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From Theory to Praxis: Integrating Contemporary Social Movements with Critical Social Theories

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the application of critical social theories to modern social movements, analysing the connection between theory and practice in influencing action. This research, rooted on the theories of Karl Marx, Michel Foucault, and feminist, critical race, and postcolonial scholars, emphasizes how these intellectual frameworks equip individuals to comprehend and challenge systems of power, injustice, and oppression. Prominent case studies, such as Black Lives Matter, the #MeToo movement, climate justice initiatives, and decolonization attempts, illustrate the significance of critical thinking in contemporary activism. The examination scrutinizes the challenges activists face in balancing theory and practical action, such as internal divisions within movements, appropriation by mainstream agendas, and the complexities involved in transforming theoretical concepts into effective strategies. The study delineates techniques for incorporating theory into activism, highlighting the significance of political awareness, coalition formation, and reflexivity. Internet activism, the effects of globalization, and the revival of authoritarianism highlight the current significance of critical

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theory. The paper continues by discussing future research options, advocating for multidisciplinary ways to improve the efficacy of social movements in tackling global issues such as climate change, inequality, and authoritarianism. This study emphasizes the significance of theory in shaping and directing activism, thus contributing to the current discussion about the essential integration of intellectual analysis with grassroots efforts for substantial social change.

Keywords: Social Movements, Praxis, Marxism, Post Colonialism, Climate Justice.

Introduction

Overview of Paper's Aim

The application of critical social theories to contemporary social movements is the main focus of this study. Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, and Michel Foucault created critical theory, which illuminates the structural roots of power and inequality. These theoretical frameworks have shaped social movements, especially in the 21st century. Marx's class conflict theory helped explain labour movements and economic justice efforts. Foucault's power and surveillance theory has helped activists fight repressive structures (Foucault, 1977, p. 125).

The article will also analyse how critical theories affect theory-praxis relationships. Praxis in social theory is applying theoretical ideas to real-world issues. Theories inform social change techniques in social movements (Gramsci, 1971, p. 52). This study examines how activists utilize critical social theories to challenge structural inequities and effect change by integrating theory and action.

Topic Importance

In recent decades, social movements have been increasingly important in tackling global challenges, including inequality, environmental degradation, and human rights violations. Critical social theories help explain power dynamics and systemic inequities, influencing labour rights and climate justice movements. Kimberlé Crenshaw developed the theory of intersectionality, which Black Lives Matter (BLM) and the global feminist movement use to address the complex ways race, gender, class, and other social identities intersect to shape oppression (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149).

Critical theory is crucial to social movements. Critical theories help

these movements analyse and dismantle power systems that perpetuate inequality (Habermas, 1984, p. 32). Activism may lack strategic depth for systemic change without these theoretical grounds.

This research applies critical social theories to modern social movements to show how they still shape activism's aims and strategies. Understanding how social movements traverse modern society and challenge dominant structures requires theoretical investigation of class, racism, gender, and power.

Research Questions

1. How do critical social theories inform modern social movements?
2. Can theoretical frameworks like Marxism, feminism, and post colonialism offer practical tools for activists?

Social Movement Theory

Marxist class struggle

Historical Materialism and Class Conflict in Social Change

Historical materialism, which underpins Marxist theory, holds that society's material conditions—primarily production—shape its structures, political institutions, and social interactions. Marx saw history as a class conflict between the bourgeoisie (those who control production) and the proletariat (the working class) (Marx and Engels, 1848, p. 35). Revolutions start when class contradictions become untenable.

Marx's class analysis is relevant to current social movements, especially labour and economic justice campaigns. Initiatives such as the Fight for \$15 and Universal Basic Income continue to combat economic injustice and working class exploitation (Harvey, 2005, p. 45). Marx's emphasis on the economic basis of society informs economic restructuring and class awareness methods for social transformation.

2. Impact on Modern Labour Movements and Economic Justice Campaigns

Modern labour movements are informed by Marxist conceptions of class exploitation and capitalism's oppression. Workers demand decent salaries and treatment in movements like Fight for \$15, echoing Marx's critique of capitalism's devaluation of labour to maximize profit (Harvey, 2005, p. 67). These movements criticize structural inequality as well as economic inequality, referring to Marx's concept of class-driven revolution.

Feminist Theory

Gender-based social constructs and their impact on gender equality

Feminist ideology rejects biological roles and views gender as a social construct that has justified gender inequality (Butler, 1990, p. 15). Feminist thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler contend that social norms support patriarchy. This paradigm guides social movements to eradicate gender-based discrimination for women and LGBTQ+ people.

Feminist theory's impact on LGBTQ+, women's, and intersectionality in activism

Feminist theory has shaped modern women's rights, LGBTQ+ activism, and intersectionality, which explores how race, class, gender, and other identities interact to create oppression (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149). Feminist criticisms of gender power dynamics have spurred global action against sexual harassment and assault, such as the MeToo movement. LGBTQ+ groups use feminist philosophy to fight normal gender norms and achieve personal and legal equality (Butler, 1990, p. 125).

Post colonialism and Critical Race Theory

Racism, Colonialism, and Historical Oppression

Critical race theory (CRT) and post colonialism analyse how race and colonialism perpetuate oppression. Legal studies gave rise to CRT, which now criticizes systematic racism in social institutions (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017, p. 43). Postcolonial theorists like Edward Said and Frantz Fanon study how colonial histories establish racial hierarchies and marginalize formerly colonized peoples (Said, 1978, p. 38).

Theory for Anti-Racist and Decolonization Movements

Black Lives Matter and worldwide decolonization efforts use these critical theories to show racial oppression's systemic character. CRT helps anti-racist activists explain that racism is a system that maintains inequality via legal, political, and economic methods (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017, p. 60). Decolonization activists use postcolonial criticisms to oppose neo colonialism and erase colonial cultural, political, and economic legacies (Fanon, 1961, p. 178).

Power and Post-Structuralism

Foucault's Power and Surveillance Theory

Michel Foucault's Theory of Power emphasizes power's pervasiveness throughout society rather than centralized organizations like the state. Even without coercion, Foucault believed that surveillance, norms, and discourses shaped people's actions and identities (Foucault, 1977, p. 92). Today's issues regarding digital monitoring and population control are pertinent to this notion.

How Poststructuralist Ideas Influence Movements to Overthrow Control and Dominance

Post-structuralist ideas like Foucault's have encouraged movements to challenge control structures and dominant discourses. Privacy rights movements and protests against mass surveillance in the digital era employ Foucault's theories to criticize technology's rising usage to watch and control people (Foucault, 1977, p. 135). These theories also inform jail abolition and criminal justice reform movements, which challenge societal control.

Modern Social Movement Case Studies

Black Lives Matter (BLM)

Using critical race theory to challenge systemic racism and police brutality

In response to systematic racial injustice and police violence in the US, particularly after the killings of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and George Floyd, activists founded Black Lives Matter (BLM). BLM's theory relies on Critical Race Theory (CRT), which posits that society's legal and political systems are the root of racism (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017, p. 43). CRT emphasizes structural racism to explain racial inequities in police, criminal justice, education, and housing (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139). BLM uses CRT to criticize structural racial inequalities and demand for police defunding and community resource funding.

Intersectionality in BLM's Activism

BLM also emphasizes Kimberlé Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality, which posits that understanding racial inequity requires examining other forms of discrimination such as gender, sexuality, and class (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 150). The movement addresses the marginalization of Black women, LGBT people, and the disabled alongside African American males. BLM's intersectional framework has made it a major activist force in current times (Taylor, 2016, p. 23).

MeToo Movement

Addressing sexual harassment and gender violence with feminist theory and patriarchy critique

Feminist philosophy, particularly its critique of patriarchy and gender-based power dynamics, underpins the 2017 MeToo movement. Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler assert that social production shapes gender roles, which in turn reinforce patriarchal hierarchies (Butler, 1990, p. 15). MeToo demonstrated the impact of power disparities on workplaces, media, and personal relationships, leading to harassment and abuse of women and other oppressed genders. Feminist theory calls out institutional patriarchy for sustaining gender violence, and the movement's effectiveness in exposing high-profile culprits shows this.

Global reach and cultural changes caused by movement

MeToo originated in the US but swiftly spread worldwide, causing cultural and legal changes. Feminist theory is applicable worldwide, as the movement shows that gender oppression is common throughout civilizations (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 90). MeToo has raised awareness of gender relations, workplace safety, and institutional reforms to eradicate gender-based violence (Gill and Orgad, 2018, p. 131).

Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future, and other climate justice movements

Marxist and ecological climate change criticisms of capitalism

Marxist and ecological criticisms of capitalism underpin climate justice initiatives like Extinction Rebellion and Fridays for Future. Marxist ideology criticizes capitalism for prioritizing profit above sustainability (Harvey, 2005, p. 123). Climate activists say the capitalism system's focus on economic expansion exploits natural resources and worsens climate change. This argument explains why many climate justice movements seek systemic transformation rather than improvement.

Climate activism's environmental-social justice intersection

Climate justice groups contend that climate change disproportionately impacts Indigenous peoples, people of colour, and poor nations (Klein, 2014, p. 58). This concept expands environmental advocacy by relating ecological sustainability to racial and economic inequity. Extinction Rebellion advocates for global economic

restructuring to address environmental degradation and social inequality (McGregor, 2021, p. 45).

Decolonization Movements

Postcolonial critiques of contemporary imperialism and economic exploitation

Decolonization movements use postcolonial theory to criticize former colonial countries' economic and cultural dominance over formerly colonized regions. Postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said and Franz Fanon argue that multinational corporations and international financial institutions perpetuate imperialism as neo colonialism, exploiting and controlling people. Decolonization movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America oppose modern imperialism by reclaiming political and economic sovereignty.

Indigenous peoples' fight for sovereignty and self-determination

Indigenous movements worldwide are a major factor in decolonization, focusing on land reclamation, cultural preservation, and political sovereignty. By opposing Indigenous dispossession and marginalization, these movements show how postcolonial criticisms relate to Indigenous rights (Tuck and Yang, 2012, p. 3). Indigenous movements emphasize sovereignty and self-determination as important to reverse colonialism and preserve culture.

Problems Bridging Theory and Praxis

Abstract Theory-Action Gap

Difficulties arise when applying complex theoretical frameworks to practice

Critical social theories and activism struggle to connect due to the gap between abstract theories and real application. Social movements challenge power systems using complicated ideologies like Marxism, feminism, and post colonialism. However, it can be challenging to transform abstract principles into effective solutions, particularly when applying them to real-world situations. Marxist conceptions of class struggle give a sharp criticism of capitalism, but modern labour organizers may struggle to apply them to larger, varied alliances (Harvey, 2005, p. 129). Intersectionality-based feminist groups may struggle to create practical frameworks that address racism, class, and gender oppressions in daily organizing (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140).

Movements Struggling with Theoretical Consistency

Historical and modern social movements struggle to manage theoretical coherence and immediate concerns. Due to its diverse membership and different interpretations of its aims, the Occupy Wall Street movement struggled to develop a long-term strategy (Graeber, 2013, p. 25). This discrepancy shows how theoretical framework-based movements can struggle to stay coherent as they develop.

Internal Movement Divisions

Tensions between race, gender, and class exist in activist groups

Class, ethnicity, and gender frequently divide movements. These differences can cause conflict, especially when organizations prioritize different causes or shift strategies. Critics have criticized the feminist movement for favouring white, middle-class women over women of colour and working-class women (Hooks, 1984, p. 23). These internal contradictions show how difficult it is to follow feminist philosophy, which seeks to end all kinds of oppression, while negotiating activist group interests.

How do movements balance conflicting interests with theoretical goals?

Despite these obstacles, movements generally resolve internal disputes and stay focused on theoretical aims. Feminist and anti-racist groups use intersectionality to analyse how oppressive systems interact (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1243). Movements may address more concerns and engage a more broad coalition of activists by embracing the complexity of these interconnections, even if it requires changing their theoretical basis.

Collaborating and depoliticizing

Media dilution or co-optation by mainstream agendas pose a risk to movements

Mainstream objectives often co-opt social movements, diluting their radical ideals. Movements that obtain media attention or political backing frequently lose sight of their initial critique of power institutions. “Green capitalism” initiatives, which promote environmentally friendly products without addressing the root causes of environmental degradation, have co-opted the environmental movement, which originally opposed capitalist exploitation of natural resources (Klein, 2014, p. 299). Co-optation diminishes the movement’s aims and depoliticizes action by focusing on consumer choices rather than structural change.

A theoretical analysis of depoliticized activism and long-term social change

Theorists criticize depoliticized activism for its limited influence on long-term social change. According to Slavoj Žižek (2011, p. 62), some types of activism might be a “distraction” from the necessary systemic adjustments to solve global inequality. Marxist historians warn that neoliberal activism reinforces power structures rather than confronting capitalism (Harvey, 2005, p. 139). This critique underscores the importance of structural transformation, despite the pressure on movements to align with popular expectations and media narratives.

Theory-Activism Integration Strategies

Public Education and Awareness

Freire’s oppressed pedagogy and education’s empowerment of activists

In his ground breaking work, “Pedagogy of the Oppressed,” Paulo Freire introduced popular education as a way to integrate theory with action. Freire believes education should equip pupils to think critically and act (Freire, 1970, p. 72). In this strategy, oppressed people become conscious of their socioeconomic situations and learn to change them collectively. Freirean activists utilize education to raise political consciousness and help people and communities fight injustice. Educating the marginalized about their rights and role in social change has fostered agency and long-term involvement in grassroots movements (Darder, 2017, p. 115).

The importance of political awareness in mobilizing grassroots movements

Political consciousness is knowledge of social, economic, and political causes that cause inequity and injustice. Marxism, feminism, and post colonialism highlight this knowledge as the first step to constructive activity. Marxist theory states that the proletariat must gain class consciousness to overturn capitalism (Marx, 1848, p. 33). Feminists employ consciousness-raising organizations to combat patriarchal systems, while anti-racists seek to understand systemic racism. Educating activists about these structures helps them mobilize and develop theory-based resistance methods (Hooks, 1994, p. 47).

Trans theoretical coalition-building

Uniting class, race, gender, and environmental justice movements.

Coalition-building, especially among social justice groups, is another way to incorporate theory into activism. In recent years, activists have

acknowledged the interconnectedness of class, racism, gender, and environmental problems. Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory explains how these oppressions overlap and interact (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1290). Effective alliances of labour unions, feminist groups, and environmental activists show how solidarity can combat numerous injustices. An effective intersectional coalition is the Sunrise Movement-Black Lives Matter partnership, which promotes climate justice and racial justice (Estes, 2020, p. 42).

Intersectional coalition successes

The Civil Rights and Women's Liberation Movements regularly intermingled with anti-war and labour rallies. Indigenous rights, environmental activism, and anti-capitalist organizations united to protest the Dakota Access Pipeline (Estes, 2020, p. 56). These instances show how theoretical frameworks that promote solidarity across oppression allow movements to collaborate while staying true to their own theories.

Reflexivity and Accountability in Activism

Stressing reflexivity in active leadership and decision-making

Ethical activism requires self-examination and critical understanding of one's position in social movements. Leaders and activists must continuously evaluate how their actions match their movements' values and philosophies. This involves understanding how movement power dynamics may mirror systemic oppressions (Foucault, 1980, p. 98). Feminist and anti-racist ideas emphasize reflexivity to prevent activist group leadership structures from perpetuating race, class, and gender inequalities. Reflexivity keeps activism grounded in theory while adjusting to actual reality, linking abstract thought with tangible action.

How Theory Guides Ethical Activism

Theory also guides ethical activism by offering standards to ensure activities accord with social justice aims. Feminist theory promotes non-hierarchical, inclusive movements, but postcolonial theory criticizes Western-centric activity that may maintain colonial control (Spivak, 1999, p. 215). Theory-based ethical action requires responsibility in both external and internal organizing. This keeps movements focused on their transformational aims and prevents them from reimplementing oppressive structures.

Critical Theory in Social Movements Today

Digital Activism and Technology

Social media and digital tools shape modern activism and theory application.

Digital activism has revolutionized social movement mobilization, information transmission, and involvement. We use Twitter and Facebook to organize protests, raise awareness, and foster unity. Critical theory examines how these instruments empower and limit activism. Platforms enable quick communication and viral idea propagation, but they also threaten “slacktivism,” when online interaction substitutes actual action (Dean, 2010, p. 22). According to Habermas, corporate interests impact the digital public sphere, highlighting the conflict between grassroots action and social media management (Habermas, 1989, p. 124).

Foucault’s Digital Surveillance and Control

The panopticon and Foucault’s surveillance theory are pertinent to digital activism. Governments and companies monitor internet and social media activities at unprecedented levels thanks to digital technology. Digital panopticism offers a controlled atmosphere where activists must be aware of their digital imprint and tracking (Foucault, 1977, p. 201). As Foucault indicated, activists employ surveillance techniques to disrupt control and build places of resistance in the digital environment (Zuboff, 2019, p. 311).

Globalization and transnational movements

Global capitalism affects local activism

Globalization has changed activism, making local fights part of a worldwide resistance network. Critical theory, particularly Marxism, provides a framework for analysing how global capitalist institutions impact local movements. Labour movements and economic justice campaigns must deal with global supply lines, multinational firms, and international financial institutions as capital becomes more transnational (Harvey, 2005, p. 89). Occupy Wall Street and Extinction Rebellion demonstrate the need for combining local battles with global criticisms of neoliberalism and economic exploitation (Chomsky, 2012, p. 45).

Critical Theory’s Approach to Global-Local Conflict

Transnational movements like climate justice reveal the

interrelatedness of local and global conflicts through critical theory. Marxist and postcolonial perspectives examine how capitalism and colonialism impact local realities like environmental degradation and social injustice. Critical race theory helps analyse how race and class connect in global movements, where underprivileged populations typically suffer from climate change (Quijano, 2000, p. 554). Intersectionality and global justice theories help activists connect local initiatives to their global context.

Resurgent Authoritarianism and Critical Theory

Rising authoritarianism and its threat to democracy and social justice

The rise of authoritarian governments and illiberal democracies globally challenges social movements. Authoritarianism erodes democratic institutions, civil rights, and social fairness, a trend that critical theory may shed light on. Fascism analysis by the Frankfurt School illuminates the cultural and economic factors that enable authoritarianism (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944, p. 96). Contemporary theorists have extended these ideas to investigate how neoliberalism's shortcomings have encouraged populist and authoritarian movements (Brown, 2019, p. 33).

Theory for Resisting Authoritarian Regimes and Policies

Critical theory stresses awareness and opposition against authoritarianism. Biopower and governance show how modern regimes manage people by forceful and subtle tactics (Foucault, 1978, p. 137). In this climate, activists must create ways to fight overt repression and more subtle forms of control, such as mass monitoring, media manipulation, and civil rights loss. Habermas's communicative action theory emphasizes the need for open public speech and democratic deliberation in fighting authoritarianism (Habermas, 1984, p. 95).

Conclusion

Key Takeaways

Marxism, feminist theory, critical race theory, and post-structuralism have shaped modern social movements. These ideologies help activists analyse and confront established authority and injustice. Marxist criticisms of capitalism drive labour movements seeking economic justice, while feminist and critical race theories inspire MeToo and Black Lives Matter. Theories have aided movements in understanding the interconnectedness of class, gender, and race, emphasizing their need for simultaneous attention.

In the digital era, activists must handle online platforms' potential and limits, making Foucault's theory of power and surveillance more relevant. Overall, critical theory has helped diagnose contemporary society's issues and guide transformational social change.

Conclusions on Theory and Practice

Critical social theory's capacity to reveal current oppression makes it relevant. Power, class, gender, and race theories are essential to understanding inequality and injustice. Activists struggle to apply abstract concepts. Theory-praxis gaps can impede movements, especially when internal splits or mainstream objectives dilute their influence.

Despite these obstacles, theory-praxis relationships are crucial. Theory helps social movements analyse power systems and imagine new possibilities. Theoretical frameworks help critique the status quo and imagine alternative forms of organizing, solidarity, and resistance.

Research and activism futures

Interdisciplinary study on theory-activism integration should include psychology, environmental studies, and technology. This might help social movements by providing a more complete picture of how oppressive regimes interact with global issues. To address environmental degradation's complexity, climate justice movements might benefit from stronger partnerships between ecological theory, critical racial theory, and economic critiques.

Future social movements must also fight climate change, inequality, and authoritarianism. Digital activism, globalization, and transnational networks necessitate new organizing and mobilization techniques that combine theoretical knowledge with creative methods. In a continually changing environment, activists must keep perfecting their methods to combat local and global injustice.

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