

The Diversity and Unity of Critical Theory in Prague

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When I first came to “Prague” in 2008 as a Ph.D. student of Nancy Fraser, I was star-struck by the concentration of figures whose works I had been studying as an aspiring critical theorist—people like Seyla Benhabib, Rainer Forst, Bill Scheuerman, Jean Cohen, Maeve Cooke, Robin Celikates, Robert Fine. Having come to present a portion of a dissertation on “critical theory from a cosmopolitan point of view,” it’s an interesting moment when you realize a substantial portion of your bibliography is sitting in the room. I didn’t have to cite; I could just point. Beyond this, my first experience in Prague was perhaps the first time I became able to see my own work in critical theory as part of something larger, of “critical theory” not merely as a collection of books or authors, a topic of university classes, or even a set of ideas, themes, or theoretical approaches, but as a living, ongoing project, one carried on by real people, carried forward by real passions, carrying out real dialogue and argument. I have since come to think of Prague as my “home conference,” and every May I look forward to seeing old friends, making new ones, participating in the talks and workshops (the ones at 9:30 A.M. a bit less so), venturing out for lunch at Na Slavníku or Argument, evenings spent wandering the old city, and at least one late night of dancing.

Like most intellectual movements, “critical theory” does not lend itself to easy definition. At its narrowest, the label recalls the work of the famed “Frankfurt School”—a group of leftist scholars based at Frankfurt’s *Institut für Sozialforschung* who took aim at the new and complex forms of domination specific to capitalist modernity, until they were exiled by fascism and war. As a gathering point for contemporary scholars, Prague shows that critical theory was never meant to remain confined to Germany, nor was it meant to remain confined to any one approach or collection of names. The original Frankfurt School hewed close to its Hegelian-Marxist lineage, but this fact alone cannot capture its intellectual life and mission. Equally important were its struggles with social pathologies specific to interwar (and later postwar) Europe, but also its responses to competing critiques of the modern condition, such as those forwarded by Heidegger and

Schmitt. Such exchanges were even more central to the project of Jürgen Habermas—standard-bearer of the “second generation” of critical theory—who came to be known not only through his own theories but through his engagements with figures like Foucault, Derrida, Rorty, Gadamer, Luhmann, Taylor, Rawls, and Brandom. The same can be said for the so-called “third” and “fourth” generations, whose members include the past and present directors of the Prague Conference. Today, all of these names and many more are as integral to critical theory’s “canon” as Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, or Benjamin. The Prague Conference, which traces its intellectual lineage through the winding road back to Frankfurt (via Dubrovnik), embodies this broader “big tent” view of critical theory with its dynamic mix of Habermassians, Foucauldians, Arendtians, radical Rawlsians, “Left Schmittians,” postcolonial theorists, old-school Marxists, Althusserians, pragmatists, and more.

One should not over-romanticize Prague, and the conference does have its detractors. Some complain of too much Rawls, too much Habermas, too much textual analysis, not enough empirical analysis, not enough non-Western theory, not enough old-style Marxism. Some complaints are the usual ones of intellectual sectarians; some are quite valid; and some the conference directors struggle to rectify. But ultimately it is Prague, along with a few other gatherings, which gives critical theory its core identity more than any particular theoretical approach or intellectual lineage. Critical theory in all its diversity sustains its unity through the camaraderie and exchanges of its participants. There are serious methodological debates to be had, which deserve to be waged earnestly and passionately. Yet Prague is driven by the understanding that our divisions over theory are outweighed by our common commitments in practice.

The Europe of today is not nearly as volatile as the one the first generation fled in the 1930s, yet we should remember the tragedy as we prepare for the coming farce. In crucial ways, Europe has come to resemble that period more closely than it has in decades: unrestrained capitalism remains ascendant, support for democracy is on the wane, national chauvinism is making a comeback, and millions have found themselves stateless. Morbid symptoms abound, while further crises of political economy, ecological sustainability, and social reproduction loom on the horizon. It once took forces of unimaginable tyranny to exile emancipatory thinking from the continent; today we face the more subtle encroachments of the corporatized university, anti-intellectual populism, shrinking public sectors, and the neoliberal reorientation of education away from broad-minded thinking. As the developed world stands at the entrance of its self-incurred immaturity, let us again make our journey to the Vila Lanna in Prague, with the knowledge that the mission once set by the researchers at Frankfurt’s *Institut für Sozialforschung* still lies before us.