Critical Theory: Why Might Critical Theory Be of Interest to the Azerbaijani Reader

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This essay is the second part of an introductory article on Critical Theory (CT). In the first part, I discussed the essence of CT, its ideological sources of influence, and its history—specifically, the first three generations. In this second part, I present the final stage of CT—its era of internationalization—and explore the themes and dimensions in which this philosophical discourse may be relevant and of interest to readers in the post-Soviet space, including Azerbaijan.

The Era of the Internationalization of Critical Theory

As noted in the previous essay, the latest phase of CT differs significantly from its earlier generations. This difference is reflected first and foremost in the tendency toward internationalization, which had already begun to emerge in the third generation. The roots of this tendency can be traced to Jürgen Habermas's effort to incorporate perspectives from the analytic tradition of philosophy into his own work. Unlike the first generation of Frankfurt School theorists, Habermas became widely recognized internationally, particularly in the English-speaking academy and philosophical circles. This visibility, in turn, enabled CT to be reflected upon and further developed in those contexts.

However, the internationalization that characterizes contemporary CT is not simply a matter of gaining recognition beyond Germany. The crucial point is that, whereas the topics and proposed solutions explored by the first three generations

of CT were Eurocentric and largely framed within the confines of the nation-state, the present stage of CT is concerned with the problems of globalized capitalism. These issues include migration crises, ecological disasters, colonialism and postcolonialism, feminism, racism, and global justice. The latest generation of CT treats these as problems that transcend the framework of nation-states and cannot be resolved within those limits. This methodological approach—viewing the problems and crises of contemporary society as structural and transnational—is also the basis for its critique of the earlier generations of CT.

Another major critique of classical CT concerns the selectivity of its philosophical analysis. For instance, neither the first nor the second generation addressed feminism or the larger problem of women's exploitation, even though feminist struggles were gaining momentum globally at the same time. Reading the first two generations of CT gives the impression that its authors were oblivious to those realities, as if living in a parallel world. Another topic excluded from the analyses of the first and second generations was racism. Despite the fact that the emergence of CT was rooted in the experience of Hitler's fascism, and the entire first generation was marked by exile because of state racism, the Frankfurt School theorists curiously approached fascism only from a Eurocentric perspective—seeing it primarily as a phenomenon confined to Europe's social and political history, and specifically to Hitler's Germany. This omission appears particularly puzzling in light of CT's own claim to a totalizing analysis of society.

The internationalized phase of CT is associated not only with Axel Honneth but also with the extensive work of Nancy Fraser, Rahel Jaeggi, Rainer Forst, Robin Celikates, Seyla Benhabib, Thomas McCarthy, Andreas Reckwitz, Amy Allen, Christoph Menke, as well as Tommie Shelby, Sally Haslanger, among others. At this stage, CT no longer functions as a single school of thought but rather as a network of theoretical approaches that

take the earlier generations (especially the first) as a point of departure, while also reflecting critically upon them. These approaches are more explicitly normative than those of earlier generations. For example, whereas Habermas focused primarily on discourse ethics and the analysis of processes of reaching social agreement, the latest generation of CT engages directly with real relations of power, the manifestations of domination and hierarchy in everyday life, global inequalities, and the injustices and power dynamics embedded in political institutions and social relations.

This new phase of CT also shifts its focus from ideal-typical or hypothetical situations to concrete situations of struggle. All groups and initiatives engaged in the fight for existence and rights on a global scale—regardless of whether they are minorities or majorities—become objects of CT's theoretical articulation.

Currently, the most intensive sphere of CT's influence is the US academy. This is attributable to the country's history of racism, the increasing momentum of struggles waged by African Americans and immigrant-descended populations against oppression, the rise of feminist movements, and their intellectual, public, and academic reflection (for instance, at Columbia University or the New School for Social Research). In Europe, scholars not only in Germany but also widely in Western European countries such as the UK, Belgium, Portugal, Spain, and the Netherlands engage with CT. Another major site of interest and influence is Latin America. The colonial past of these countries, along with the contemporary problems shaped by that legacy and the dominant left-wing tradition of their social and political struggles, provides fertile ground for engagement with CT. In addition, interest in CT has been growing within decolonial studies perspectives in South Korea, Japan, India, and South Africa—where its influence is felt primarily in the sphere of activism, encompassing anti-authoritarian initiatives and student movements.

Why Might Critical Theory Be of Interest to Azerbaijani Readers?

Thematic Correlations

Any student who has studied philosophy in Germany will inevitably encounterCT in one form or another. The influence of the CT tradition is highly visible in German academia and in the public intellectual sphere. I myself studied philosophy in Germany, yet at that time my interest in CT was limited to its presence in the curriculum. In recent years, however, both the social dynamics unfolding in our own society and global developments have created fertile ground for more intense associations with CT. My own interest in Critical Theory has grown significantly over the past six or seven years living in Baku.

The authoritarian mode of governance to which we are subjected, the usurpation of power—i.e., its acquisition through illegitimate means—the subjection of society to nationalist and fascist propaganda, the wars and military conflicts with neighboring states and their consequences, the apathy or perceived loyalty of the population, restrictions on access to information and its manipulation, the destruction or forced exile of intellectual groups—these political and social tendencies inevitably evoke the events that unfolded in Europe and globally in the early twentieth century. CT itself emerged precisely as an intellectual initiative reflecting on such events. In other words, the historical circumstances of CT's emergence and the similarities between those circumstances and the political and social processes of our own time render CT highly relevant today and even renew interest in the topics explored by the first generation of its authors.

Within the post-Soviet space – and specifically in Azerbaijan – CT has received little attention, whether in academic or public-intellectual reflection. This is striking given that all of the factors driving interest in CT elsewhere are also

present and relevant in the post-Soviet context. Azerbaijan, for instance, is a country with a colonial past. Its present is shaped by authoritarian rule, its recent past by military conflict; it suffers from acute social injustice, a dysfunctional political system, the subordination and exploitation of women, discrimination against minorities, and significant emigration (both labor migration and brain drain). All of these dysfunctions, discussed above, are part of our social reality. Moreover, Azerbaijan was once part of one of the largest socialist projects in history (i.e., the USSR) and its inclusion in that project is an integral part of its colonial history. For this reason alone, the absence of interest in CT – an intellectual tradition that developed as a critique of classical Marxism – within the intellectual sphere of the post-Soviet space, including Azerbaijan, is a remarkable phenomenon.

CT is almost as old as the Soviet Union itself. It is a tradition that reflected on the Second World War, fascism, the re-evaluation of classical Marxism, and postwar society – historical events in which the USSR was deeply involved and with which it was closely connected. Its absence from Soviet intellectual life is unsurprising, given the ideological and political constraints of the time. CT was not openly discussed even in the German Democratic Republic. However, after the collapse of the USSR, when information flows expanded and previously restricted, prohibited, or unknown intellectual initiatives and traditions became objects of intense interest, CT was still not among them—even though its provocative potential as a counterpoint to Soviet Marxism might have been expected to generate curiosity. In the academic and public intellectual fields of the post-Soviet states, there was little reflection on the works of CT authors. Only in recent years has CT become at least partially recognized in the post-Soviet space, largely thanks to a generation of researchers and academics of post-Soviet origin who, after the dissolution of the USSR, sought education in European and American

universities and are now connected, in one way or another, to Western academia.

Correcting Epistemic Stereotypes About the Enlightenment

As noted above, the reflection on Critical Theory (CT) within the post-Soviet intellectual space is a relatively recent phenomenon. This likely explains why CT is often presented and understood as an anti-Enlightenment movement, even as a rejection of reason itself. This misunderstanding probably stems from a misinterpretation of the first generation of CT theorists' critique of the concepts of classical Enlightenment – particularly their critique of the notion of reason.

CT in no way rejects either the Enlightenment or reason. On the contrary, CT represents a continuation and next stage of Enlightenment philosophy. CT takes from classical Enlightenment the affirmation of reason's emancipatory potential. Emancipation is one of the foundational concepts of CT and refers to the liberation of society (or societies) from domination, hegemony, exploitation, and injustice through the exercise of reason. The classical Enlightenment's call *Sapere Aude!* ("Dare to know!") is also the emancipatory call of CT. What CT does not accept, and indeed critiques, in classical Enlightenment thought can be summarized as follows:

1. Classical Enlightenment regarded reason as a universal and unitary phenomenon, standing above time and space, and failed to recognize the role of historical and local conditions in shaping reason and its exercise. CT, by contrast, emphasizes the impact of historical and cultural contexts on reason and rejects the notion of a single, uniform concept of reason. CT distinguishes between instrumental reason and critical reason (Adorno, Horkheimer). In a later development, Habermas introduced the concept of communicative reason.
2. CT does not share the Enlightenment's unqualified optimism about reason. In classical Enlightenment

thought, reason was endowed with a positive moral value—implicitly assumed to be a force for good. In other words, it was believed that by using reason we could not only free ourselves from the evil to which we are subjected but also prevent ourselves from becoming perpetrators of evil. CT, however, rejects the unequivocal moral status of reason. Reason cannot automatically or universally be assumed to be good. Its exercise can serve not only liberation but also domination and destruction. Distinguishing between these requires attention to the difference between instrumental reason and critical-reflective reason. Instrumental reason is oriented toward causal correlations, pragmatic efficiency, and the control mechanisms that serve such efficiency. When instrumental reason is applied without being subjected to critical-reflective rationality, it becomes a breeding ground for new forms of dependence, domination, and hierarchy. CT offers as examples the bureaucracy of capitalist societies, the culture industry, the power constellations in the distribution of labor and wealth, and the exploitation and destruction of nature.

3. Thus, the classical Enlightenment's call *Sapere Aude!* acquires a new and more nuanced meaning in CT. "Dare to know!" becomes not only an exhortation to think for oneself but also a call to critically interrogate the very conditions, possibilities, and moral consequences of one's own reasoning.

An Alternative to Theoretical Skepticism: The Reality-Making Power of Critique

One of the epistemic attitudes that has caught my attention in post-Soviet space is the skeptical approach toward theoretical thinking, particularly in the context of social and political change. Theoretical reflection is often dismissed as "idle talk," contrasted with "work and action." This attitude may

well be the residual effect of the famous slogan—entrenched in Soviet social consciousness—attributed to Marx: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it." After all, the USSR was a historical project that explicitly invoked classical Marxism.

Several years ago, I wrote an essay titled "Enlightenment, Reason, and Pseudo-Enlightenment," which partly emerged from observing this epistemic habit, and I traced its origins to an incomplete Enlightenment. In that essay, I treated Sapere Aude! as an epistemic concept and distinguished between the deconstructive (problem-identifying, critical) and constructive (creative, solution-oriented) stages of Enlightenment. I argued that in our society, only the first stage had taken place, leaving the process of Enlightenment unfinished.

The perception of CT, or philosophy in general, as a powerless abstraction incapable of changing the world appears paradoxical against the backdrop of Soviet intellectual history. Philosophy, as a discursive practice, was in effect prohibited under Soviet rule precisely because critical thinking was seen as possessing a transformative power that posed a threat to the authoritarian regime. With respect to Enlightenment philosophy specifically, in the Soviet era it was reduced entirely to an instrument of ideology and propaganda. As I noted in my earlier essay:

It is no coincidence that Enlightenment philosophy was so widely promoted during the Soviet period. Its simultaneous revolutionary and paternalistic potential made it highly adaptable to Soviet ideological needs. It is equally unsurprising that the Enlightenment idea was taught in an entirely anachronistic form. The errors rejected by Sapere Aude! were presented as belonging to the past realities of Tsarist Russia—for example, religious superstition, social hierarchy, and the denial of women's rights. But in relation to Soviet realities, Sapere Aude! was entirely forbidden. The status of "enlightened savior" was transferred to the Communist Party. Whatever the Party chose to illuminate was what everyone was meant to see. There was no longer any need for Sapere Aude! the idea of Enlightenment had been turned into mere decoration for an ideology fundamentally at odds with its

essence.

The central claim and ambition of CT is precisely that critical reflection transforms and shapes reality, and that philosophy's task is to improve the world through radical critique. One of the principal ways of intervening in reality through critical reflection is the process of theorizing. Within the CT tradition, theorizing is not merely the study of problems; it is the systematic search for solutions—a kind of prescription. Theorizing is not merely reactive, not confined to post hoc description and explanation of events. Rather, it is an active form of reality-construction: based on data and diagnosis, it aspires to generate forecasts and reflect upon possible modes of implementation, thereby actively intervening in reality.

Whether or not it has succeeded in this ambition can certainly be debated. Yet, CT's commitment to theorizing as a reality-shaping activity appears to me as an intriguing alternative for reflecting upon, and potentially overcoming, the theoretical skepticism characteristic of the post-Soviet context. Turning to the CT tradition's concept of theorization may provide valuable and productive impulses, both for studying this skepticism and for transcending it.

Conclusion

The era of the internationalization of Critical Theory (CT), owing both to its theoretical potential and its resonance with global political and social dynamics, has led even to a renewed interest in the themes explored by the first-generation authors and, on the other hand, to its dissemination and recognition far beyond Germany and Europe. Despite sharing a remarkably similar spectrum of problems and themes – indeed, despite its own leftist ideological past – the post-Soviet public sphere encountered CT very late and in a largely superficial manner. Nevertheless, CT can serve as a compelling and productive platform for reflection for readers

and researchers in post-Soviet space, and for Azerbaijani intellectuals in particular. I have sought to highlight several dimensions of this potential.

First, CT offers Azerbaijani readers the perspective that the historical conditions in which they live and the crises to which they are subjected are not fatalistic nor unique, but rather form part of broader dynamics that are equally pressing in other parts of the world. This, in turn, allows us to perceive our problems as global and systemic in nature. Another significant potential lies in providing both an impetus for the study of theoretical skepticism – so characteristic of post-Soviet and Azerbaijani intellectual history – as an epistemic phenomenon, and an alternative to that skepticism. CT stands in direct contrast to this skepticism, characterized instead by a form of theoretical optimism. Moreover, studying CT is essential for reconsidering the anti-Enlightenment and anti-reason image with which it has often been presented in our context, thereby dismantling these stereotypes. Thus, CT itself is increasingly being used as a decorative façade for reactionary propaganda under this image.

Overall, although CT is an intellectual initiative with leftist ideological origins, its most recent, internationalized phase is marked by theoretical pluralism. In my view, this offers a promising opportunity for us: We may both interpret our problems within a broader global context and discover a platform for debate that allows us to engage critically with other theoretical perspectives.

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