North American Critical Theory after Postmodernism

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North American Critical Theory after Postmodernism explores the emergence of a generation of critical theorists whose lives and scholarship unfolded in the midst of what has been called ‘the postmodern turn.’ I locate this generation in the 1970s and 1980s in the work of Ben Agger, Andrew Arato, Robert J. Antonio, Seyla Benhabib, Craig Calhoun, Nancy Fraser, Douglas Kellner, and Timothy W. Luke. While certainly not a comprehensive list of the North American critical theorists who belong to this tradition, each of these authors offers a contemporary statement on critical theory, builds on the work of Western Marxism and the Frankfurt School, and engages sagaciously with postmodernism¹ without proposing a radical break from the tradition of emancipatory telos and the practice of immanent critique. This unique engagement results for each author in an evolving and distinctly political perspective on varying contemporary themes.

Recently, in his introduction to Postwar American Critical Thought, Peter Beilharz traced contemporary American critical theory through its historical relationship to the Frankfurt School and local influences, such as pragmatism, noting that ‘the paths of critical theory are thus transatlantic as well as local, and spread by transcontinental as well as continental carriers.’² Beilharz’s observation of the local and global influences on the work of North American critical theorists is evidenced in the interviews included in this volume, which include discussion of early encounters with theorists as varied as Jean Baudrillard, Giles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Felix Guattari, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Jean-François Lyotard. These encounters took place in the context of deep readings of, among others, Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Pierre Bourdieu, John Dewey, Jürgen Habermas, Georg W.F. Hegel, Max Horkheimer, Alasdair MacIntyre, Herbert Marcuse, Karl
Marx, Richard Rorty, Charles Taylor, E.P. Thompson, and Max Weber. At the same time, members of this generation of North American critical theorists were actively engaged in the political struggles of the 1960s and 1970s.

Given this vast mosaic of intellectual influences, both scholastic and political, that played a part in the formation of this generation’s contributions to critical theory as a mode of practice, the objectives of this volume are, first, to document the formative experiences of this generation of critical theorists (c. 1970–), not only as a matter of historical record, but also in order to learn how these experiences have shaped their view of critical theory. Second, these interviews help to identify how the North American tradition, which is significantly influenced by both German and French theory, has avoided the concretization of either. Third, in addition to highlighting their similarities, these dialogues reveal how the positions articulated by these theorists diverge.

One impetus for conducting the interviews included in this volume was my observation of a disconnect between the politically minded practice of this generation of critical theorists and the characterizations of their work that I encountered both within and outside of North America. I heard puzzling labelings of the intellectuals included in this volume as either ‘postmodern’ or ‘Marxist,’ neither of which is a credible characterization of this generation, which seems to avoid strict adherence to ‘schools of thought’ and orthodoxy. Together, the work of the authors in this volume demonstrates how North American critical theory neither fully embraces nor bluntly dismisses the insights of Marx or of postmodern theory. As Philip Wexler noted when referring to Agger, Fraser, and Luke (among others), they ‘do not eschew postmodernism for hackneyed slogans, nor do they embrace theory as an aesthetic substitute for theory as a socially transformative practice. They are committed both to social theory and social practice... The authors are a new generation of North American critical theorists who do not retreat to European humanism in the face of social, cultural, and self transformation.’3

My anecdotal observation of tendencies towards mischaracterization of North American critical theory was reinforced by Göran Therborn’s characterization in ‘From Marxism to Post-Marxism?’4 In direct contrast to the thesis of this volume, Therborn’s discussion neglects most of the work done by North American critical theorists since the 1970s and concludes that ‘its best output has been about, rather than of, critical theory.’5 In this volume, Agger, Antonio, Arato, Benhabib, Calhoun, Fraser, Kellner, and Luke tell of a different