion of *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse reflects—through his own ventriloquizing of Benjamin—"It is only for the sake of those without hope that hope is given to us."<sup>15</sup> This phrase, Marcuse explains, was authored "At the beginning of the fascist era..." in 1922. In the origins of critical theory in the Frankfurt School tradition, a specific problem presented itself to a critical, oppositional imagination: A new political order, under the name of fascism, was rising.<sup>16</sup> For Horkheimer and Adorno and Benjamin and others, that order posed a fundamental danger, in part because its very emergency was disguised in the name of progress. By the time Marcuse authored his critical theory of society in 1964, the danger had become sublimated by its destroyers, and the struggle for the true totalitarianism—in the form of advanced industrial society—was underway.

By the time of the publication of this symposium, in 2017, the totality of such dangers has almost been fulfilled. The current conditions



of totality — the almost total market, the almost total state — are in their very form total because almost total, almost becoming total. Yet we should not be blackmailed by the pessimism of such near-totality.

In this way, critical theory today cannot be the same as the program of critical theory before.<sup>17</sup> Whereas Marcuse could read the line “it is only for the sake of those without hope that hope is given to us” as fundamentally political — a voice calling to the rising opposition, armed with the dyad of action and paralysis — we must now ask how we would read it today, where those without hope cannot stand in the same relation to the contemporary “us.” The potency of Marcuse’s anxiety of paralysis at the start of his text, gives way to the possibility of a future yet to come. If ours is that future, it is not clear how we should stand — if we should stand still. The essays here offer up reflections on this important mode of theorizing and the dangers we face in the rising of a new fascist society.

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### Notes

1. See, for example, Andrew Brietbart’s criticisms of “critical theory” in *Righteous Indignation: Excuse me While I save the World* (Grand Central Publishing, 1994), especially chapter 6 “Breakthrough,” and Amy Allen’s recent critique of the eurocentrism of “Critical Theory” in her *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (Columbia UP, 2016).

2. As Nancy Fraser aptly reminds us, “those who would renew the project of critical theory face a daunting task... pathways of emancipation — like socialism for the first generation of critical theory — are not so clear.” This is because contemporary political life seems marked by “an exhaustion of left wing utopian energies and a decentered proliferation of social movements, many of which seek recognition of group difference, not economic equality.” This is a context in which, as Fraser explains, “value horizons are pluralized, fractured, and crosscutting.” Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition: A*

*Political-Philosophical Exchange* (Verso, 2003) 198. Many of these contemporary transformations receive treatment in *Theory & Event* (Volume 20, No. 1, January 2017 Supplement).

3. Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory" in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, M. O'Connell (ed.), New York: Continuum Press, 1999, p 2010–11.

4. Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," *ibid.*

5. Andrew Breitbart, *Righteous Indignation*, 124.

6. Andrew Breitbart, *Righteous Indignation*, *ibid.*

7. It is worth noting that this is the same view of "critical theory" that Anders Breivik offered in his manifesto "2083—A European Declaration of Independence." There Breivik turned to Breitbart as one of his many sources.

8. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Beacon Press, 1964), from the introductory essay "The Paralysis of Criticism: Society without Opposition" xlii.

9. Marcuse, "The Paralysis of Criticism: Society without Opposition" xli.

10. Marcuse, "The Paralysis of Criticism: Society without Opposition," *ibid.*

11. Marcuse, "The Paralysis of Criticism: Society without Opposition," *ibid.*

12. As Amy Allen reminds us, following on Edward Said's critique of "Critical Theory" — "the canonical, Frankfurt school variety, can appear as though it purports a "blithe universalism" which Allen explains "assumes and incorporates the inequality of races, the subordination of inferior cultures, the acquiescence of those who, in Marx's words, cannot represent themselves and therefore must be represented by others." Bound up with the logics of imperialism, contemporary critical theory might itself appear — by Allen's view — too blithe. If critical theory depends on a progressive logic, grounding a normativity in a society which it imagines as advancing from "premodern, nonmodern, or traditional forms of life," such historical progress appears to be bound up in its own foundational domination of this advanced view over those who were oppressed by such claims (3). Allen attempts to imagine a more contingent foundation, extending critical theory into its own radical position against such dominations. See Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*.

13. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" from *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (Schocken, 1968), 261.

14. The University of Frankfurt (officially the *Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main*) was, until the unification of East and West Germany, located on a main campus at the edge of the *Bockenheim* neighborhood of the city of Frankfurt. The Institute for Social Research (IfS) is sited directly across *Senckenberganlage* from the old University. After the US government gifted *IG Farben Haus* — the one-time offices and laboratories of the chemical company responsible for the production of, amongst other things, the gases used in the mass executions of the concentration camps — this became the site of the new University of Frankfurt. That transition is now almost entirely complete, leaving the IfS in the middle of a wealthy residential neighborhood, directly across the street from what is likely to become high-end condominiums.

15. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, 257.

16. Regarding the origins of critical theory in Frankfurt, see for example, Martin Jay's *The Dialectical Imagination: The History of the Frankfurt School and the In-*

*stitute for Social Research 1923–1950*, (University of California Press, 1973) especially Chapter 1, 3–11, and Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance* (MIT Press 1995), 9–36.

17. See, for example, Axel Honneth, who worries that “critical theory” might become “an intellectual “artifact.” As Honneth explains, we may – in the contemporary moment – face a “nostalgic memory of the heroic years of Western Marxism” where “there is an atmosphere of the outdated and antiquated, of the irretrievably lost, which surrounds the grand historical and philosophical ideas of critical theory, ideas for which there no longer seems to be any kind of resonance within the experience of the accelerating present. “A Social Pathology of Reason: On the Intellectual Legacy of Critical Theory” in *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory* (Columbia UP) 2009, 19.