

UC Santa Cruz

UC Santa Cruz Previously Published Works

Title

Critique and Disclosure: Critical Theory between Past and Future

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1jw0j8pv>

Journal

GERMAN STUDIES REVIEW, 32(1)

ISSN

0149-7952

Author

Bivens, Hunter

Publication Date

2009

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Nikolas Kompridis. *Critique and Disclosure: Critical Theory between Past and Future*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006. Pp. xiii, 337. Cloth \$37.50

Nikolas Kompridis frames his book as a response to what he sees as a crisis in Habermasian critical theory. Theory has exhausted its own semantic resources, and Kompridis sees the solution in a philosophy (the question of the difference between philosophy and critical theory remains unasked) that listens rather than seeking to speak first. Kompridis outlines a practice of "critical intimacy" (122), tempering the coldness of communicative reason with Martin Heidegger's notion of world disclosure. The guiding question of Kompridis' book is that of "the proportion of continuity and discontinuity of the forms of life we inherit and pass on" (152), and the deep engagement with critical theory's imbrication in the temporal structure of modernity lends coherence to the book. If the modern itself is a temporal dispensation based in continual crisis and emergence, critical theory is, according to Kompridis, something like modernity's self awareness, and it is the vocation of the critical theorist, as the "philosopher of the future" (a coinage of Nietzsche), to perform openness to the novelty of said future through an active reception of the past.

The crisis of critical theory today, as Kompridis diagnoses it, then is its increasing helplessness in the face of this challenge. Indeed, Habermas' own proceduralism can be read as an attenuation of hopeful, or perhaps utopian, attachments to the future in recent decades, as his deployment of communicative reason "has identified itself almost exclusively with a procedural conception of law and democracy," becoming "principally... a theory of the normative order of democratic societies" (278). In this affirmative and conservative stance, Kompridis implies, critical theory has not so much overcome what Habermas saw as the dead end of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as it has itself come to resemble the instrumental reason that Horkheimer and Adorno attacked. It is against this "contracting space of possibility" (198) that Kompridis evokes the Heideggarian notion of world disclosure, which he defines in terms of receptivity to the aspects of the lifeworld that Habermas tends to neglect. Thus, the notion of disclosure based on a reading of positive solicitude, which Kompridis brilliantly wrestles out of Heidegger's oeuvre, offers Kompridis a model for attentiveness to the past, tradition, and particularity.

Rather than writing off the plurality of everyday practices and of local lifeworlds as so many "provincialisms" to be overcome, Kompridis's intimate critique sees the particular as the necessary resource of reason if it is not to collapse up itself.

The urgency of Kompridis' argument seems to hinge on his identification of critical theory with Habermas. Yet Habermas represents only one of many directions taken by thinkers indebted to the tradition (never so well defined itself) of the Frankfurt School. It would have been interesting, given Kompridis' concern with the futures of utopian desire, to see him address the work of others who have taken up this theme in different ways, for example, Susan Buck-Morss, Russell Jacoby, or Fredric Jameson. Furthermore, Kompridis' book is at times somewhat abstract. While Kompridis does a worthy service in casting two important figures (especially Heidegger, who Kompridis valiantly saves from himself) in a new light, the reader is left wondering what exactly the critical intimacy Kompridis advocates might work. The few "real life examples" Kompridis provides are strangely undeveloped and under-theorized.

HUNTER BIVENS, *UC Santa Cruz*