

Comprehensive Exam Questions for Ben O’Heran

September 19, 2018

Part 1: Approaches to Political Theory: Critical Theory and the New Materialism

1. To what extent, or in what way, is the “new materialism” of thinkers like Jane Bennett, Ian Boggost, Jakob Von Uexkull, Alexander Weheliye, and Bruno Latour a contribution to “Critical Theory” in the way that Max Horkheimer programmatically defined this project and/ or as Adorno later refined it (e.g., in *Negative Dialectics*)? What is the conceptual status of “matter” within these approaches? Discuss at least three of the new materialists in relation to Frankfurt School Critical Theory.
2. Compare and contrast what you take to be the key features of the conceptions of *relationality, agency, and history* developed in *Frankfurt School Critical Theory* (as represented by Horkheimer and Adorno), on the one hand, and by the *new materialists*, as represented by Bennett, Boggost, Von Uexkull, Weheliye, and Latour, on the other. Regarding the new materialists, you need not discuss all five thinkers in detail. Instead draw on at least three of them in a manner that illuminates the new materialist approach to *relationality, agency, and history*. What are the stakes for thinking about race, gender, sexuality, ability, and indigeneity?

Part 2: Thinker – Marx

1. Was Marx ethnocentric and/or Eurocentric? Some recent interpreters have identified these qualities in Marx’s thought. Others, like Stuart Hall, have maintained that Marx’s thinking – especially his historical materialism – was actually appropriately historical and malleable, able to address well historical specificities of politics. What is your view? If Marx was ethnocentric and/or Eurocentric, are these qualities so essential to his thinking that it is no longer useful today? Provide a reading of Marx on this that draws on at least four primary and secondary texts.
2. Marx’s account of “alienated labour” is often taken to be a pivotal piece of his moral perspective, or the moral basis of his critical theory of capitalist society. On the surface, however, it might seem to be rather anthropocentric, for better or worse. (Consider his early account of human “species being” as well as the other three aspects of “alienation” Marx sketched in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*.) Is it anthropocentric? If so, in what ways, and to what extent is this a problem or not a problem for thinking about the continuing value of Marx’s political theory? What, if anything, remains vital in Marx’s account of alienation and what might beg for rethinking or reconceptualization?
3. A number of commentators have maintained that Marx’s materialist conception of history (or historical materialism) is rather different from the kind of “dialectical materialism” developed by theorists of the Second and Third Internationals. They have blamed Engels’s efforts to popularize and extend Marxism – e.g., in his

Dialectics of Nature – for the reductionist, scientific, and anti-political tendencies in many later Marxist analysis of society. To what extent does the later Engels offer a reliable guide to Marx's materialist conception of history? To what extent (for better or worse) does Engels depart from Marx's thought? Draw upon at least four texts (primary texts and commentaries) in your answer.