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**Beyond Protest and Contestation. Reconceiving Critical Democratic Theory**

Critical Theory has not been a major reference point for recent developments in democratic theory or the analysis of current trends in democratic societies. This can be seen, for instance, in the debates on post-democracy and on populism. Some have even argued that Critical Theory’s versions of democratic theory have themselves contributed to the eclipse of the political, and, thus, to the prevalence of post-democratic forms of governance. Does this indicate that Critical Theory is outdated or unable to address recent challenges?

This paper will show that Critical Theory can offer a distinctive perspective on current transformations of political and social order, but that this requires Critical Theory to reconceive of some elements of its idea of democracy. It starts by reconstructing Critical Theory’s key assumptions and its diagnosis of the pathologies of capitalist modernity. On this background, the theory develops a particular understanding of democracy and its essential components. With this social conception of democracy in view, the paper will consider the debates on post-democracy and populism and their diagnoses of the problems democracy currently faces. It will point out that Critical Theory’s diagnosis diverges from standard views in these debates, but it will also argue that Critical Theory cannot account adequately for some recent developments – even though the turn to protest and contestation significantly extends its scope. The paper ends with some suggestions for reconceiving democratic theory in a Critical Theory perspective.