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Introduction

Contested identities - critical conceptualisations of the human

Critical Theory, insofar as it seeks to “liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (Horkheimer 1982: 244), continually engages with a critical conceptualisation of the subject of its enquiry – humanity – and the societies it inhabits. The third South African Society for Critical Theory annual conference took place on 22 and 23 November 2019 at the Howard College Campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal on the theme “Contested Identities: Critical Conceptualisations of the Human”. The conference served to re-affirm the continuing relevance of critical theory for enquiring not just into contemporary society, but also for asking questions of our conceptualisations of the human and human identity.

To this end papers were invited which addressed the vexed notion of the ‘human’ in the contemporary age and considered the potential and pitfalls of identity theory in relation to Critical Theory. The conference also called for papers that explore the concept of ‘the human’ and ‘human nature’ from a critical perspective. What, for instance, might we construe as ‘essential’ human characteristics? Or is it the case that the question of the ‘human’ is no longer meaningful in such a sense? Has the technological mediation of existence altered our understanding of humanity? Would we perhaps be better served by attempting to define the ‘human’ contextually, in its present historico-social conditions? And would doing so enable us to extrapolate its future trajectory? Is it the case that attempting to formulate such a definition may facilitate liberation, or would it merely serve a repressive ideological function? For if it is the

case that the ‘human’ or ‘human nature’ are no longer meaningful categories, then what is it that Critical Theory aims to liberate?

This call generated a wide response, and those that have been finally accepted for publication follow a certain thematic pattern regarding the future and past of the idea of ‘the human’. Broadly, one can divide the accepted papers into those that follow a roughly political trend (Pauwels; Dick and Painter; Amiradakis; and, to an extent, Olivier), a ‘crime, violence, and guilt’ theme (Lotter; Latecka; Collins and Plüg) and an educational line (Sewchurran and Hofmeyr; Govender; Hlatshwayo). We shall follow this broad division while, as guest editors, introducing these papers and the background from which they arise.

The first group of papers presented all address, in different ways, a critical engagement with the political implications of the very notion of ‘identity’. In addition to problematising the functions of identity, these papers also bring into view the political dimensions of the processes whereby such identities are constituted, particularly in terms of identity politics.

Pauwels’s paper engages with the politics of identity via the prism of Rancière’s political philosophy. Starting from the assumption that the Black Consciousness Movement represents a form of identity politics, Pauwels asks whether Rancière’s critique of identity politics can be used to conceptualise and assess the movement’s political project. Pauwels draws upon a tension in Rancière’s work between his commitment to emancipatory forms of politics and his apparent antipathy to identity politics to reconsider the applicability of Rancière’s political philosophy to the history of the struggles of formerly colonised peoples.

Rancière, on Pauwels’s account, associates emancipation with the absence of limitations. Consequently, a group’s emancipatory potential is to be assessed in relation to its non-conformity to ‘identitarian determinations’. As a result, Rancière takes issue with forms of politics which confine people to fixed roles and identities. In addition to ‘overdetermining’ their modes of acting and being, Rancière also argues that identity politics tend to lead to oppressed groups submitting themselves to an unequal position in the social hierarchy. Rather than a shared common identity, they suggest, it is the ways in which oppressed groups position themselves *between* identities that defines and maintains them as group.

In so doing Pauwels critically examines the coherence of Rancière’s views on emancipatory politics and identity politics, and explores both their flaws and their analytic potential. By reflecting on Rancière’s philosophy in conjunction with their idiosyncratic reading of Biko’s philosophy, Pauwels problematises the Black Consciousness Movement’s “therapeutic essentialism” and proto-nationalist tendencies. In so doing, they trace both the limits of Rancière’s political model and

bring to light the ways in which the Black Consciousness Movement developed its own critique of apartheid-era identity politics.

Dick and Painter approach the topic of identity by considering the formative circumstances and processes of subjectivity in academia under the working conditions of neoliberal capitalism. They explore the detrimental effects of neoliberal managerialism, specifically the sense of precarity it engenders, and argue that a truly critical theory must move beyond theoretical diagnosis to the development of forms of treatment. In so doing, such forms of treatment must remain open to the possibility of identifying forms of resistance present within, and perhaps even made possible by, the current neoliberal context.

The paper is structured as a dialogue between Dick and Painter in the form of an exchange of emails, during the course of which they chart the stresses and strains to which they are subjected. The paper eschews the traditional format for an academic paper and instead provides us with a performative enactment that seeks to draw meaning out of the inimical institutional environment in which and about which it was written, and to enable self-understanding of the ways in which they themselves constitute and are constituted by this environment. The disjointed form in which this dialogue is presented is a mode of discourse with which we are all too familiar, that of an email trail. And yet, in its treatment by Dick and Painter, this disjointed dialogue also exposes the tentative and fragmentary process whereby the authors struggle to articulate their situational awareness of the institutional environment in which they operate, attempt to extract a coherent meaning from it, while also striving to adopt a critical (and self-critical) stance to their precarious state of affairs and their own role in its perpetuation.

Dick and Painter call for a transformative moment within academia, a process whereby the isolated and subjugated denizens of the university form subject groups, open to creative praxis and the otherness of others. Regardless of how one feels about the likelihood or even desirability of this eventuality, their paper should leave a sense of unease that may lead to self-reflection among tenured and untenured colleagues alike regarding the role that they play in perpetuating the neoliberal exploitation of, among others, postdoctoral research fellows and adjunct staff. Additionally, consideration is given to the intolerable workplace stresses produced by such neoliberal exploitation, and the question of the nature of the human being within those institutions they inhabit forms an unspoken through line.

Amiradakis similarly explores the effects of neoliberal capitalism on the formation (and deformation) of human subjectivity. Their paper scrutinises the impacts of contemporary communications technology, particularly social media, on the digital citizen. They specifically trace those technologies within the wider

socio-economic system in which and for which such technologies function. Amiradakis suggests that these technologies be considered as constituting “informational capitalism”, a state of affairs in which technologies enable the analysis and commodification of all digital interaction. Drawing on Shoshana Zuboff’s concept of “surveillance capitalism”, they sketch an image of an economic system that is based on the commercialisation of technologically-mediated data that is generated and consumed by the users themselves, and is consequently dependent on users’ continuous engagement with social media technologies.

Amiradakis argues pointedly that these technologies have been specifically designed in order to capture the attentional and retentional reserves of the user. Bringing Critical Theory into dialogue with the philosophy of technology, Amiradakis draws upon the work of Bernard Stiegler to explore the ways in which social media operates as ‘memory-technologies’ that manipulate attentional faculties into ever closer relation with what is offered for consumption by the attentional economy. Given the centrality of the role of attention in consciousness, and in the processes of individuation, it is suggested that the proliferation of memory-technologies’ use is designed to serve capitalist interests which may result in the limiting of possibilities for individuation – the question of the construction and reconstruction of human nature and human identity remains a theme throughout.

Furthermore, Amiradakis notes, these attention-capturing techniques have clear political ramifications. The exploitative structures of the digital culture industry employ the targeted filtering of information, in effect deciding on behalf of the user what it is that they will find interesting. It is suggested that this, in turn, raises broader concerns regarding the social media’s effective power to direct the socio-political consciousness of the digital public.

In contrast to the preceding papers, Olivier’s article engages with a more utopian strand in critical political thought. Olivier uses *Sense8*, the Netflix science-fiction series created by the Wachowskis and J. Michael Straczynski, for a prospective consideration of the politics of identity and the possibility of a solidarity that embraces rather than effaces difference. *Sense8*, on Olivier’s account, operates as “heterotopian mirror” which reveals contemporary society’s dystopian facets while also indicating what might yet be – a future “assemblage” based upon a mutual need for support and formed of those who have moved beyond the set of gender, cultural, and racial prejudices that typify social normality. Drawn from the work of Deleuze and Guattari, the term “assemblage” indicates the essential role of others in the formation of the subject, itself a complex of relations and inter-relations rather than a discrete ontological entity. The political subject is thus an assemblage situated within a further assemblage,

not to be understood as static structure but a process of creative becoming, of dynamic rhizomatic activity.

By theorising the coalition of so-called sensates (mysteriously connected individuals in the narrative language of *Sense8*) as an assemblage, Olivier argues that *Sense8* can point beyond present social circumstances to a non-hierarchical ‘global assemblage’, a future where difference is embraced as mutually beneficial, rather than serving as an inducement to social repression. In this way Olivier’s discussion of an overlooked science-fiction series also serves as a Deleuze-Guattarian meditation on the political potential of minor cinema to subvert our understanding of present social relations, and both direct our attention to and propagate the seeds of alternative political futures wherein essential human characteristics are continually being expanded and reworked.

While politics and Critical Theory seem an obvious pairing in exploring the question, or even possibility, of a contemporary human nature, the next group of contributors turn their attention to the relation between Critical Theory and criminology to explore a similar question. Theorisation of the incarcerated individual and the criminal, perhaps more than any other, provides a fruitful space for asking questions concerning the relation of society to the human being in their historico-social conditions.

Casper Lötter argues in their paper “Critical Theory’s role in enhancing praxis in post-apartheid SA: the case for criminology” that the relation between Critical Theory and criminality has been an under-investigated theme, at least in the present state of affairs in South Africa. There has been a movement in criminology towards the perception of crime as having societal origins, according to Yar (2012: 52), which started in the late 1960s or, following Lynch (2014), in the early 1970s. Both its name (critical criminology) and the resultant interest in a critical and socially rooted approach serve to bring critical criminology in line with Critical Theory, a relationship commented on at length by Yar (2012). Anthony and Cunneen (2008: 1) define critical criminology as that which “seeks to locate and understand the reasons for crime within wider structural and institutional contexts” while Lynch (2014) adds to this definition by asserting that “[d]espite growing specialization, the field of critical criminology is united in its emphasis on addressing power differentials, hierarchies, and inequalities as explanations of crime”.

One might assume that, considering the long history of critical criminology and its social grounding, this discipline would have gained a foothold in South Africa, particularly given its relatively recent history of national political and social change. But the adoption of such a stance and “the political clout of critical criminology only gathers its momentum in its reflexive process, ongoing

critique and active engagement” that we have yet to see figure prominently in the South African milieu (Anthony and Cunneen 2008: 4). It is exactly this theme that Lötter explores in their paper.

Lötter claims that South African criminology has, somewhat surprisingly considering historical events, maintained its focus on the empirical track to the stark neglect of what they term “context”, i.e. the elements of structural oppression resulting from the country’s varied social inequalities and its still present racism. While not denying the value of empirical research into crime, Lötter states that “this unjust empirical focus has led to an emphasis on individual responsibility to the exclusion of institutionalised oppressions”. To support this central claim, they apply contributions from Critical Theory to the analysis of the phenomenon called the prison-industrial complex.

Lötter discusses the neglect of context in Western criminology, which they hold responsible for the phenomenon of the prison-industrial complex, as a situation which has resulted in corrupt use of funding for socio-economic projects. They assert that a similar situation exists at present in the South African penal system and proceeds to a critique based in Critical Theory and Marxist-based criminology. At this stage, the author gives an overview of Critical Theory, with particular reference to its engagement and suitability for critical criminological studies. Using this evaluation as backdrop, Lötter further analyses the application of conflict criminology and Critical Theory in the South African situation. In conclusion, Lötter reiterates the need for increased inclusion of Conflict Criminology and Critical Theory in theorising criminality in South Africa, on the one hand, and the need for a self-reflective attitude on the part of practising criminologists, on the other.

The next paper in this section is Ewa Latecka’s paper “Metaphysical guilt: Jaspers, Honneth, and the problem of dehumanisation”. The second paper in this section proceeds from an angle that is, on the one hand, very different from Lötter’s and yet bears certain unmistakable similarities both in their use of Critical Theory and adoption of a reflective stance. It is suggested that that it is this reflectivity that Schinkel (2010: 3) wishes to invoke in their *Aspects of violence* when they state that “violence is a slippery object, covering a plethora of things, actions mostly, being ill-definable”. Latecka’s point of reference lies within the combined philosophies of Karl Jaspers and Axel Honneth, in contrast to Schinkel’s focus on critical theorist Walter Benjamin, in their approach towards the issue of dehumanisation in their paper.

While literature on guilt abounds and crosses disciplinary boundaries, this wealth of information is typically rather confusing. Definitions often differ from discipline to discipline and frequently incorporate related emotions of shame,

remorse, or sin, to mention but a few (see Arel 2016; Charney and Mayzlish 2010; Katchadourian 2010; O'Connor et al. 1997, among many). Since the boundaries between these concepts are vague and their meaning coincides, it is only fair to say that, like violence, guilt too is an intangible concept.

Latecka confronts this difficulty by selecting not only a particular type of guilt, but a concept specifically described by a particular philosopher. They choose to discuss the concept of metaphysical guilt, as presented by Karl Jaspers, understood as arising from inter-human solidarity. Their interest is, first of all, in the issue of how metaphysical guilt arises, given that Jaspers does not present an in-depth account of the social component needed for it to occur either in the *Question of German guilt* (Jaspers 2000) or in the rest of his philosophical oeuvre. Secondly, they ask how it is possible that, in some contexts, certain humans do not experience metaphysical guilt.

In response to the first question, viz. the explanatory deficiency regarding the social basis of guilt which they find in Jaspers, the author adopts a process which combines three elements. First, they engage in a description of the origin of the concept of guilt in Jaspers's philosophy, and metaphysical guilt in particular. They follow this with the reference to what Jaspers calls a "boundary situation". Such a situation, guilt being one of them, when encountered, does not offer anything but a very clear choice of responses: one either accepts responsibility for one's deeds or views them as non-existent, in the denial of facing an existentially difficult truth. However, considering that a relationship to another human being which may result in the acceptance of guilt requires a social component, they then supplement this understanding of metaphysical guilt by introducing Honneth's concept of recognition and its unavoidable counterpart, misrecognition.

Secondly, the author engages with the issue of the complete lack of metaphysical guilt in certain individuals under particular circumstances. Here, they employ the concept of dehumanisation, an attitude that allows for the treatment of another human being as a worse human, less-than human, or non-human. Having defined and exemplified dehumanisation, Latecka finds that not only does it invoke denial, as claimed by Jaspers, but also misrecognition in its Honnethian understanding.

Anthony Collins and Simón Plüg's paper "'These violent delights have violent ends': Good subjects of everyday South African violence" also places itself in this group of papers. The authors move the focus from crime and guilt to violence in its most horrifying aspect, viz. mob-guided violent actions, often culminating in the death of innocent subjects, as in the cases of Mlungisi Nxumalo and Lucky Sefali.

The authors create a backdrop to their discussion of violence with a number of reflective quotations from a range of authors such as T.S. Eliot, Judith Butler, and William Shakespeare, thus, admittedly, pointing to the “social worlds” to which they refer in the conclusion. In particular, the authors are interested in how violence reproduces itself in societies. Their reflection on this topic seeks response first in Althusser’s concept of repressive and ideological state apparatuses. However, this concept does not seem, at least on the surface, to present a solution to the question of why violence reproduces itself. After all, claim the authors, the state provides measures of both penitentiary and educational nature to prevent and reduce crime rather than encourage it.

The authors adopt a “theoretically anti-humanist” stance, as they call it, in that they view the perpetrators as ‘subjects’ rather than ‘individuals’ which, according to the authors, implies self-interest and therefore positions their actions as purposely leading to the fulfilment of it. This allows them to distance themselves from making the normative judgments often invoked by attitudes whose terms of reference lie either in their religious underpinning or the assumption of the egocentric motivations of human beings. Instead, they wish to engage with research and theoretical frameworks which, rather than making moral statements, engage with the social causes of violence.

The authors analyse a case of mob justice as an example of violence in a South African context, before engaging in a thorough and multi-faceted analysis of the possible social contexts and reasons that may have led to the killing of Mlungisi Nxumalo and Lucky Sefali. They conclude with a thought provoking statement that, rather than considering violence as a reflection of an inherent “badness”, we should, in fact, look at the perpetrators as “ordinary people whose social worlds have produced conditions of violence and normalised it”.

The next prominent theme pervading the papers in this issue is education, and again the question of the human being in relation to their historico-social conditions comes to the forefront through the consideration of the role of education. Three papers, by Hlatshwayo, Sewchurran and Hofmeyr, and Govender, respectively, engage with the question of education from the perspective of Critical Theory.

Since 1989, when Crenshaw (1989) first used the term intersectionality to describe the interdependence of race and gender, the approach, based on treating identities as intersecting rather than additive in nature (Harris and Patton 2018: 2), has gained traction in a number of fields in academia and outside it. As Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall state, intersectionality “has emerged in a number of discursive spaces” (2013: 785). The authors differentiate three areas which, in their understanding, should form part of the emerging field of intersectionality

studies, viz. the theoretical/methodological, the applied academic research, and the non-academic praxis (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013: 785–786). It is the second of these to which the paper by Hlatshwayo belongs. While research in the intersection of race, gender, and education is not rare (see, for example Bhopal and Preston 2011 or Harris and Paton 2018), the approach taken by Hlatshwayo differs not only because they apply the theory to the South African context but also because they overlay it with the application of a concept of “a native of nowhere”, first presented in Essop Patel’s (1975) tribute to Nat Nakasa.

Hlatshwayo’s overall claim is that South African higher education is yet to fully address the issues of decolonisation and institutional transformation, as brought to the surface by the 2015–2016 student movements. To substantiate this view, they first use intersectional theory to establish the particular situation of higher education in South Africa. Having done so, the author presents particular intersectional struggles of both black students and black academics alike, stemming from the alienation and marginalisation which they still encounter in academia. In doing so, they prepare the ground for their final assertion, viz. that the tertiary system, as it presently exists, contributes to the production of what they call “postcolonial natives of nowhere”, i.e. people who, as a result of where and how they are educated, neither have nor obtain a sense of belonging.

Sewchurran and Hofmeyr touch on a different issue in their paper “A Critical Reflection on Digital Disruption in Journalism and Journalism Education”. The authors reflect upon issues brought into journalism with the advent of the information technology revolution, and data visualisation in particular.

So, what is digital disruption? The concept, first appearing in Clayton Christensen’s (1997) book *The innovator’s dilemma*, a follow-up to the same author’s earlier paper titled “Disruptive Technologies: Catching the Wave” (Bower and Christensen CM 1995), could be defined as the impact and resultant change that the advent of digital technologies has upon the world’s economy. Presently, the term may also be applied to changes brought about by digitisation to all, not just economic, aspects of human endeavour. In its original understanding, the term had a neutral meaning, indicating the above-mentioned effects, without making a value judgment.

However, Sewchurran and Hofmeyr view digital disruption as a possible danger, affecting journalism with particular potency. In their thoroughly researched paper, they focus on the small section of the technological advance bringing in the disruption, viz. data visualisation, stemming from the need to present data in a way which is accessible to players of the new, not only global but networked, economy. Narrowing their focus further, the authors ask questions related to, as they put it, “dangers posed by digital visualisation to the core ethos

and function of journalism as a vehicle in the service of contributing to a resilient democracy". The paucity of research in this relation justifies their claim.

The authors follow a course which first allows them to establish and define the terms, by offering a contextualisation of the problem followed by the definition and discussion of the existing literature on data visualisation. They then move to the historical account of journalism education in South Africa. They make the salient point that, pre-1994 and immediately thereafter, media studies and thus also the training of journalists had a critical aspect to it, stemming from the understanding of media as that which, while it may be in the service of the ruling powers, also allows for countering the prevailing ideology. However, the authors' claim is, with South Africa truly joining the world not just politically but also economically, the country also, *nolens volens*, joined the world's path of commodification. They argue, following on Adorno and Horkheimer's concept of culture industry, that a new media has arisen, harnessed to create and support the new consumerist economy. In accord, media studies started offering courses of a more vocational and professional rather than critical nature.

The authors further analyse this trend, and digital visualisation in particular, in terms of the Foucauldian "politics of truth", which opens up to the subsequent analysis of the issue with reference to Habermas's concept of the public sphere and his theory of communicative action as well as Fuchs's digital applications and the need for the disclosure of speaker identity. This analysis leads them to their final conclusion, viz. that, unless the training of journalists returns to making them critical thinkers rather than skilful artisans, data visualisation used in journalism carries with itself a risk of undisclosed bias.

Govender's paper, "Alienation, Reification and the Banking Model of Education: Paulo Freire's critical theory of education", follows a theoretical approach, in that it aims at firmly establishing Paulo Freire's membership within critical theory. However, if critical theory is always explanatory, practical, and normative as expounded by Horkheimer in his 1937 article "Traditional and critical theory" (see Horkeimer 2002) this paper, too, touches upon praxis, the praxis of social liberation.

Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was first published in 1968 in Portuguese and its English translation appeared two years later (Macrine 2020: v). Since then, it has become the basis for critique of educational systems and the source of inspiration for practising teachers and theorists alike. It also gave rise to a branch of pedagogy often referred to as critical pedagogy. The link to critical theory seemed obvious since, as Evans (2014: xv-xvi) explains:

"Critical theorists have made important contributions that help us better understand the nature of human society in the modern and postmodern eras. [...] Critical theorists in a variety of fields have contributed enlightening frameworks, perspectives, concepts, and analyses. [...] Without critical theorists in education, we might not understand the ways in which schools function to reproduce oppression."

And yet, despite this apparent confluence of critical theory and the legacy of Freire's *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, there has been, to our knowledge, no attempt to formally establish this connection. This is a deficit that Govender sets out to remedy.

Govender claims that Freire's *Pedagogy of the oppressed* should be accepted as part of the body of work on Critical Theory, and they use two arguments to support their view. First, they claim that there is conceptual likeness between *Pedagogy of the oppressed* and Critical Theory, and secondly, they also point to what they term "methodological isomorphism", i.e. the application of the same methodology by both Freire and Critical Theory, or its first generation in particular.

The paper begins with an outline of the key tenets of the Frankfurt School, both conceptual and methodological, followed by a symmetrical analysis of Freire's *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. These two sections are followed by an analysis of, first, conceptual similarity and then methodological isomorphism. The author concludes by stating that, while Freire's work is "pedagogical in character", it nevertheless may be considered a description of societal ills as reflected in miniature in the classroom. As such Govender has no doubt that it belongs, conceptually and methodologically, to the greater body of critical theory work.

Is the author stating the obvious? Maybe. Still, the obvious needs to be stated and the incorporation of Paulo Freire's thought into Critical Theory needs to happen. To the best of our knowledge, even though Freire is discussed alongside certain critical theorists (see, for example Misgeld 1988, discussing Freire and Habermas), papers presenting a logically developed proof that Freire actually is a critical theorist himself are non-existent.

In summation, this issue gathers together papers that address the question of the human being and identity politics in contemporary society, both prominently and tangentially, through engagement with the themes of the "political", crime, violence, guilt, and the educational. Such eclectic topics reflect the inherent complexity of formulating the concept of the human in the facilitation of liberation. These papers emphasise the emancipatory commitments of Critical Theory even while critically theorising questions of identity politics and the nature of the human being, suggesting the inherent value of Critical Theory in conceptualising

such themes. What is revealed is that, even in critically engaging with the basis of its theoretical roots, Critical Theory provides an avenue for sustained critical insights and social critique for contemporary society.

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