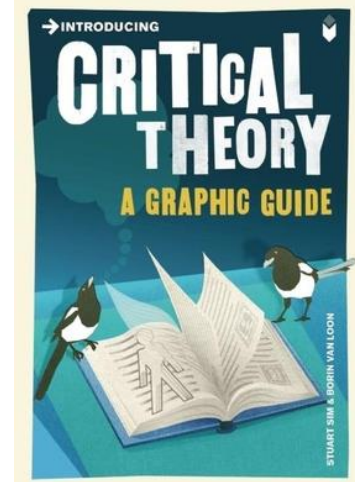


Comprehensive But Dated: The Many Strands of “Theory”

a review from Dick Burkhardt of

Introducing Critical Theory: A Graphic Guide

By Stuart Sim & Borin Van Loon (2012)



This a very insightful overview, made fun and accessible by cartoon-like graphics, of what philosophers call “critical theory”, originally published in 2001. Now in 2022 it is dated – no mention of “critical race theory” (CRT) – the strand most known to the general public and most controversial. But the foundations and most of the key ideas are there, including early versions of the controversies. What’s new is how heavily critical theory has gotten into identity politics and how the controversies have gone viral.

What’s encouraging to those of us who are among the critics of prominent aspects of CRT are the statements like “postfeminists share the tendency of their post-Marxist, postmodernist, and poststructuralist counterparts to view their predecessors as authoritarian” (p 157). Critical identity theory, such as “whiteness studies”, is in desperate need of such a wave of “post” critiques. This is because of the damage caused by the current cancel culture, often justified by dogmatic versions of critical identity theory, targeting dissidents from across the political spectrum.

But what really stood out to me in this book is the insularity of this kind of philosophy. You’d think that critical theory would have something to do with critical thinking skills and the scientific method. Yet the scientific evidence on the subjects in question is often ignored, downplayed, or cherry picked. In CRT reason and logic are sometimes even disparaged as “white” and “oppressive”, mirroring fundamentalist or totalitarian ideology in certain tactics and doctrines, hence the controversy.

The one nod to science cited in this book is the use of quantum mechanics, chaos theory, and complexity theory (p 12) by a few theorists. Except this is often a misuse – to undermine the truth-seeking achievements of good science in favor of the “social construction of knowledge” based on relationships of power, especially as popularized by Foucault. That is, this modern physics and mathematics (my specialty) only demonstrates the limitations of traditional Newtonian and other simplistic views of nature. This forces us into new ways of knowing, not into “postmodern relativism”.

The problem here is that most academics in the humanities, often even in the social sciences, have not been educated in these new ways of knowing. They default to abstract or simplistic ideologies which misrepresent reality in key respects. In history Peter Turchin is introducing nonlinear models and data mining, in economics Steve Keen, David Orrell, and a few others are pioneering the mathematics of nonlinearity and complexity – designed for the real world. In philosophy a few, like Alexander Wendt, have dug into quantum mechanics in a serious way. But the connections to reality in critical theory are often so speculative that they remind of me the “abstract nonsense” I had to deal with in graduate school.

Author Sim does cite the “Sokal” affair (1996) – a hoax designed to expose this nonsense. More recently the “grievance studies” affair was a hoax orchestrated by James Lindsay, Peter Boghossian, and Helen Pluckrose in 2017 to demonstrate that the situation has not improved. All this is grounded in the denigration of Enlightenment values like evidence and reason, a key feature of influential critical theories (blaming fascism and the like on the failure of Enlightenment values rather than on recognizing their aspirational nature, a project for many generations of experience and learning, with setbacks to be expected). The result has often been little better than propaganda, enforced by accusations of racism or white supremacy against dissenters in CRT or of sexism or homophobia against dissenters in queer or gender theories.

I find it especially strange that Marxism is identified as the underlying model for critical theory but little attention is given to understanding the modern economy versus the early industrial economy that Marx had to deal with. In particular, critical identity theory has been described as an updated version of Marxism but with the role of class replaced by identity (of marginalized groups) – due to the failure of the proletariat to lead the revolution anticipated by Marx. Yet this identity politics subverts the key insight of Marx – that justice is rooted in the economy and is doomed to failure because it deals with symptoms and superficial issues rather than root causes.

It would be great to see this book updated and supplemented by critiques and comments from outside the field itself. Critical theory focuses on important issues – the ongoing sociological dysfunctions in many societies – but is so insular and ideological that it handles those issues very badly.