

BEATE JAHN (U SUSSEX):

CRITICAL THEORY IN TIMES OF BREXIT AND TRUMP

GUEST LECTURE & DISCUSSION

Critical theory was originally designed in response to the experience of populism in the 1930s. No wonder, then, that many writers interpret the return of populism today as a failure of critical theory – giving rise to a debate about its shortcomings and to suggestions for reform. This paper shares the goal of this debate: to identify the tasks of critical theory in times of Brexit and Trump. But it departs from the current debate in two ways: by providing an empirical analysis that shows that critical theory – contra common assumptions – has been politically very successful; and by providing a thorough reconstruction of Horkheimer's core assumptions underpinning critical theory and its relationship to political practice. This reveals that while critical theory was always intended to have a political impact, it could never guarantee the outcome. Indeed, in the process of shaping historical development, critical theory inevitably becomes part of a new reality that must be subjected to further critique. It is therefore reflection on its own success that allows critical theory to unlock an account of the new historical realities today and to regain its critical edge: not through the reform of its core assumptions but through their application to a new historical conjuncture.

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