

# Critical Dialogue

## The Militant Intellect: Critical Theory's Conceptual

**Personae.** By Andrés Fabián Henao Castro. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2022. 270p. \$115.00 cloth.  
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The question of the status of the critical theorist is a perennial problem for those writing in the tradition of critical theory, broadly conceived. Perhaps one could even say that the very tradition of critical theory was inaugurated—if one dates this moment not back to Marx, but to Max Horkheimer's coinage of the term in his famous 1937 essay, "Traditional and Critical Theory"—when a group of thinkers in Western Marxism found themselves unable to maintain their belief in the proletariat as the effective "subject-object of history," the class agent who would bring emancipatory transformation. This loss of faith pulled the rug out from underneath the received understanding of the critical theorist in Western Marxism as the intellectual complement to the proletariat, and they would now have to offer a new account of their role in emancipatory struggles.

Andrés Fabián Henao Castro's book, *The Militant Intellect: Critical Theory's Conceptual Personae*, represents a highly engaging attempt to wrestle with this problem. It does so by offering a novel conceptualization of the critical theorist as one that embodies what Henao Castro calls a "militant intellect." This conceptualization is general in its intended scope. It seeks to describe an intellectual attitude that cuts across multiple dimensions of domination and is applicable in the struggle against various forms of unfreedom and injustice.

Remarkably, and provocatively, Henao Castro initially offers an account of the militant intellect that seems much more limited in scope by defining this attitude with reference to Franz Fanon as "one that works towards the death of the colonist" (1). However, he quickly recasts this definition in a less literal way to offer a broader interpretation that is at once intersectional—"insisting that such death necessarily entails the death of the capitalist, the patriarch, and the heteronormative as well" (4)—and structural. As he puts it, "to work towards the death of the colonist is not to fantasize about killing the colonist but to imagine a world in which the colonial, capitalist, heteronormative, and patriarchal structures have been brought to death" (4). Just as

importantly, Henao Castro suggests that such a way of conceptualizing critical theory involves cultivating intellectual militancy in times that are *not* ripe for revolutionary change—i.e., when the "spirit of freedom" must be kept alive in anticipation of more promising circumstances.

Through incisive, thought-provoking, and often surprising chapters on the thought of Plato, Marx, Fanon, Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Spivak, Saidiya Hartman, Jacques Rancière, Judith Butler, Jordy Rosenberg, and Jodi Dean, Henao Castro illuminates not only how each of those thinkers can be interpreted as embodying a distinctive militant intellect but also how critical theory's emancipatory intention can be intersectionally developed against various dimensions of domination and injustice. Along the way, Henao Castro offers wholly novel interpretations of both Plato's allegory of the cave and Judith Butler's activism through the mythological figure of Ismene. He skillfully deploys the idea of the conceptual persona—by which he means the dramatic personification of a theory—to discern common threads in this diverse body of thought, illuminating how these thinkers use "conceptual personae to articulate practical ways in which [critical theory] understands thought to be committed to changing the world" (11).

In the book's most stirring chapter, Henao Castro analyses Jordy Rosenberg's "fox" as a conceptual persona that expresses a queer desirous revolt against "the social compulsion to normalize the libido by reducing the multiple and infinite aims and objects to which the libido can be attached to those that are socially constructed as 'normal'" (188). Moreover, Henao Castro points out that Rosenberg characterizes Jack Sheppard—the 18<sup>th</sup> century London robber and thief—as possessing the remarkable ability to hear commodities speak. In Marxian terms, this means that Sheppard has audible access to their displaced use-value and comes to desire and struggle for their liberation from the commodity form. As Henao Castro explains, this struggle against the confining form of exchange value not only mirrors and connects with the struggle against the confining normalizations of libidinal desire, but it also evokes—through a reflection on the commodity that *does* speak: the slave—a call for critical theorists to cultivate the ability to "hear" the reverberations in commodities of the oppressive, racially structured (and, one might add, ecologically destructive) global capitalist apparatus that produces them. In these intriguing thoughts, there are parallels to the

“unrelenting consciousness of non-identity” that Adorno develops in *Negative Dialektik* (1966, 15) and to the materialist view of *bourgeois* libidinal confinement in Eric Fromm’s early social psychology. But Henao Castro does not pursue these links.

More generally, Henao Castro does not include a chapter on—and hardly mentions—any of the Frankfurt School critical theorists, who otherwise loom so large in the tradition. This omission is particularly noteworthy in the case of Max Horkheimer, to whom we are not only indebted for the term “critical theory,” but who also developed a conceptualization of the theorist’s “critical attitude” that closely aligns with Henao Castro’s “militant intellect.” In fact, Henao Castro’s description of the Marxian conceptual persona of “the Communist” as “actively militating for [the world’s] transformation in the emancipatory direction that would make freedom and equality a material reality” (41) almost reads like a paraphrase of Horkheimer’s description of the critical attitude as “directed towards emancipation” and as having “the transformation of the whole of society as its aim”, in his “Traditional and Critical Theory” essay (1982, 208). Horkheimer developed this idea of the “critical attitude” in response to his own experience of living in a time that was not, as he had previously supposed and hoped, ripe for revolutionary change. In Theodor W. Adorno’s work, in turn, this premise of untimeliness takes on systematic importance. As Adorno suggests in the opening sentence of *Negative Dialektik* (1966), “Philosophy, which once seemed *passé*, clings to life because the moment of its realization was missed” (13). I would have liked to have read Henao Castro’s reflections on these closely aligned philosophical arguments from within the tradition of critical theory. Yet his focus remains elsewhere, and I confess to being curious about the reasons for leaving them out. Is it because Henao Castro feels that these thinkers no longer speak *to us* in the way that Rancière or Spivak do?

I want to register two concerns with Henao Castro’s argument—both with reference to Adorno. The first is with the adjective “militant.” As Henao Castro notes, “militant” captures “the combative modality of that thinking that performs its own labor against the very system of commodification that is trying to incorporate it” (7). However, “militant” and “combative” also share an association with “aggressive” that one might worry, with Adorno, can conflict with what it means to *think critically*. In a short essay called “Resignation” written shortly before his death in 1969, Adorno sought to justify his disagreements with the German student movement and what he saw as the students’ impatient “actionism.” Adorno insisted that since the conditions for true emancipatory action were not ripe in the late-1960s German Federal Republic, the students’ demand for revolutionary praxis risked annihilating truly critical thinking. In order to remain free, Adorno argued, critical thinking must not only keep its distance from

practice but it is also characterized by *not* being aggressive in the way that the figure of the “militant” might seem to suggest. As he wrote in his radio address, “Resignation,” “Whoever thinks is, in every critique, not enraged; thinking has sublimated the rage” (2003, 799).

The second concern is more important. In most of the book, Henao Castro’s “militant intellect” invokes an understanding of the critical theorist for times that are *not* ripe for revolutionary change, in which the struggle for the “death of the colonist” should be understood in metaphorical and structural terms. But Henao Castro sometimes writes as if this call should be taken literally in times that *are* ripe for revolutionary change. As he puts it, “only at the right time – that is, under specific historical circumstances – can militating for such death be understood in literal terms” (4). I am unsure if this is Henao Castro’s considered view, but I would suggest that drawing such a sharp distinction between a metaphorical and literal understanding of revolutionary violence is an oversimplified and morally questionable way to conceive of emancipatory struggle.

I find Adorno’s practically disengaged position unattractive—as I suspect Henao Castro might also do. However, I want to suggest that Henao Castro’s definition of the militant intellect may in one way be closer in spirit to Adorno than he might be comfortable with. For in defining critical theory, “as it takes place in the academy and elsewhere, as contributing to cultivation of that militancy during *the time that is not right*”, while simultaneously defining “the right time” as one in which “the intellect can be cultivated in just that revolutionary way”, as “perhaps only in the armed struggle” (4), I worry that Henao Castro leaves much too narrow a conceptual scope for what might, in his view, constitute emancipatory action. To be sure, this revolutionary conception of when “the time is right” leaves plenty of space for the critical theorist to cultivate intellectual militancy. But it may come at the cost of disengaging from practical struggles that, even if not revolutionary, are nonetheless genuinely emancipatory.

Henao Castro’s book offers a welcome meditation on the status of the critical theorist today. It offers important lessons for anyone aspiring to nurture an appropriately intersectional critical attitude towards the multiple forms of domination and injustice in our world, even if it leaves fundamental questions unanswered about what emancipation from those forms of domination might ultimately mean.

### Response to Malte Frøslee Ibsen’s Review of *The Militant Intellect: Critical Theory’s Conceptual Personae*

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Malte Frøslee Ibsen raises three important questions regarding my book. I do not have a very satisfying answer