

# The Frankfurt School and the Reconstruction of Contemporary Social Critical Theory

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## Abstract

**The purpose of this article is to explore the internal logic of the transition from Frankfurt School critical theory to contemporary social critical theory. This article examines the paradigm shift from philosophy of consciousness to philosophy of language, analyzes the mechanism of the differentiation between communicative rationality and life world, and explains how recognition politics expands the dimension of justice from economic distribution to identity. By integrating resources from Kant, Hegel, Rawls, etc., the theory re-established norm standards with universal binding force in the context of secularization. Contemporary critical theory has repaired the decline of explanatory power of traditional Marxism and provided a solid framework for diagnosing systemic pathology in post-modern society. This has contributed to the key ideological resources for reshaping the rational order of modern society.**

## Keywords

**Frankfurt School; Social critical theory; Instrumental rationality; Communicative rationality.**

## 1. Introduction

As an important branch of western Marxism, social criticism theory has been devoted to analyzing the internal tension of modernity and the potential path of human liberation since its birth [1]. In the middle of the 20th century, Frankfurt School established the philosophical height of critical paradigm with its sharp "instrumental rationality" criticism and profound insight into cultural industry [2]. Faced with the rise of fascism and the formation of a capitalist consumer society in the late period, the first generation of scholars tried to reveal how reason alienated into a dominant natural force and tried to break the materialized structure by awakening the subjective consciousness [3]. However, the paradox of history is that the liberated subject has not been truly free, but has fallen into a deeper management cage in the standardized administrative management system [4]. Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* offers a profound critique of reason's self-destructive tendencies, yet it often slips into a pessimism that offers little in the way of constructive norms—making it ill-equipped to address the diverse and fluid forms of oppression found in postmodern society [5]. When the narrative of class revolution fails and subjectivity disappears in the cultural industry, critical theory falls into a crisis of legitimacy [6].

In this context, subsequent theorists try to activate the classical critical potential to adapt to the new era context through paradigm transformation and normative reconstruction [7]. They are no longer limited to one-sided philosophy of consciousness and economic determinism, but turn to philosophy of language, theory of communicative behavior and social ontology, and expand from justice of resource allocation to politics of identity recognition. This reconstruction process is not a total negation of classics, but a dialectical sublation, which not only retains the radical edge of criticism, but also overcomes the nihilistic tendency of early theories, and provides the possibility for the reconstruction of normative basis [8]. The

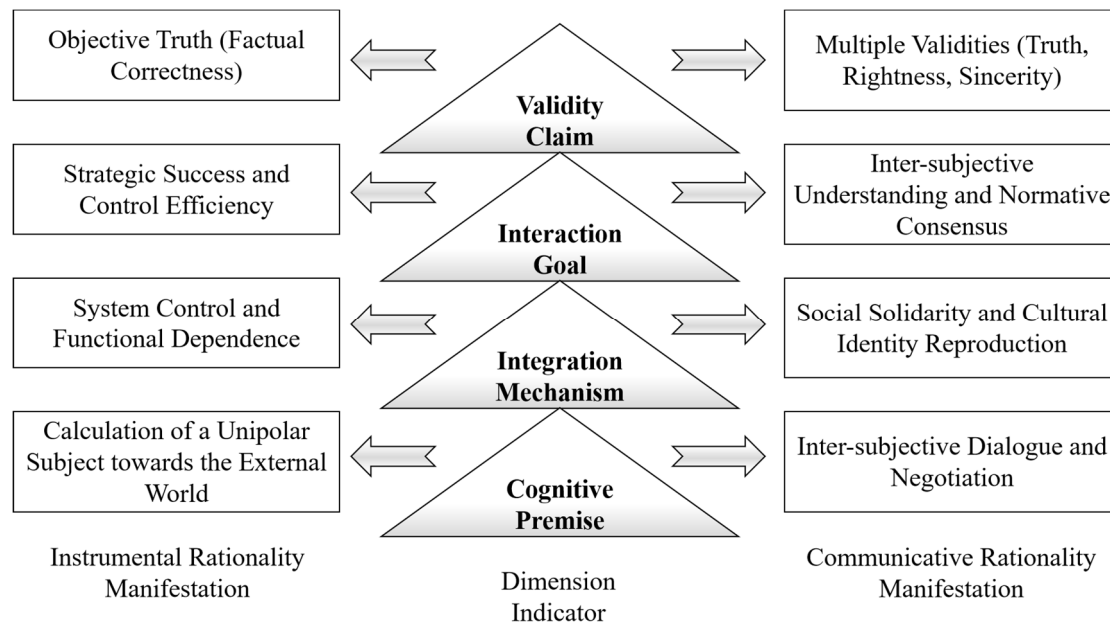
complexity of contemporary society, including the inequality brought by globalization, the blurred boundary of technical ethics and the intensification of ecological crisis, requires the theory to have stronger explanatory flexibility and normative guidance. Based on the inherent logic of theoretical pedigree, this article strictly follows the methodological constraints of theoretical derivation and focuses on the philosophical investigation of concept evolution.

## 2. The Theoretical Dilemma of Classical Criticism

The primary dilemma faced by classical critical theory lies in the self dissolution of its internal logic. The excessive expansion of instrumental rationality leads to the reversal of the subject object relationship. Although it successfully exposes the dominant structure of capitalism, it slides towards negative negation due to the lack of specific liberation plans. The theory of cultural industry presupposes the comprehensive passivity of popular consciousness, which suspends the subjectivity in the theoretical presupposition and plunges it into an irreparable abyss of pessimism. Early theories tended to depict the driving forces of social change in a static manner, neglecting the micro mechanisms of self correction and reflection within society, making it difficult to adapt to the complex realities of post-war welfare states and consumer societies. This overall negative perspective limits the theoretical imagination of the possibility of liberation, making it appear inadequate in explaining specific social pathologies and unable to construct normative bridges connecting the present and the future, thus forcing later theorists to seek new entry points to break this deadlock.

## 3. The Paradigm Shift of Communicative Rationality

And the later elaboration of critical theory in Frankfurt School showed more that critical theory had gone through a deep linguistic turn. In this respect, Habermas's theory of communicative action represented a decisive turn that left behind the dismal outlook of the past. The concept of intersubjectivity completely replaces the transcendental presupposition of isolated subjects, and the theoretical focus shifts from philosophical reflection on the structure of consciousness to normative reconstruction of language interaction. The core purpose of this paradigm transformation is to solve the problem of the colonization of the life world by instrumental rationality [10]. Communicative rationality no longer regards language as a simple tool of information transmission, but establishes it as a necessary medium to reach understanding and consensus among subjects. Communicative behavior requires the speaker to undertake the commitment of authenticity, legitimacy and sincerity in his speech. This theoretical turn corrects the static description of the first generation of scholars on the driving force of social change, and also endows critical theory with stronger empirical explanatory power and diagnostic function. Communicative rationality especially emphasizes the process of the subject reaching a consensus through free debate in the ideal speech situation. This theoretical framework recognizes the pluralistic characteristics of modern social values and seeks the possibility of cooperation based on rational rules. By this way, critical theory has regained its ability to intervene in real life. The power of the system still mainly depends on money and power as control means, but the reproduction of the life world needs to rely on language to convey meaning and unity. When these two different social logics conflict violently, critical theory must provide professional diagnosis scheme to identify social pathology.



**Figure 1.** Core Dimensions between Instrumental Rationality and Communicative Rationality

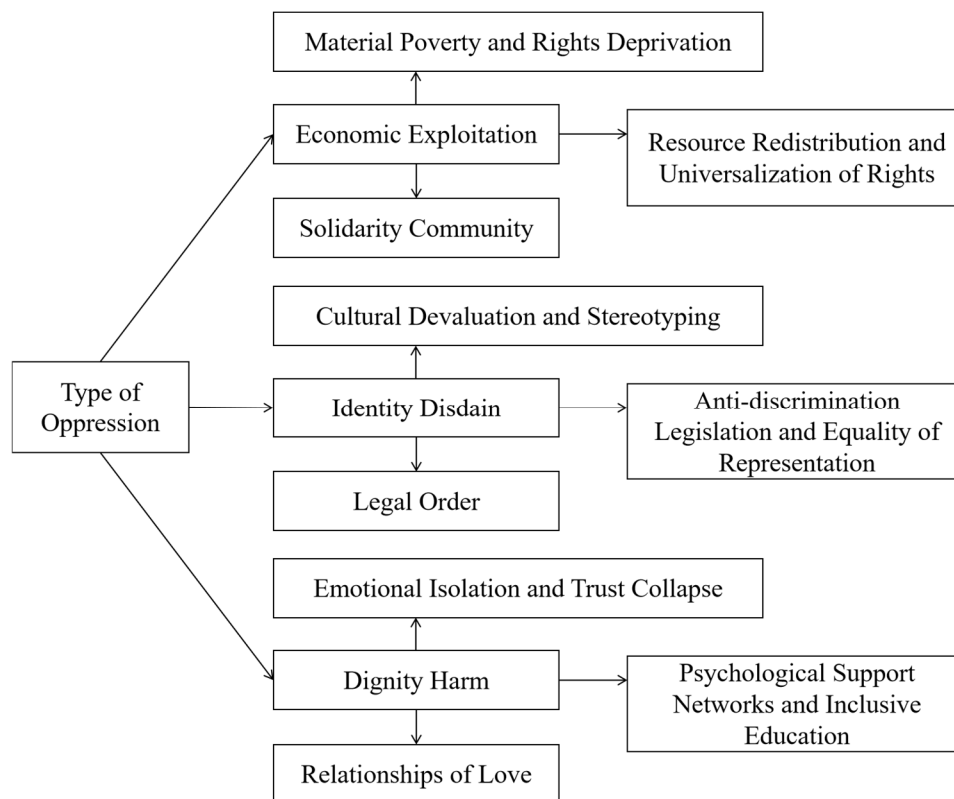
Figure 1 shows the fundamental differences between these two logics in operating mechanism and value orientation. The former always pursues strategic success, while the latter always pursues mutual understanding among people. This fundamental difference determines the source of motivation of social actors and the basic way they interact with the world. An accurate understanding of this paradigm shift is of great importance and theoretical necessity for grasping contemporary social pathology. Theorists now pay more attention to the procedural justice of discourse ethics than some fixed substantive value judgment. This marks the in-depth shift of the research perspective of critical theory from grand historical narrative to micro-interactive mechanism.

#### 4. Recognize the Reconstruction of Politics and Justice

After Habermas' communicative rationality, the contemporary evolution of social critical theory has experienced a more thorough ontological turn to inter - subjectivity. This crucial juncture is centrally reflected in the reconstruction of the politics of recognition and justice theory. As successors like Honneth integrate Hegel's master - slave dialectic into the critical system, the academic community has gradually realized that simple economic redistribution is insufficient to cover all the sufferings of modern people. The mutual contempt and identity exclusion among subjects constitute another deep - seated social pathology.

Figure 2 lists three main modes of admission failure and their corresponding institutional remedies. It presents a complete spectrum from personal emotional needs to legal system protection. Neglecting any of these dimensions may lead to the failure of corrective measures. Contemporary justice theory must therefore adopt a dual strategy, eliminating both the poverty cycle caused by market mechanisms and the hierarchical bias in cultural value systems. Fraser put forward the dualism of redistribution and recognition, and this theory got a dialectical synthesis here. Fraser argues that any single-dimensional reform cannot fundamentally solve systemic injustice. By drawing on this broad framework, it highlights the basic role of the state in holding society together. Thus on policies, importance shall be given to economy and culture intertwined with double responsibility. Mutual respect for that institutions can be considered agents of social interaction and so it is important to establish the principle of mutual respect for stability. Through the interweaving of these mechanisms, critical theory has largely transmuted abstract moral philosophy into a political program. This reconstruction not only

revived ethical concern in Marx's theory, but partly made up for the shortcomings that liberalism excessively depended on contract hypothesis.



**Figure 2.** Corresponding Mechanisms between Recognition Struggles and Justice Realization

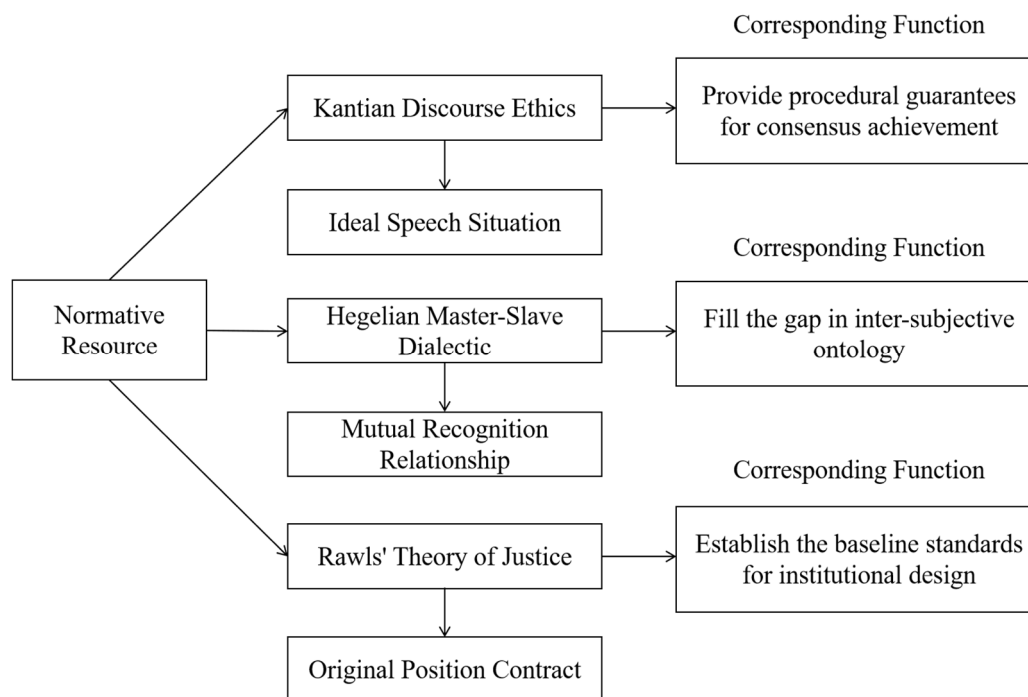
## 5. Normative Integration of Critical Theory

The crucial vitality of critical theory is whether it can reconstruct a firm normative basis in post-secularization age. Re grafting of historical materialism and classical liberalism resources In this context, theorists seek to compile universally valid value standards that transcend mere empirical descriptions. This is not just eclecticism, however: this is a very deep analysis of the innate moral potential of modernity. It is through this examination of legitimacy across different ideological traditions that a normative framework can begin to be established. It upholds the principles of radical democracy; it also contributes to those theoretical values concrete concerns about procedural justice. In some casual register, different thoughts have been right for all types of construction work. The paths of transformation/mutation for Kantian ethics/Hegelian dialectics/Rawls' theory of justice in (contemporary) critical practice above (figure 3). Such integration ensures that the theory is sufficiently explanatory and moral against intricate social constraints.

Kantian discourse ethics guarantees procedures of consensus, and Hegelian recognition compensates for having only subject-object relationship; Rawls' principles of justice provides bottom line requirements for institutional construction. These theoretical exchanges make these critical frames heterogeneous and three-dimensional. Critical theory leaps from the syllogism of books into active expansion, cross-discipline. It threads power analysis, discourse thinking and ecological care into the center of its agenda. Institutions put theory to the test, empowered by it.

The social changes in the future thus require our theories to give detailed normative proposals that are directed toward an ethical problem introduced by technological domination. Through this multi-dimensional normative integration, critical theory can transform from pure negation

to constructive reconstruction at least in part. This structural analysis showing how normative foundations are not given a priori, or indeed constantly generated in social interactions. There needs to be an openness of form in theory, otherwise it risks becoming just another set of dogma. Acting in an inherently post-colonial frame, it is common for a singular cultural value system to fail to accurately account for issues of oppression that cross borders. For this, critical theory needs to emote beyond the nation state. What was shown in the resource integration of Figure 3 is tailored to handle the increasingly complex practical problem bard.



**Figure 3.** Diverse Normative Sources of Critical Theory and Their Functional Integration

## 6. Conclusions

In this article, we explore Frankfurt School legacy in contemporary applications and illuminate features embedded through linking to its main significance. Theoretical community and the transformation of it are not pessimistic greyhand, nor because the space diverts into all kinds of abstract negation The field of early principles fell into the series reduce itself ask basic demand equipoise side (such as those who are materialism-dominance structure of world view) general way "Instrumental" and so spirit hero is antimoral a Tang Zhi crooks in bottomless pit, From focus on about economy background when at binary destroy some arbitrariness (subject-object antagonism) to practice based upon such multi-facets scrutinizes aspect human flow phosphorescent multiplexesReplyAcknowledgeinfluence. In fact its not a repair (simple) but an extending rational dimension for enlightenment. It is this distinction between communicative reason and the lifeworld that enables us to defend social life against systemic colonization. It recognizes that politics addresses the emotional and ethical void in traditional distributive justice. The normative integration reflects that the critical theory has not further developed its sharpness, but rather found more feasible orientation on a new ground. The integrated theory sees deliberative democracy not only as a sign to access the rationality of norms, but also encourages more attention on citizen participation in social governance.

The risk society in the contemporary world is facing some terrible challenges such as algorithmic hegemony, ecological crisis and liquidity oppression under the impact of globalization, thus this framework still needs to keep more openness. Future work must

enhance cross-cutting interdisciplinary perspectives and align philosophical abstraction with social network practices in the public domain. It is precisely at that moment when critical theory can respond to individual survival anxiety and structural dilemmas that its potentially normative power can be translated into a practical force for social change. And it is not only about theoretical enrichment but also a solemn pledge to human liberation. In this perspective, and by creating a more inclusive, critical and binding regulatory framework, it will continue to perform its extensive diagnostic activity as modern wound. So this well-known mechanism will do better serving to ensure that civilization doesn't get lost in the headlong rush of technology, and reconcile the dialectical unity of private liberty and social unity.

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