Property

CTI Research Project Series

*Futures of Property & Personhood.*

*“Culture” and the Problem of the Disciplines.*

*Politics, Theory and Contemporary Culture.*

*The States of Theory.*

*The Aims of Representation: Subject/Text/History.*
Personhood

CTI Members

Etienne Balibar
Political philosophy, philosophical anthropology, citizenship & nationality, cosmopolitics

Lindon Barrett
African-American literature & culture, gender & sexuality, post-structuralism, cultural studies

Chungmoo Choi
Modern Korean culture, colonialism, pop culture, cultural theory, anthropology

Jacques Derrida
Philosophy, ethnology, critical legal studies, Marxism, psychoanalysis, literature, arts

James Ferguson
Ethnography, "development" and modernity, post-colonial urban Africa

Alexander Gelley
Narrative theory, philosophical aesthetics, German-Jewish literature & culture, literary pragmatics & rhetoric

Wolfgang Iser (emeritus)
Reception and reader-response theory, literary anthropology, literary theory

Akira Mizuta Lippit
Film and visual studies, alternative film and media, Japanese and Asian film & theory

Liisa Malkki
Politics of humanitarian interventions, "international community," racism, exile & displacement

Bill Maurer
Law & economic theory, cultural forms of finance, financial globalization

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19C & 20C English, American & Comparative literature, speech acts, queer theory, deconstruction, globalization & telecommunications

Mark Poster
Electronic media, media studies, cultural theory, media as cultural object

John Carlos Rowe
Media studies, Comparative American studies, cultural studies, postmodern theory, pedagogy, history of critical theory, queer theory

Gabriele Schwab
20C comparative literature & culture, reader-response theory, reading as cultural contact, interdisciplinary studies in literature, culture, anthropology, psychoanalysis, ethnography & politics

John H. Smith
Modern German philosophy, theories of subjectivity & agency, dialectics, feminism, & queer theory

Contact Information:
Critical Theory Institute
University of California, Irvine
433 Krieger Hall
Irvine, CA 92697-5525
Phone (949) 824-5583
Fax (949) 824-2767
Director: James Ferguson
Admin. Coordinator: Lisa Ness
lness@uci.edu
Asst. Admin. Analyst: Erin Ferris
eferris@uci.edu
www.humanities.uci.edu/critical

Futures
Irvine Lectures in Critical Theory

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Former Miracles & Future Possessions: Privatization, Property, Risk

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Assumptions of Identity, Racial Blackness & Neo-National Culture

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Pheng Cheah
The Political Body as Organism & the Property of Life

May 2001
Rosemary Coombe

Oct 2001
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Language of Order(s): Jenny Holzer in the Public Sphere

Apr 2002
Marilyn Strathern
Divided Origins & the Arithmetic of Ownership

Nov 2002
Mary Poovey
Can Numbers Ensure Honesty? Unrealistic Expectations & the US Accounting Scandal

Feb 2003
Etienne Balibar
My self and my own: one and the same?

Apr 2003
Paul Rabinow
Untimely Meditations: Belated & Adjacent Work-in-Progress

Mar 2003
Akira Lippit
One, Two Three: The Psychic Economy of Multiplicity

Apr 2003
Akhil Gupta
To be announced

Gabriele Schwab
To be announced
The Futures of Property and Personhood

In the 1999-2000 academic year the Critical Theory Institute at the University of California Irvine began its current research project, "The Futures of Property and Personhood." In its focus on property, the topic explores the challenges to social and cultural theory posed by privatization and its broader political, cultural and institutional effects. It considers, too, the manifold changes in the status of personhood brought about by the forces of privatization and globalization, as well as the new technologies that facilitate the remaking of human bodies and determine the politics of reproduction. The most pervasive effects of privatization include a general weakening of liberalism’s hold on the social imaginary, a trend that profoundly affects state practices, socio-cultural reproduction, and the institutional production of knowledge. By exploring the synergy and dissonance between conceptions of the private as marketable and the private as inalienable, the CTI poses the question of how critical theory can productively engage with the contemporary transformations and futures of notions such as property, personhood, and related concepts of citizenship, state, culture, and knowledge.

Since the Enlightenment, definitions of property have entailed corresponding configurations of the person who owned, and/or was subjected to, property. In the past three decades, critical theories have devised and debated new models to respond to historical changes in the relation between property and personhood. Most of these theories challenge the classical paradigms of liberalism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis, expanding their focus to include issues such as symbolic economies, regimes of power and knowledge, or the superimposition of commodity and sexual fetishism. Many of these theories rethink the legacy of Nietzsche, Marx and Freud from the vantage point of the new economies of a global corporate media culture and its continually changing impact on relations between property and personhood. Today, new forms of privatization demand that we rethink the range of available models of subjectivity in relation to late capitalist, global and corporate economies and their effects on personhood. We need to ask whether contemporary critiques of the subject are adequate to challenge narratives of the triumph of the market and the privatization of knowledges, persons, and life itself.
Privatization, as we understand it, refers to a complex array of interconnected processes and relationships through which political rights, social membership, knowledge production, and the related spheres that constitute personhood are increasingly brought within the ambit of the capitalist marketplace. We are currently living through a profound acceleration of such processes of privatization and their far-reaching effects on the social and cultural imaginary. Among such effects we may count the economic, political, and epistemological reworking of notions of citizenship, the re-definition of the nation-state in relation to a transnational economy and its global markets, and the privatization of services formerly under state management. Similarly, privatization deeply affects social and cultural identities, subjectivities, and cosmologies of personhood. Niche marketing and demographic “indicators” of consumer preference, for example, are rendered as self-identity. Moreover, identity itself is increasingly framed through acquisitive individualism. Self-identity becomes a product to be worked on, invested in, and competitively performed and deployed as a social currency. In a similar vein, identitarian forms of social protest are increasingly recoded as consumptive and private. We witness a pervasive expansion and transformation of property, accompanied by concomitant changes in the self-as-proprietor and the self-as-investor. Newly expanded property constructs and laws extend from rights in potential and future ideas, to rights in cells, organs, and genetic material.

These complicated economic, legal, and social changes are also transforming the very category of culture. As the concept itself comes under scrutiny in the anthropological and literary circles that made it their hallmark for the greater part of the century, culture is now increasingly recoded in proprietary terms. Collectivities and corporations battle over knowledges and practices newly configured as potentially alienable and commodifiable cultural properties. Individuals protect cultural works through the apparatus of patent and copyright. Opponents of a neo-liberal stance often frame their project in terms of claiming collective properties, re-imagining the commons, and reinvigorating the community. But what is the status of commonality and community when culture itself—in Marilyn Strathern’s phrase—has been “enterprized up”? What happens if culture can be both chosen and selected from a seemingly infinite array of patented goods for consumption? What are the consequences when culture is deemed intrinsic to identity and becomes the object of collective property rights?

The trends and developments outlined herein should make it clear that the anticipated futures of property and personhood fundamentally affect the most central parameters of the debates in critical theory as they have developed in the past decades. They, in fact, reach far beyond the now familiar critique of the categories and values of the tradition of humanism and enlightenment. The gradual refashioning of fundamental theoretical concepts and binaries such as nature/culture, body/mind, self/other, human/inhuman, life/death, man/woman, subject/object has begun to converge in a pervasive epistemological change. At stake is nothing less than the sustainability of theoretical concepts in a global ecology in which transcoded social, cultural, economic, political, somatic and psychic energies and flows have transcended even the familiar signatures of the postmodern. ...
as Halberstam and Livingston argue, only the “seismograph and epicenter” of epistemic changes, the concomitant revaluation of cultural values affects all politics, transcoding the spheres of economy, technology, law, biology, culture, and psychology. Theories that trace the effects of globalization in the cultural imaginary—such as those of Appadurai, Jameson, Deleuze and Guattari, Haraway, among others—prepare the futures of theoretical models that make such transcodings part of their basic presuppositions.

Such transformations are, of course, often partial and even contradictory. Even while the very categories of the human, the subject, and personhood are under revision, the human is enjoying a remarkable renaissance in global discursive fields centered on “human rights.” Human rights are precisely not a universal standard applied irrespective of place, not a bulwark against the processes of privatization or the reconfiguration of personhood. On the contrary, the very notion of human rights circulates within the circuits of governmentality, structuring and structured by privatized, neoliberal global economy. For example, the World Bank and IMF attach “human rights conditionality” to countries receiving “assistance” in “structural adjustment.” Human rights become a device of governmentality and commodification when deployed as an index of “liberalization” (of markets) and “democratization” (of non-Western political orders). Thus, discourses of the human, human rights and humanitarianism need to be critically explored under these changed conditions.

The changing relationship between the public and the private, and the challenges posed by privatization and new property constructs, determine the politics of cultural reproduction, pertaining to the renegotiation — if not obliteration — of the boundaries between nature and culture, human and nonhuman, inhuman or posthuman.

These processes are transforming not only the world at large, but also the immediate environment of our intellectual activity. Everyday practices of privatization in the academy include the university’s use of market models to guide curricular changes and the privatization of knowledge—from information technologies and copyright restrictions impacting the classroom, to modes of knowing and new categories of the known. These practices are radically transforming the most fundamental relations concerning the conceptions of person, knowledge, and property on which intellectual production has long rested. The consequences of such transformations have yet to be fully anticipated and explored.

The proposed project identifies three rubrics within which to focus its analysis of how privatization and the related reconfiguration of the social imaginary pose a challenge for contemporary debates in critical theory:

- property
- citizenship and personhood
- the posthuman

What is the status of commonality and community when culture itself has been “enterprized up”?
Challenges to Property

Liberal nation-states in the post-War era claimed to serve the public good through social services and economic redistribution, with the promise of full “social” as well as political citizenship for all. Today, deregulated markets and international trade and finance, together with the increasing importance of international organizations, have produced a world in which such promises are explicitly disavowed, even as an ideal. But if the welfare state is dying, the interventionist ways of the nation-state are alive and well. States today subsidize and enforce markets through tax policies, enterprise zones, interest rates and central banking, as well as through property regimes and the promise of violence should they be breached. At the inter-governmental level, states attempt to harmonize their protocols both for the use of force to guarantee property, and for the construction of proprietary entities. Labor emerges as the only commodity that does not enjoy freedom of movement.

We are thus witnessing less the decline of state regulation than the expansion of the domain of property itself. The state gives over some of its traditional functions to private enterprise and to the voluntary sector, resulting in increased competition that also means increased risk. New property regimes demand new forms of securitization, resulting in the creation of fungible, negotiable proprietary interests in any thing or entity. Financial entities tie property so closely to risk that it threatens to collapse into risk itself. We witness the emergence of actuarial properties, persons rendered as risk-profiles, contracts specifying corporate relationships to “potential” properties. What are the implications for critical theory of a change in the very meaning of property? What new theories of capitalism, labor, and value are called for in response to such reconfigurations? How can critical theory recognize, and provide insight into, both the new forms of oppression or exploitation as well as the new possibilities for liberation and resistance that such transformations may open up?

Critical theorists have successfully demonstrated the bankruptcy of narratives of linear development and progress. But we have not yet thought through the consequences of this bankruptcy for the production of knowledge and for the logic and justification of our own knowledge practices. Critical theory traditionally saw itself in opposition to nationalism.

Moreover, economic reproduction is itself linked to the “politics of reproduction” more generally, particularly in light of the reconfiguration of the human body to serve industrial production and of its submission to a regime of discipline and punishment. As Susan Squier argues in “Reproducing the Posthuman Body,” discourses about reproduction and reproductive representations “help to consolidate the global power of multinational late capitalism,” defining and distributing difference, “within and across a variety of temporally and geographically overlapping power grids,” including civil society, institutional science, medicine and industrial capitalism (p. 115f.).

Finally, the changing relationship between the public and the private, and the challenges posed by privatization and new property constructs, similarly determine the politics of cultural reproduction, pertaining to the renegotiation—if not obliteration—of the boundaries between nature and culture, human and nonhuman, inhuman or posthuman. According to Halberstam and Livingston, “the posthuman does not necessitate the obsolescence of the human; it does not represent an evolution or devolution of the human. Rather it participates in re-distributions of difference and identity” (10). Such profound redefinitions of personhood, and of the boundaries of the human more generally, pertain to global culture and global flows of capital, information, discourses, and bodies. In the social imaginary, they engender a particular “postmodern gothic,” a “gothicization of the body” (Halberstam/Livingston) afloat with phantasms of the “body without organs” (Deleuze/Guattari; Beckett) or even of the “grotesque clone” (Baudrillard). If this posthuman body is,

What futures hold for the category of the human when the self-as-proprietor explodes into a dispersed network of corporate interests?
The Posthuman

What futures hold for the category of the human when the self-as-proprietor explodes into a dispersed network of corporate interests? Whither social protest when the privatization of identity recodes interests as fungible preferences? How can critical theory map this posthumanist, or as some prefer to call it, posthuman landscape? How can we provide a theoretical grip on the new subjects and objects of a hyper-commodified world? Can we find theoretical means or grounds for a critique of the privatized human body that does not fall back into a humanist nostalgia?

Across disciplines and theoretical orientations, the very boundaries of the human are in the process of being redefined. The challenges to personhood have vast implications and ramifications beyond the material, political, economic, social and cultural spheres. They affect the social and cultural imaginary, the psychosocial formation of persons or subjects, as well as possible philosophical, ethical and epistemological conceptions of the subject, of personhood, and of agency more generally. A wide range of recent theories on the posthuman and the posthuman body (Deleuze/Guattari, Halberstam/Livingston, Squier, Hayles, Haraway) as well as the inhuman (Lyotard) have been engaged in theorizing, analyzing, and conceptualizing these profound changes in the status of personhood. A whole body of current theoretical work of the politics of reproduction is equally concerned with issues of privatization and related challenges to property and personhood. Reproductive politics, one of the most controversial and hotly debated issues in critical theory today, concerns sexual and gender politics, bioethics, communal politics, subject constitution, human and civil rights, as well as modes of information characteristic of a technological media culture.

Many current debates, ranging from genetic engineering and the Human Genome project to the “sustainability” of our planet, focus on the relationship between property, privatization and reproduction. Current changes in the politics of reproduction challenge fundamental theoretical concepts across disciplines and force us to rethink the relationships among, and the erosion of boundaries of, traditional categories such as nature and culture, the subject, the human, civil rights, property, the body, etc. and liberalism alike. But how can critical theory remain “critical” at a time when the fundamental principles of liberalism are themselves being called into question, less by theoretical critique than by socio-economic transformation?

Today, even the knowledge produced in the university is being privatized. In the absence of an over-arching state commitment to social citizenship, and in a property regime that restricts dissemination and use of knowledge, what becomes of the traditional function of the university, and its project of imparting “universal” knowledge to the citizens of the nation? If we reject both the liberal assertion of knowledge as universal enlightenment and the “privatized” notion of knowledge as a commodity for sale in the market, then how do we understand the place and efficacy of our own knowledge production? And how can we re-imagine the university in a way that enables a critique of the logic of privatization without reaffirming notions of liberal enlightenment or an unsituated, universal knowledge?
Citizenship and Personhood

In classical liberalism, the private sphere entailed the domain of home, religion, family, personal relationships and affiliations through which individuals created and realized themselves. It was also the domain where individuals came to know their interests—personal, and economic—and to go about fulfilling them. The public existed above and between various “private spheres,” providing a space in which everyone was supposedly allowed to pursue his or her private interests and affiliations without threat of force or fraud. How are private and public being rerouted and redefined in the present? How are new proprietarian logics challenging the vision of personhood at the heart of liberal conceptions of the public (the world of the citizen, equal to all others) and the private (the world of the individual, unique among all others)?

In much of the world today, social citizenship is no longer a central goal of the state. In rolling back the contract between state, capital, and labor, abandoning social welfare policies to private and voluntary enterprises, and replacing social citizenship with consumer citizenship, the state seems uninterested in its traditional civic obligations. Who “belongs” in a world of consumer citizenship where one participates in the nation by virtue of one’s investment in the national productive-consumptive product? What are the boundaries of rights and obligations, given the extensive commodification of citizen identity? And, what are the limits of protest, given the commodification of dissent and the sale of a politics of lifestyle choice or gut-level preference?

In addition to a change in relation between citizen and state, the expansion of privatization brings in its wake new exclusions within and between states. Suprastate organizations like the WTO, MAI and GATT reconfigure sovereignty and political liberalism even as strong states dictate foreign policy through the language and mechanisms of the “market.” Working less in terms of “national interests” than in terms of free market principles, states have not so much abandoned their powers as transformed the field in which they operate. Privatization thus has a direct effect on concepts and practices of “security” both within and between states. In much of the world, public police are increasingly supplanted by private security corporations; public prisons by corrections management facilities; and state armies by private mercenary forces. The privatization of security means both new forms of “war” and new forms of “peace.” It thus gives new meaning to the “rule of law,” dismembering liberalism’s promise of rules of law over rules of men, of public over private interest. How can critical theory address these challenges to citizenship and statehood without falling into nostalgia for the citizen-subject of liberalism, the rule of law as guarantor of rights and freedoms, and modern notions of belonging and identity that continue to animate conflict and community?