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RESEARCH

Should critical public intellectuals defend liberal democratic institutions?

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Abstract

In today's 'crisis of democracy', critical theorists defend democratic principles as public intellectuals. Yet, they remain hesitant to 'conservatively' defend liberal democratic institutions. This article contributes to a special issue on civil society defences of liberal democracy. It asks under what conditions critical theorists can justifiably intervene to defend existing institutions. The article first discusses arguments in critical theory which suggest that defences of democracy should be based on core democratic principles. It then turns to early critical theorists, demonstrating that their defence of existing institutions does not refer to such strong principles. Subsequently, the possibility of defending existing institutions without appeal to strong normative standards is discussed in dialogue with contemporary critical theory. Finally, the article suggests that critical theorists can defend existing institutions if they avoid strong normative claims and focus instead on institutional matters. Practically, they should forge civil society alliances to defend the potential for abolishment inherent in existing institutions.

Keywords: democratic theory; critical theory; crisis of democracy; democratic self-defence; public intellectual

Introduction

Many political theorists and comparative political scientists today sense a 'crisis of democracy', driven by regressive dynamics that reverse the institutional achievements of existing liberal democracies see, eg Diamond 2015; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Przeworski 2019; Runciman 2019; Schäfer and Zürn 2023). Much of liberal democratic political theory has therefore taken to the defence of these achievements (Kirshner 2014; Müller 2016; Malkopoulou and Norman 2018; Rijpkema 2018; Stahl and Popp-Madsen 2022).

In the context of this special issue, which investigates civil society defences of democracy from empirical and theoretical perspectives, it is important to reflexively ask about political theory's own defensive capabilities. This article contributes to this task, focussing on critical theorists as public intellectuals. Navigating their roles as academics and as engaged citizens, critical theorists commonly operate in media institutions and civil society networks to 'defend democracy' as public intellectuals (eg Forst 2021; Jaeggi 2024). Such engagements, central to critical theory's practical import, produce normative issues (see, eg Verovšek 2021). This article focuses on one particular question: can critical theorists defend existing liberal democratic institutions while remaining consistent with their commitment to transforming society?

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Many contemporary critical theorists share concerns about 'populist' or 'authoritarian' pressures on liberal democracy (eg Brown et al. 2018; Morelock 2018). But while calls for defending democracy today commonly appeal to the safeguarding of institutionally formalised 'basic orders', critical theorists consider these basic orders an object of critique (Menke 2018: 475). Opposition to the conventionalist maintenance of status quo institutional orders is commonly described as a core feature of critical theory: 'Critical social theories seek radically to change existing social reality', including 'transformation of the fundamental structures of society' (Cooke 2020: 583).

Critical theorists' advocacy for democracy, thus, commonly refers to democratic principles rather than to existing institutions (eg Mouffe 2019; Näsström 2021; Forst 2023). The article's *Section two* coins this 'the principled argument'. The principled argument is defined as follows: it refers to irreducible, indivisible, and maximal – superordinate – democratic principles for justifying defensive interventions; it assumes the transformative character of these principles; it opposes interventions conflicting with these principles.

This article argues that the principled argument imposes unnecessary restrictions on critical theory's contribution to civil society defences of liberal democracy. In *Section three*, it points out that early critical theorists, Horkheimer and Adorno, begin to publicly intervene on behalf of existing liberal democratic orders after beginning to renounce normative standards in their theories. *Section four* discusses contributions to contemporary critical theory that justify critical practice in the absence of strong normative principles. These contributions, however, cannot justify defending existing institutions.

Section five spells out conditions of possibility for critical theorists to publicly defend existing institutions without relying on the 'principled argument'. It suggests that critical public intellectuals may defend institutions inconsistent with the principles they advocate when meeting three criteria: they eschew strong principled claims in favour of existing institutions; they harness institutional potential for radical change; and they reconceptualise institutional 'value' accordingly. Critical theorists should prioritise institutional matters and publicly engage (also) in defence of an institutionally specific potential for radical change or 'abolishment'. Thereby, they can defend particular institutions while opposing various attempts at shielding existing institutions from change.

Section six concludes with a call for using these three criteria to consider practical conditions under which critical theorists may assist in civil society defences of existing liberal democratic institutions, and to reflexively assess existing defensive efforts.

The principled argument

Engagements with defending democracy in contemporary critical theory suggest that it is possible to defend democratic principles and institutions consistent with them. Institutions not corresponding to these principles are opposed as drivers of authoritarian developments (eg Mouffe 2019; Forst 2023). These elements of the 'principled argument' characterise much of critical theory's engagement with defending democracy today.[1] Advocates of this argument refer to superordinate, transformative democratic principles to justify *and* to oppose defensive interventions, depending on the consistency of interventions with these principles.

It is beyond this article's scope to cover all principled arguments in critical theory regarding defending democracy. To cover a broad range of arguments, contemporary 'Frankfurt School' critical theorists (Forst 2023), egalitarian social democrats (Näsström 2021), and radical

[1]Some contemporary critical legal scholars consider repressive, militant democratic interventions like party-bans a 'democratic duty' (Fischer-Lescano 2024). Critical political philosophers tend to be more hesitant. Nevertheless, they may advocate repressive intervention where consistent with the democratic principles defended.

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democrats (Mouffe 2019) are discussed.[2] This shows that the principled argument is pervasive and thereby imposes restrictions on public defences of democracy in critical theory.

Consider, firstly, Forst's (2023) essay 'The rule of unreason: Analyzing (anti-)democratic regression'. Forst begins by calling for 'further conceptual reflection and clarification' rather than taking the concept of regression at face value (Forst 2023: 217). He criticises that the concept of regression relies on a 'status quo ante fixation', on a 'reduction of the concept of democracy', and on a 'misclassification of critiques of democracy' (ibid.). To summarise what this entails: Forst argues that 'regression' likely overvalues and idealises existing, non-ideal democracies; it likely abstracts from the transformative demands of democratic principles and their significance for political struggle; it likely misjudges authoritarian calls for participation and change as legitimate democratic demands (Forst 2023: 218–221).

In other words, a principled, normative defence of democracy is tenable, whereas a 'conventionalist' defence of existing institutions is not. Critical theorists may relate defensively to existing institutions from a 'justifiable normative standpoint' (Forst 2023: 219), grounded in a 'first principle' (Forst 2023: 220) that is not reducible to the existing institutional order. They cannot refer to the conventionalist argument 'that something has once been established or recognised' and should therefore be defended (Forst 2023: 219). Forst opposes recourse to 'already achieved and institutionalised standards or socially accepted ideals' and links corresponding defences of democracy, at worst, to an 'ideological nostalgism' (Forst 2023: 219).

Forst's essay exemplifies the 'principled' defence of democracy. The critical thrust of defensive interventions is secured via superordinate normative principles, such as Forst's own theory of justification,[3] which are counterposed to the existing institutional order. Public interventions which defensively refer to existing institutional orders rather than to 'first principles' risk being dismissed as merely ideological.

Similar arguments pervade egalitarian, social democratic political theory and some variants of radical democratic theory. At first glance, these traditions seem to oppose the principled character of Forst's critical theory. Social democratic theory commonly promises a firm grasp of practical matters. Radical democratic thought emphasises 'political' over ethical concerns. Nevertheless, their defensive arguments refer to strong principles. As such, they clarify that the adopting of 'first principles' is not only ethically significant, but also it enables and constrains the substantive politics possible within the realm of critical theorising.

Näsström (2021) suggests an egalitarian, social defence of democracy in addressing the 'substantial' question 'what kind of democracy is *worth* defending' (Näsström 2021: 377, 391). Social democratic measures, on her account, correspond simultaneously to the principle of equality and to the principle of democratic openness: 'their purpose is to tame [. . .] [democratic] uncertainty by sharing and dividing it equally' (Näsström 2021: 389).

A democracy worth defending, according to Näsström, is a democracy based on two core principles. Corresponding interventions may combine the development of 'political institutions and social policies' (Näsström 2021: 392). These transformative measures serve the purpose of 'motivating commitment to democracy' rather than merely 'keeping democracy's enemies in check' (ibid.) through legal or political measures. While avoiding more abstract, ethical reference to first principles, Näsström's social model for defending democracy thus relies on the principled, transformative defence of equality and democratic openness. It does not allow for the status-quo-preserving defence of existing institutions that are inconsistent with these principles.

[2]The article thus excludes particularly those critical theorists who prefer to either reflexively call into question the 'crisis of democracy' (eg Saar 2018) or to fully sever ties between democracy and existing liberal democratic institutions (eg Rancière 2014).

[3]Forst explicates that his theory of justification grounds his argument (Forst 2023: 222). In the context of this article, Forst's suggestion that the defence of democracy ought to be principled is of greater concern than this particular, controversial identification of democracy's normative core.

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Some variants of radical democratic theory share in this principled understanding of democratic defence, despite claims to the contrary. Authors like Mouffe oppose the 'liberal democratic' attempt of 'formulat[ing] a definitive list of rights, principles, and institutional arrangements that are unassailable' (Mouffe 2020: 138–139). As a consequence, radical democratic thought has been criticised for an alleged normative-institutional deficit (on this see, eg Westphal 2019; Flügel-Martinsen 2022). Regarding the question of defending democracy, however, Mouffe advocates 'certain forms of consensus relating to allegiance to the ethico-political values that constitute [democracy's] principles of legitimacy, and the institutions in which these are inscribed' (Mouffe 2019: 93; see also McNay 2014).

This principled, ethico-political baseline justifies repression. Those who 'reject the conflictual consensus that constitutes the basis of a pluralist democracy' are an 'enemy' of democracy and beyond the 'limits of pluralism' (Mouffe 2019: 91–92). Mouffe's argument is principled insofar as it justifies exclusionary defences of existing institutions with their correspondence to a constitutional baseline. This baseline, in turn, is consonant with transformative democratic principles. On the other hand, Mouffe opposes merely 'managing the established order' (Mouffe 2019: 17), for example, by conservatively preserving existing institutions.

An emphasis on superordinate, transformative principles distances Forst, Näsström, Mouffe, and much of contemporary critical theory from 'conventionalist' defences of democracy that seek to preserve existing institutions because they exist.[4] This principled anti-conventionalism both enables and constrains how critical theorists can act as public intellectuals in civil society efforts to defend democracy. It enables public advocacy for superordinate democratic principles and interventions consistent with them. It constrains defending non-ideal institutions that do not correspond to these principles. Critical public intellectuals usually critique existing institutions for not corresponding to the principles that they champion. Preserving such institutions is inconsistent with the principled argument outlined in this section. As a practical consequence, critical public intellectuals tend to defend democracy by seeking the transformation of existing institutions rather than their preservation.

Early critical theory and 'dubious democracies'

Not only do contemporary authors think of critical theory's thrust as primarily geared towards changing existing institutional orders. Critical theory has also been defined by its radically transformative orientation ever since Horkheimer's programmatic essay 'Traditional and Critical Theory', which identifies the latter as 'driv[ing] towards the transformation of the social whole' and as a 'struggle against the existing' (Horkheimer 2009 [1937]: 193, 203). The 'first generation' of Frankfurt School critical theory, spearheaded by Horkheimer and Adorno, is still commonly identified in engagements with today's authoritarian resurgence as the origin of critical theory (see, eg Brown et al. 2018).

The practical politics of early critical theorists in the post-war era, especially Adorno's, are defined by public intellectualism. This led to unresolved tensions. Critical theorists were 'calling upon people to change their attitude while claiming that things can't really be changed' (Heins 2012: 79). They denied the possibility of meaningful praxis beyond interpretation: 'Adorno's view comes down to saying that people have tried to change the world, in various ways; the point in the 1960s was to interpret it' (Freyenhagen 2014: 885). Any praxis is always already (also) wrong, the practice of public intellectualism being included. Critical theorists intervened into public debates, but undermined any basis for doing so 'correctly'. This contradictory predicament finds an expression in an oscillation between a radical critique of the existing political order and what has

[4]Critical theorists thus do not necessarily reject the defence of existing institutions, but the conservative argument that institutional preservation is justified by the uncertainty of change (eg O'Hara 2011).

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been described by contemporaries as a conservative accommodation to that very order (Cooke 2020: 584).

Rather than amounting to a simple contradiction, Horkheimer and Adorno's example *raises the question* of how radical opposition to the existing institutional order and the defence of particular institutions can be brought into convergence. The argument developed in this section is that early critical theory's oscillation between philosophical radicalism and 'conservative' political praxis helps broaden the range of interventions available to critical theorists intending to defend democracy today, even where it produces unresolved normative, political, and philosophical problems. Early critical theory does not hold ready-made answers. As an example of bringing the defence of democracy and critical theory together in ways that sharply differ from current attempts at doing so, it provides a useful contrastive foil.

To illustrate, consider Horkheimer's (2002: viii) insistence that 'a dubious democracy, for all its defects' demands (also) protection and preservation in the face of totalitarian dangers. A democracy is openly objected to as suspect, dubious, and thus potentially bad. Yet, even though it seems to fall short of any principle that would allow for judging it as good, it deserves defensive intervention. This critical but defensive relationship to existing democracies is programmatic for Horkheimer and Adorno's political involvement in post-war Germany.[5] They chose not to confine their political praxis to a marginal radical philosophical habitus. Instead, they took a controversial role in the 'restorative', 'intellectual founding' of the Federal Republic of Germany (Albrecht et al. 1999).

Especially, Adorno's public intellectualism echoes concerns of contemporary democratic defence. Adorno publicly opposed 'the afterlife of National Socialism *within* democracy' (Adorno 2016: 556), confronting his contemporary right-wing radicalism (Adorno 2019) and antisemitism (Adorno 2024) in this context. In these interventions, Adorno occasionally adopts a non-conformist, radical posture, which explains his appeal to protesting students of the 1960s and 1970s (Demirović 1999; Albrecht 2019). Surprisingly, however, Adorno also refers favourably to particular 'democratic' institutions such as the separation of powers, going so far as identifying them with the idea of critique (Adorno 2016: 785). His private friendship and televised 'coordinated [. . .] controversies' (Link 2016: 238) with conservative public figure and former NSDAP member Gehlen, as well as his insistence that he had 'never said anything that was immediately aimed at practical actions' (Adorno 2002: 15), further complicates his public persona. Ultimately, contemporaries accused Adorno of a conservative retreat from political action and resulting accommodation to the status quo, a charge that sticks with early critical theory until today (Lukàcs 1971; Krahl 1974; Harcourt 2022).

The ambiguity of Adorno's public interventions intensifies once reading them in tandem with developments in early critical theory's philosophical outlook. In the 1930s, Horkheimer had conceptualised critical theory as a particular approach to immanent critique (Horkheimer 2009 [1937]). By the end of the Second World War, Horkheimer and Adorno considered the normative commitments necessary for immanent critique untenable. This development is set in motion with the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno 2016 [1947]), and it culminates in *Negative Dialectics* (Adorno 2004 [1966]). In these canonical contributions to critical theory, Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that Enlightenment normativity, the normative basis available to critical theory, collapsed under National Socialism. Consequently, there are no remaining superordinate principles to rely upon for grounding their critical enterprise. The position of a critical public intellectual becomes utterly precarious. If there is no principle that allows for identifying any particular practice as right, then the practice of public intellectualism is wrong by implication.

[5]During the time that early critical theorists spent in exile, they significantly revised their evaluation of liberal democracy (eg Offe 2004; Ziege 2009; Mariotti 2016). In post-war Germany, this produces apparent tensions between 'critical' philosophical arguments and 'conservative' political interventions.

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Much of early critical theory's reception suggests that the 'conservative' bent of Horkheimer and Adorno's engagement as public intellectuals results from their giving up on the very principled stance that contemporary critical theorists consider necessary for sustaining the 'critical' character of public interventions. Paradigmatically, Habermas claims that Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of Enlightenment reason is self-defeating: 'If they [. . .] want to carry on their critique, they must preserve at least one standard for their explanation of the corruption of all reasonable standards. In the face of this paradox, the totalising critique loses its direction' (Habermas 1982: 28).

In critiquing Horkheimer and Adorno, Habermas thus programmatically formulates what has above been called the 'principled argument'. At least one strong standard, a principle, is needed for keeping the practice of critical theory going. This position separates Habermas from Horkheimer and Adorno and approximates later 'generations' of critical theory. It is consistent with Habermas' reflections on preserving the democratic constitution. While Habermas insists that existing institutions cannot constitute the limit of liberal democratic tolerance, basic 'constitutional principles', the 'normative base of the constitution' (Habermas 2004: 9, 18; see also Habermas 2022: 25) do. Habermas' involvement as a public intellectual reflects this stance: his norm-driven consensus-orientation contrasts with Adorno's 'anti-consensual' interventions (Müller-Doohm 2005: 278).[6]

Contemporary critical theorists, as shown above, suggest that defensive interventions that do not depart from a superordinate, transformative principle are 'conventionalist'. It is neither possible to consistently defend existing liberal democratic institutions, nor is it possible to remain critical of them, as long as there is no principle available to guide critical theory. Horkheimer and Adorno's interventions in defence of existing liberal democratic institutions thus are not only contradictory but flat out impossible for them to justify.

Contradictions in Horkheimer and Adorno's public intellectualism, however, may also be read as an unfinished attempt to sustain critical praxis without strong normative principles (an attempt that others, such as Habermas, continued in a different direction). As such, the historical example of early critical theory's defence of democracy maximally contrasts with defences in contemporary critical theory. Rather than offering a 'more critical' blueprint for defensive practice, however, early critical theory only poses the question whether, and if so, under what conditions critical theorists can publicly defend particular institutions in the absence of strong principles.

Defending bad institutions?

The above has shown that for critical theorists, the defence of existing institutions is difficult to justify if principled reasons are unavailable. It has also been shown that historically, critical theorists have nevertheless defended 'bad' institutions. This, contemporary critical theorists have argued, leaves a number of problems unresolved. It remains unclear whether and, if so, how such a defence can be motivated. It further remains unclear how it can differentiate between particular institutions. In short: why should critical theorists defend, and which, bad institutions?

Maeve Cooke argues that, absent credible, context-transcending normative claims, critical theory cannot motivate political practice. It is the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*'s claim that 'a repressive instrumental rationality has pervaded every part of the social order, including the consciousness of its inhabitants' that renders critical theorists 'unable to appeal to the intuitions and expectations already contained within existing social reality for rational support for their

[6]Nevertheless, recent commentary suggests that Habermas' intellectual practice is not necessarily congruent with his more programmatic claims (Biebricher 2011). Some have argued that it is precisely Habermas who, as a public intellectual, continues the project of critical theorising in the post-war era (Verovšek 2021). The remainder of this article spells out 'parameters' for reflexively assessing the interventions of critical public intellectuals. These parameters may be used to systematically reconstruct the public intellectual practices of Habermas and other critical theorists.

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views' (Cooke 2006: 191). As a consequence, critical theory risks becoming authoritarian: it can only appeal to the knowledge of critical theorists (Cooke 2005: 389; see also Cooke 2020). On this view, the absence of positive normative standards makes it impossible for critical theorists to engage as public intellectuals in non-authoritarian, 'democratic' ways.

Departing from similar observations, Niesen (2023) argues that a specific justification for the defensive 'imperative of non-regression' that especially Adorno formulates in his public interventions remains wanting, producing an abstract relationship to particular institutional orders. All that Adorno can offer by way of such a justification is a theory of civilisational regression that he derives from a universalisation of National Socialism as an 'encompassing regressive phenomenon' (Niesen 2023: 210–211). Absent further concretion, such an encompassing notion of regression can sustain only a generalised defensive imperative. As a consequence, Adorno cannot conclusively differentiate between institutional and social orders (for a similar argument, see Forst 2023: 219). On Niesen's view, this is illustrated by Adorno's failure to account for his relative preference for post-war over National Socialist Germany (Niesen 2023: 214).

Given these problems of motivation and institutional specificity, it may seem as if it was altogether untenable for critical theorists to publicly intervene on behalf of any particular institution, unless in arbitrary and ultimately authoritarian ways (thus mirroring deficits of 'militant democracy', Invernizzi Accetti and Zuckerman 2017). Critical public intellectuals, this would imply, ought to critique existing institutions in defence of a transformative normative standard. Otherwise, they risk slipping into a conservative-authoritarian defence of existing liberal democratic institutions, thereby surrendering their status as critics.

Despite this, some critical theorists have attempted to justify critical practice in the absence of strong principles. Importantly for this article, they have also argued that under such conditions, a non-arbitrary defence of existing institutions remains possible. To this effect, Fabian Freyenhagen (2013, 2014) suggests that a 'negative' normative standard is sufficient for the defence of 'democratic' political orders. In a nutshell, his argument is that it is possible to counterfactually posit a maximal normative standard that remains unattainable under present conditions. This allows for criticising the existing 'negatively', as falling short of the minimal conditions that would be required to approximate this standard.

In practice, this means that certain 'bad' institutions can be maintained as 'lesser evils'. Adorno's engagement as a public intellectual, Freyenhagen suggests, is driven by the conviction that the collapse of liberal democracy ought to be prevented, which he seeks to achieve by critiquing authoritarian regimes in 'even stronger' terms than the political 'West' (Freyenhagen 2014: 879). This relational defence of the liberal democratic 'West' hinges on the use of its political order as a reference category. To be able to put up an 'even stronger' critique of authoritarian institutional orders, critical theorists tacitly provide 'relative' justification to the 'West's' institutional order without being able to positively identify it as 'good'. If reference institutions become objects of critique at a later point, however, this produces performative contradictions.

Others, such as Gordon (2023), have suggested that critical theorists need not retreat to such a defeatist, and ultimately self-defeating relational strategy of critique. Instead, he suggests that critical theory should focus on rare experiences that serve the verification of an at least 'precarious' existence of a maximal good within the existing order. Because the status of this maximal good is marginal within the existing order, it is near-impossible to attain it within the confines of the existing. Such an unattainable 'standard', consequently, justifies the continuous critique of existing orders (Gordon 2023: 170).

In practical terms, Gordon (2023: 429–430) suggests, defensive and critical tasks converge: the 'catastrophe' of the good's final disappearance can only be prevented if the existing order is wholly transformed. This suggestion illustrates that Gordon makes a revised 'principled argument'. Only a maximal, indivisible, and irreducible standard that points beyond the existing institutional order enables the defence of democracy. The intention to preserve existing institutions, on the other hand, cannot halt catastrophic developments.

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Summarily, it must then seem as if the defence of existing institutions was an altogether inconsistent, precariously justified aim for critical public intellectuals. This applies to the 'principled argument' and to the argument that strong principles are unavailable to critical theorists. Both streams of critical theory, sometimes inadvertently, concede that the defence of particular institutions becomes arbitrary in the absence of grounding in a transformative, maximal standard.

Critical theory as defensive praxis

The above has shown that it is difficult to sustain the defence of institutions that do not correspond to strong principles. Thus, while critical public intellectuals may unproblematically defend democratic 'first principles' and institutions consistent with them, attempts to defend 'bad' institutions appear to inevitably drive them into self-contradiction. As a consequence, critical public intellectuals lose much of their potential capability to contribute to civil society efforts to defend democracy under non-ideal conditions. This section proposes three conditions that may help render publicly defending existing 'bad' democratic institutions as a consistent aim for critical public intellectuals. Critical theorists ought to: avoid strong 'principled' claims; harness institutional potential for radical change; and reconceptualise institutional 'value'.

Avoiding strong principled claims

Critical theorists who are interested in the public defence of existing liberal democratic institutions may opt to distance themselves from strong principled claims. Thereby, they simultaneously develop a reflexive consciousness of the politically problematic character of their own principled commitments and a capacity to develop ways in which it is possible to credibly defend existing institutions that do not correspond to these principles.

This need not entail that transformative principles must be given up on altogether, but that their status vis-à-vis institutions changes. To clarify, it is helpful to reconsider why strong principles have been rejected by early critical theorists. The reason for them to renounce any principled normative grounding for their critical projects lies in a conceptualisation of National Socialism as an 'encompassing regressive phenomenon', 'a regressive phenomenon as such that affects everything and everyone' (Niesen 2023: 210–211). In such a situation, normativity is unavailable for deriving relatively unproblematic 'principles' by which existing institutional orders can be assessed. This is because in a context of universal regression, 'superordinate' principles actually stand on equally precarious footing as existing institutions.

To be sure, this does not mean that critical theorists necessarily reject all normative principles in undifferentiated ways. On practical terrain, however, they might be well advised to distance themselves from strong principles also in the context of the current 'crisis' of democracy. That is, they might adopt the insight that under present conditions, any given principle is as politically problematic as any given existing institution. Consequently, principled strife towards institutional transformation is not *prima facie* better justified than the preservation of existing institutions without reference to strong principles. Critical theorists who publicly intervene in defence of democracy, on this view, should continuously reconsider the field of tension between principle and institution. They should not attempt to bring them into a hierarchy in which the defence of 'first principles' is the default 'critical' choice.

Harnessing radical institutional change

Once critical theorists who are interested in the public defence of existing liberal democratic institutions distance themselves, at least for practical reasons, from strong principles, they might also begin to reconsider the significance of existing institutions for their critical

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interventions.[7] If critique is not motivated with reference to superordinate 'first principles', then entities other than normative standards, such as existing institutions, become increasingly relevant for critical practice.

Whenever critical theorists foreground the claim that all existing institutions need to be overcome (a claim with which there is nothing wrong per se), they deal in institutional abstraction. Particular institutions do not matter if all institutions need to be overcome. This abstract relationship to particular institutions surprisingly echoes the ways in which contemporary liberal discussions of democratic defence tend to be driven by the anxiety that existing democratic institutions are generally at risk of being abolished in ways that are consistent with their own provisions (for an overview, see Müller 2016). While critical theorists may abstractly assume that the abolishment of existing institutions is a good thing, defenders of democratic institutions may abstractly assume that this is a bad thing.

If critical theorists want to intervene on behalf of existing liberal democratic institutions, they might want to instead achieve institutional specificity. To explain why, consider the following point Adorno makes in *Negative Dialectics*: 'total society formation objectively hatches its opposite, and there is no telling yet whether it will be the catastrophe or liberation' (2004: 346, translation altered). On Adorno's view the total, subordinating integration of individuals into institutional order (total society formation) produces its opposite, the disintegration of institutional order. The normative outcomes of this process are unclear. Adorno thus suggests that processes of institutional disintegration inextricably link a maximally 'good' principle (liberation) and its maximally 'bad' opposite (catastrophe). Ambiguous normative potential resides in institutional change.

Critical theorists thus avoid institutional abstraction in showing how precisely which specific existing institutions can in fact be abolished without their provisions being undermined (this is often less straightforward than commonly assumed). They would demonstrate the potential for abolishment specific to particular institutions and thereby prepare the ground for a defence of existing institutions that is grounded in this potential.

Reconceptualising institutional value

The first two recalibrations suggest a reconceptualisation of the 'value' of existing institutions for critical practice. This 'value' does not reside in the correspondence of particular institutions to any particular principle. Because all existing institutions are potentially 'bad', the 'value' that they realise is their potential not to be. In other words, the normative significance of existing institutions resides in the very potential for self-abolishment that theories of democratic defence tend to oppose.

This leaves the question of how the preservation of existing institutions can be justified if it is their self-abolishment that is normatively significant. To clarify, consider contemporary critical theorist Jaeggi's (2009) conceptualisation of '"good" institutions'. Jaeggi argues that a good institution is an institution that admits to being collectively constructed and therefore abolishable: it must remain possible to 'redefine, modify or even abolish institutions that our ancestors created' (2009: 541–543; translated in Jaeggi n.d.). This conception of a 'good' institution is consistent with the claim that institutional value resides in an institution's capacity to abolish itself. Such institutions may be defended against being changed in such a way that this capacity is (further) obscured or altogether ruled out.

To be sure, this begs the question whether abolishment constitutes a 'principle'. Abolishment, however, is the capacity of an institution to change on its own terms, with the radical marginal result of its disappearance. While this potential is necessarily institutionalised, it is neither

[7]This article omits the undoubtedly significant role of existing institutions in structurally enabling critical theorists. More important for the argument developed here is the question how institutions may be of 'critical' use in their own right.

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synonymous with the continuous and historically contextually independent existence of any institution, nor is it constitutive of any particular institution. Abolishment does not prescribe what an institution ought to be like or for how long it ought to exist. It only means that an institution is valuable so long as it exists while transparently being able not to exist, on its own terms.

Summarily, the three conditions developed in this section enable critical public intellectuals to consistently partake in civil society efforts to defend existing, non-ideal, potentially 'bad' democratic institutions. To this end, they need not give up on the 'critical' insight that the institutions in question are inconsistent with strong principles. They only need to acknowledge that the institutions in question are capable of abolishing themselves, and that this capability is valuable. By locating the value of existing institutions in their ability to abolish themselves, critical public intellectuals maintain their radical opposition to the existing order without surrendering their ability for defensive intervention. Instead of demanding institutional transformation consistent with principles, critical public intellectuals may thus oppose restrictions to forms of institutional change that are consistent with the provisions of existing institutions. They thereby avoid imposing normative principles external to or insufficiently realised in the institutions that they defend. Nevertheless, they do not revert to a 'conventionalist' maintenance of status quo institutions. In other words, they become able to defend existing institutions against institutional closure, whether pursued by 'anti-democrats' or 'defenders of democracy'. This constitutes a properly defensive complement to the transformative aims of principled public interventions.

Conclusion

Can critical theorists consistently intervene in public debates in defence of existing liberal democratic institutions? Despite hesitation in much of contemporary critical theory, this article suggests that such a 'critical defence' is possible. As such, critical theory can contribute to civil society efforts to preserve existing liberal democratic institutions.

Claiming that critical theorists may intervene on behalf of existing institutions does not mean, however, that they would be justified in lending their unqualified support to the preservation of existing institutional orders. Instead, the judgement that existing institutions are bad, and the demand that they should therefore be overcome, ought to be strengthened. The seemingly paradoxical task of preserving existing institutions while strengthening the demand that they be overcome, it has been suggested here, can be achieved once both tasks are approached with an emphasis on their institutional specificity rather than on superordinate normative 'first principles'. In practice, this means that critical theorists best defend existing institutions by eschewing strong principles and by instead locating the critical force of their interventions in the ability of institutions to abolish themselves. At historical junctures in which both the disintegration and the repressive fortification of liberal democratic institutional orders occur, this strategy is particularly useful.

The article's suggestions for recalibrating critical theory's normative outlook on institutional conservation suggest at least one particular strategy for defensive practice: critical theorists should offer the institutional potential for self-abolishment to political use. They are tasked with demonstrating to social agents that, as subjects of existing institutions, they are always already entitled to the abolishment of these institutions and that they are justified in counteracting any obfuscation or reduction of this entitlement. Critical theorists may form strategic alliances with elements of civil society, and likely with governmental and supranational actors. They may disagree with these actors in principle, but they may share an interest in retaining the institutionalised possibility of (even radical) institutional change. These alliances may be uncomfortable, but the approach suggested here makes them consistently possible insofar as it relieves critical theorists of the duty to retain consistency between their principles and their political interventions.

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While this article has been able to spell out the conditions of possibility for critical public intellectuals to assist civil society efforts to defend existing liberal democratic institutions, further consideration of the practical possibilities for acting upon this potential is needed. The forms of engagement present in critical theory's history of defensive public intervention may serve as inspiration, but they rely on a particular historical context of action that has undergone drastic historical changes (as critical theorists observe, Habermas 2022). More than offering a ready-made answer, this article thus confronts critical public intellectuals with tools to reflexively question their interventions and reconsider the role of institutions for them.

Even pending a broader discussion of practical challenges, these tools are of use for reflexively evaluating existing civil society efforts to defend democracy. They suggest asking a very straightforward question: do attempts to safeguard existing institutions reduce, preserve, or expand the potential for change that the institution in question contains? Raising this question is a promising inroad for critical public intellectuals who seek to partake in civil society defences of existing liberal democratic institutions.

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