

*Karin Stögner, Stefano Marino and Ines Zampaglione*  
**Critical Theory and Feminism Today:  
An Interview with Karin Stögner\***

**Stefano Marino and Ines Zampaglione (hereafter SM and IZ)**

Dear Prof. Stögner, we would firstly like to sincerely thank you for having generously accepted our invitation to make this interview on the relation between critical theory and feminism today. We believe that this is a very important topic, perhaps today more than ever, and we are happy to have the opportunity to discuss this topic with an expert scholar like you, a Professor of Sociology at the University of Passau (Germany) and, among other things, the co-editor with Dr. Alexandra Colligs of a significant volume published last year, *Kritische Theorie und Feminismus* (Suhrkamp, Berlin 2022, 394 pages).

We would like to start our conversation from some general questions, in order to go then into detail with more particular questions about single and specific topics. Your co-edited volume *Kritische Theorie und Feminismus*, published by Suhrkamp last year, is really an impressive book, a collection of eighteen contributions (essays and interviews) by several outstanding scholars in this field that truly offer to the readers a wide, rich and articulated picture of the various ways in which the relation between feminism and critical theory can be articulated and also fruitfully rethought today. The topics addressed and investigated in the book range from society to sexuality, from politics to religion, from intersectionality

\* For Stefano Marino this work represents one of the outcomes of his participation – as a member of the Research Unity based at the University of Bologna – to the Research Project of National Interest (PRIN) entitled *Italian Feminist Photography: Identity Politics and Gender Strategies*, funded by the Italian Minister for University and Research (MUR), and guided by Prof. Federica Muzzarelli as Principal Investigator.

to materialism, from psychology to capitalist economy, also including, among other things, questions concerning production/reproduction, gender, emancipation, subjectivity, identity/non-identity, queerness, affectivity, critique of domination, utopia, and much more.

Can you tell us something about how the project started and was originally conceived by you and Alexandra Colligs (co-editor of the book), how it was developed, on which basis you selected the various authors and various contributions, and also what kind of feedback have you received until now in Germany and other countries? For example, we are happy to inform our readers of “Scenari” that you successfully presented a part of your project in the form of thematic panels at the International Critical Theory Conference of Roma in 2022 and 2023.

### **Karin Stögner (hereafter KS)**

First of all, thank you very much for your interest in my work!

The book *Kritische Theorie und Feminismus* is the direct result of my visiting professorship in critical theory, which I held at the Goethe University Frankfurt in 2018/2019. I structured the two semesters around critical theory and feminism, and organized all the courses in this topical field. The two semesters ended with a two-day international conference on the topic. Alex Colligs was a PhD student in philosophy at the time and co-organized the conference together with me. We invited scholars from three generations of feminist critical theory.

The structure of the book follows the concept of interdisciplinary materialism as it was shaped by early critical theory in the 1930s and to which feminist critique can productively connect. Today, after decades of deconstructivism in feminist theorizing, this idea of interdisciplinary materialism is once again gaining traction. I understand this current turn to interdisciplinary materialism as an expression of the need for a feminist critique of domination that does not set up a particularist framework within which the categories of race, gender and class are hierarchized and played off against each other. Rather, what is required is a critical reflection on the dialectical constellations that result from the multi-layered entanglements of subjects in concrete contexts of domination.

Feminist critical theory has been with me for more than two decades. In fact, back in the late 1990s and early 2000s I wrote my master’s thesis in sociology on images of femininity in the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, and another master’s thesis in literature on femininity in Walter Benjamin’s writings on Paris, especially the *Arcades Project*.

I realized early on when studying critical theory how much potential there was for a feminist reading. I was surprised by this, because at the

time, in the 1990s, feminist theory tended to criticize the lack of focus on the women's movement in older critical theory. It tended to emphasize that it was working with images of femininity that corresponded to common clichés in a patriarchal society rather than critiquing it. However, I had read it somewhat differently from the beginning and was puzzled by the discrepancy between my reading and that of the dominant women's studies at the time. I understood the images of femininity – for example, Kirke and Penelope in the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, or the figure of the lesbian and the androgynous woman in the *Arcades Project* – not as a confirmation of the patriarchal view of women, but rather as indices of civilizational injustice. My reading of them was that they were dialectical images, full of their own contradictions and unwilling to fit neatly into the empty narrative of the patriarchal order. And I think that Horkheimer, Adorno and Benjamin had chosen these images precisely because of their resistance and contradictoriness, and had exemplified an entire epoch, modernity, by them. So, *in nuce*, the history of domination is exemplified by the unequal gender relations. In addition to these images of femininity, I also noticed early on that in the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, in particular, antisemitism and misogyny were in a sense thought together, as if these two ideologies had a common origin. In my dissertation on the constellations of antisemitism and sexism, I explored this in depth (see *Antisemitismus und Sexismus. Historisch-gesellschaftliche Konstellationen*, Nomos Verlag, 2014). I then developed a new view of intersectionality, focusing on how ideologies interact, reinforce and permeate each other, and how they repeatedly appear together. I called this the “Intersectionality of Ideologies”, which is intended to give a new impetus to feminist ideology critique. So, this is the broader framework of my own intellectual development in which the book *Kritische Theorie und Feminismus* is embedded.

## SM and IZ

Radical feminism, which has intersected with critical theory, is known for its systematization of the politics of recognition in the form of identity politics, placing identity and its oppression at the core of political critique and action. In the following decades, as intersectionality gained prominence, this approach has faced criticism for potentially neglecting class-related issues, becoming at odds with the “orthodox” framework of redistribution. Given that the question of recognition has long been a central concern within critical theory, contemporary critical theory now confronts the opportunity of addressing this issue, taking into account the insights and contributions of feminist thought, while simultaneously attending to matters of redistribution.

Do you think that critical theory should rise to this challenge? If so, what descriptive and analytical framework does critical theory require in order to effectively engage with this task? Do you believe that one of these dimensions should hold, if not an ontological, an analytic primacy over the other?

**KS**

I don't think it makes sense to elevate one moment – recognition or redistribution – above the other in an absolute way, as was the case, for example, in the old Maoist debates about “principal” and “secondary” contradictions, or as we see in reverse in many forms of identity politics today. Nancy Fraser has shown very well how fruitless it is to play recognition and redistribution off against each other, and that in reality both moments are connected. It is a matter of thinking in terms of universal mediation, so that all parts are included in a moving constellation. Only in this way can society be grasped as a totality that is not stagnant, but itself a process of the history of domination. In this, all parts are indeed related to each other in the sense of what Adorno called the comprehensive entanglement context.

I believe that here, a certain understanding of intersectionality can prove helpful in critically engaging with this complexity of contemporary mediation processes and, precisely in the current polarized constellations in which some put the structural class contradiction in the foreground and others overemphasize the importance of subjective identity components, it can help us, to use Adorno's words from the *Negative Dialectics*, “not to be made stupid either by the power of others or by one's own powerlessness [...]”, and thus to insist on differentiation and complexity, without losing the ability to say where and how the relationships between the single moments in one society are actually formed.

In this context, I see the complex of intersectional theorizing as a desideratum of critical theory today. However, I don't understand intersectionality as an identity-political token, but rather in the sense of an intersectionality of ideologies, as a way to critically comprehend the multidimensionality of social relations of domination. This is important because since the 2000s at the latest, the intersectional paradigm has undergone a shift from an initially more structural-analytical to an identity-political perspective. This has drastic consequences for the analysis and critique of domination and discrimination. Identity-political intersectional approaches are not so much concerned with analyzing the interlocking of different forms of enemy identification and discrimination within a particular society at a particular historical moment, but rather with the effects of discrimination on

individuals who are affected by more than one such attribution. Such a limited focus on the experience of (multiple) discrimination encourages simple hierarchies of victimization and thus leads to a narrowing of the critique of domination to a critique of privilege. There is therefore an excess of subjectivism in the identity political approach, which tends to overshadow the critique of the objective and structural conditions under which discrimination and domination occur. The structural-analytical approach to intersectionality, which focuses on objective social formations, can in turn be accused of largely ignoring subjective factors, giving the impression that society reproduces itself automatically, autopoietically. To counter both the excess of subjectivism and a subjectless social science, a dialectical turn is needed that can make the entanglement of the subjective and the objective fruitful in intersectional knowledge.

This form of intersectionality is what is driving feminist critical theory today, but it is also, to some extent, prefigured in older critical theory. As I said, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* already speaks of the close connection between antisemitism and misogyny. Empirical evidence for this theoretical assumption was then provided by *The Authoritarian Personality*. One of the seminal insights of these studies was the discovery of an authoritarian ideological attitude syndrome, which functions as a constellation of ideologies. In this broader ideological framework, which I developed further, ideologies are mobile in relation to each other, mutually reinforcing and interpenetrating. Thus, in my research, I have been able to trace how antisemitism interacts with moments of sexism, nationalism or racism and thus condenses into an entire worldview. I also followed Else Frenkel-Brunswik's insight into the importance of gender relations and dominant sexuality in the formation of the authoritarian personality. She found a significant connection between the insistence on a strict heteronormative gender binarity, with the associated unambiguous and fixed ideas of masculinity and femininity, on the one hand, and other markers of authoritarianism, such as antisemitic, nationalist and racist attitudes, on the other. In my recent work I have updated these relationships for an analysis of masculinity and individuality in the neoliberal condition. And currently we are carrying out research on the masculinist ideologies of the Incels (Involuntary Celibats) and Jihadist Islamists with a comparative focus. Here, too, a feminist intersectional ideology critique serves as a framework for analyzing misogyny and antisemitism and how they are interrelated. In any case, the ideas presented in *The Authoritarian Personality* can be seen as anticipating the concept of intersectionality later developed in Black Feminism. The difference with today's identity-political intersectional approaches is that Else Frenkel-Brunswik also turned to the subject, but not to the subject affected by exclusion and discrimination, and not to the identities of oppressed people. Rather, she focused on those

subjects who willingly follow authoritarian and exclusionary ideologies. This is in line with the insight that exclusionary ideologies cannot be explained, let alone combated by merely focusing on the victims. In order to explain and combat antisemitism, racism and sexism, we must turn to the authoritarian subjects and their motivation. For all these ideologies do not begin with those who are affected by them, but have their origin in an unequal society, which manifests itself in the authoritarian subject. I think that intersectionality understood in this way is a very fruitful approach to feminist critical theory today that is worth pursuing further.

## SM and IZ

In the Introduction to the book *Kritische Theorie und Feminismus* you claim that the relation between critical theory and feminism began during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, encompassing both theoretical and political dimensions. Since then, they have evolved in close proximity, yet independently. While radical feminism has consistently embraced concepts originating from critical and academic realms, the reverse has been rarely the case, with some noteworthy exceptions. Nonetheless, many feminist contributions have demonstrated their capacity to revitalize traditional ideas, making them suitable for contemporary critique.

Just to give an example, feminist interest and research on social reproduction has been able to cast new light on the contemporary crises of capitalism, simultaneously revitalizing the theoretical and collective significance of foundational concepts within critical theory, such as class struggle. While “gender” frequently serves as a viewpoint or a departure point in many feminist traditions within critical theory, the “classical” strand of critical theory appears to be somewhat apprehensive, viewing it as a constraint on analysis or as “another” or “specific” issue.

Do you believe that the male dominance within critical theory, as an academic, theoretical, and political realm, can account for this? Could this tendency potentially stem from a certain arrogance or haughtiness that is inherent within male-dominated academic circles? Alternatively, do you think there are deeper theoretical motivation at play?

## KS

Critical theory of the Frankfurt School is still considered to be male-dominated, especially in Germany. This perception is mainly due to the fact that the representatives on whom the reception of critical theory is primarily based are all men: first and foremost Theodor W. Adorno,

Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin and later Jürgen Habermas. In this respect, however, critical theory was no different from other social science, political and philosophical theories of the time. However, this fact is often associated with the diagnosis that critical theory is fundamentally a patriarchal theory and suffers from gender blindness. Indeed, there is no explicitly formulated theory of gender relations in the writings commonly attributed to older critical theory. But can we therefore immediately speak of a neglect of gender relations? And if so, where exactly does this gap come from? There are convincing voices that locate the gender gap in the prevailing current reception of older critical theory rather than in critical theory itself.

As far as critical theory and gender relations are concerned, there are basically two aspects to be distinguished: on the one hand, it is important to make visible women who practice and develop critical theory; on the other hand, it is important to make visible those moments in critical theory itself that have points of contact for a critique of gender relations and for explicitly feminist theory formation. The first aspect focuses on women as subjects of critical theory, the second on a feminist focus of critical theory, and these two aspects do not always coincide.

Still, to this day, a strong male dominance can be observed in philosophical theory formation, especially at German universities. The situation is not quite as bad in social theory, which is not entirely divorced from empirical research, where a relatively large number of women can be found. Feminist theory sometimes speaks of a privileged epistemological standpoint that women (or members of other social minorities) have because of their specific situation as women in society. They are said to be in a better position to judge unequal gender relations because they are directly affected by them. This doesn't fully convince me, because knowledge always involves a high degree of abstraction from what is immediately given and experienced. And even if it is true that critical theory begins with the particular, with the experience of suffering, injustice and mourning, in order to make visible the effects of society and domination, it does not stop at the immediate particular and does not regard these experiences already as knowledge, but rather as a starting point for knowledge. So even though, as a critical theorist, I have little use for the concept of epistemological privilege, it is striking that it is mainly women who are concerned with gender relations, and that feminist critical theory is still a women's thing. So, despite all the scientific and academic abstraction, it is obviously the case that differently socialized people find different things in society problematic. In this respect, women's quotas in science and academia are neither purely cosmetic nor purely formalistic, because women obviously bring different questions to science and academia because of their experiences. This does not mean that gender relations become prob-

lematic for all women while not a single man cares, and I am not saying that this is a law of nature. Rather, I am tracing a social tendency that is quite persistent. It is no coincidence that of the 17 authors in our book, 16 are women. This means that unequal gender relations in academia do not remain external to the theories that are conceived and produced there, but that this inequality is also reflected in the orientation of theory and the problems that are taken up. This is particularly virulent in German philosophy, where there is still a strong male preponderance.

I observed early on that many female scholars perceive forms of theory without a visible empirical basis as abstract and do not see themselves in them, do not feel included. Female students are still reluctant to engage with theory; and critical theory, especially among female students, often has the reputation that its concepts which have sometimes become jargon, would somehow foreclose a critique of concrete gender inequality. In critical theory reading groups, and even at academic conferences, abstract discussions of concepts often prevail over a critical engagement with what these concepts actually mean for analyzing concrete inequalities and domination.

There is a lot of skepticism about abstract concepts because women realize that the general terms are not meant for them, that the universal is not made for them, but names a male bourgeois norm that hardly exists in practice today anyway. Perhaps that's why Foucault's philosophy was so attractive to women, because it started from the particular, just like deconstructivism, which pretended to break open hermetic conceptual apparatuses and declared war on the abstract general concept.

But it was precisely from such a perspective that I found critical theory attractive from the start, because it also takes the path through the particular, starting with it and not with abstract general concepts. Contrary to many deconstructivist strands of theory formation, though, it does not remain particularist, but seeks the moment of the general in the particular. Only this double movement, which embeds the individual experience in larger contexts, makes it a concrete critique. By contrast, a particularist critique, of domination, for example, remains abstract and useless for feminist politics because it leaves particularities and particular experiences unconnected and does not allow any statement beyond the immediate, isolated finding. Critical theory thus produces a different kind of general concept, one that is full of concrete experience. This is where it differs from deconstructivism, which leaves no notion of the universal alive and thus eventually loses the ability to distinguish between right and wrong, because any general statement is equally frowned upon. Critical theory, on the other hand, gives us a framework within which to develop a materialist critical feminist theory that does not place the universal above the particular or vice versa, but is capable of thinking the mediation between the two.



The political aim of thinking, in this context, is emancipation. This is often repeated and often simply stated in the abstract and taken for granted, without much thought being given to what exactly is meant by emancipation. Often the discussion gets lost in an abstract conceptual knocking without much concrete definition of content. What we need for a feminist critical theory, however, is a concrete critique of domination, subjectivity and reason that looks at the specific circumstances of life and, on this basis, asks what unites and what divides.

This is where Marx's concept of the critique of the critique comes into play – in the sense that an abstract critique of society forces us to engage in concrete critique if, for example, it does not include gender relations, which operate within class relations, at the centre of its considerations. Only against the background of such a concrete critique, which does not shy away from the empirical depths, confusions, and contradictions, is a feminist critical judgement possible that escapes the pitfalls of cultural relativism on the one hand and repressive universalism on the other.

## SM and IZ

As scholars interested in the social function and the political significance of art, our final question will be focused on one of the most famous concepts of the aesthetic theories inspired by the paradigm of critical theory: the concept of the culture industry. As is well-known, this concept was originally coined by Horkheimer and Adorno in a famous chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, not only to critically refer to mass culture but also to immediately emphasize, already at a terminological level, the strictly industrial character of *all* mass culture. Especially in some passages of their work, Horkheimer and Adorno seem to deny the possibility itself that, in principle, *any* form of mass culture (popular music, film, comics, fashion, etc.) can hold a potential for human emancipation, given their idea of the culture industry as an organ of the “administered world” and an agency of “mass deception”.

After having talked with you about the current relation between feminism and critical theory, we would like to ask how you (as a sociologist, a feminist and a woman) conceive of the role of women in the context of the cultural industry today. This is clearly a question that opens up a range of interesting knots and calls into question several fundamental nodes, such as: the female representation or under-representation in relation to the cultural industry; the relation between gender and power; the feminist critique of capitalism in relation to its ability to subsume gender and sexual differences under production processes; the problem of the potential presence of phenomena of gender discrimination and violence in the film

industry, the music industry, the fashion industry, etc.; the relation between feminism and everyday life; the issue of equal opportunities; and so on.

We are all immersed in mass culture today: popular contents and messages reach us all the time through forms of popular art, mass media, social media, the Internet, advertisements, publications, etc. Is there, in your view, an adequate (that is, theoretically and politically fruitful) way to think about these and other questions concerning feminism and the culture industry in the present age? Do you think that Horkheimer and Adorno's absolutely critical view of the culture industry is still useful and valid today, or can mass culture also offer today some opportunities for the emancipation of women and, more generally, of all the subjectivities that suffer from gender-based oppression, discrimination and violence?

**KS**

I think the chapter on the culture industry in the *Dialectics of Enlightenment* was meant to illustrate the decline of the bourgeois subject and its capacity to experience, judge and criticize society and connected to this a loss of the capacity to think about the good society and to negotiate about it together. The pessimism it expresses is due to the times. Walter Benjamin also wrote extensively about the changes in people's patterns of perception in modernity. What is interesting for me here is not so much the apodictic statement that all mass culture is rubbish (in this context, my Viennese colleague Gerhard Scheit once put it very aptly: if all mass culture is rubbish, then it is a matter of rubbish separation in order to be able to distinguish and critically judge at all). What is much more interesting is the historical-critical embedding of the bourgeois subject in the conditions of its emergence and decline. The early studies of authoritarianism, *Authority and the Family*, emphasized the close connection between bourgeois male subjectivation and authority. The decline of paternal authority was also linked to the decline of the bourgeois subject. It was the changes within the capitalist order that produced the individual and the modern subject as we know it. The decline is therefore also embedded in the development of the capitalist order, and this includes mass culture and the culture industry. The decline of the subject in the culture industry, as diagnosed in the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, is often misunderstood as a simple mourning of the bourgeois male subject and its culture on the part of the authors. But following the authoritarianism studies of the early critical theory, which were carried out at the same time, I see rather a mourning for missed possibilities of liberation from authoritarianism. For while the culture industry contributed to the disintegration of the bourgeois subject to which authority was attached, it did not

in turn enact a free subject, but one that was subjected to the impersonal authoritarianism of the commodity fetish. Fascism and Nazism were able to build on this depersonalization of authoritarianism – authority passed directly from the sensual-concrete father to the impersonal command of the authoritarian state and its institutions. Under such circumstances, it was all the more difficult for the subjects to develop tools of resistance. To the contrary, the new forms of authoritarianism without the father led people to indulge in universal conformism. Thus, the erosion of bourgeois authority in the cultural industry did not lead to the end of authoritarianism but, on the contrary, made it more powerful. This is another dialectical contradiction that the system produces out of itself. This does not mean, however, that all mass culture is per se the work of the devil and must be rejected out of hand in a cultural pessimism that forgets history. Neither Horkheimer and Adorno nor Benjamin thought so. This can perhaps be illustrated by a passage from the *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (p. 185) on the dialectics of the emancipation of women: “The liberation of citizens from the injustice of the feudal and absolutist past served, through liberalism, to unleash machinery, just as the emancipation of women culminated in their being trained as a branch of the armed forces. The spirit and all that is good in its origin and existence are hopelessly implicated in this horror”.

This describes the universal entanglement into which everything is drawn in the state of unfreedom. It does not mean, however, that the emancipation of women is to be rejected, but rather that it is itself embedded in a historical process of forces and counter-forces that can also result in emancipation being turned into its opposite. And I think it is necessary that feminist critical theory repeatedly makes itself the object of such fundamental critical reflection. This is the dialectics of feminist enlightenment, as the German feminist critical theorist Gudrun-Axeli Knapp has pointed out with reference to the “successful failure” of feminist critique. This successful failure consists in the complete integration of women into the capitalist system of exploitation as a non-intended side effect of the feminist struggle for recognition and equality. Similarly, Nancy Fraser has shown that the mobilization of women’s labor power and the accompanying push for women’s subjectivation has not only led to a gain in equality within the system, but has also paradoxically obstructed the vision of emancipation beyond the system. Thus, historical phenomena and processes are rarely unambiguous; rather, they contain the possibility of freedom and oppression in varying degrees. This makes conscious differentiation and judgement all the more important, so that the emancipatory moments are strengthened and the repressive ones recognized and combated. This also applies to the culture industry and mass culture. The emancipatory moments, however, are bound to subjects who

take them up and push them forward, even against resistance from within. Thus, the culture industry and mass culture integrate feminism and thus rob it of some of its potential for resistance. In the post-feminism that has emerged, the emancipatory impulse seems to have become obsolete. The post-feminist repertoire ranges from a resurgence of the idea of a natural and insurmountable gender difference to the subjectivization of objective processes to self-optimization, abstract individualism, formalist freedom of choice, empowerment and the commodification of difference. This cultural-industrial taming of feminism corresponds with a culturalized feminist theory since the 1990s that reflects less and less on social gender relations and instead focuses on how gender is constructed as a form of identity. Along with pluralism, diversity and opportunities for participation, the culture industry has also led to a levelling of difference in commodification, to an “anything goes” in which, in terms of identity politics, everything is put on the same level and every experience and positioning and every cultural particularity demands unconditional recognition, regardless of whether or not these particularities increase the subjects’ possibilities for freedom and access to equality. Emancipation then amounts to a pure functionalism, and those ways of life that function are viewed to be true. Post-feminism eventually takes up feminist motifs and turns them against liberation – for example in the antigenderism and trans- and homophobia of the radical right or Islamists.

Against that background I see a desideratum in current critical feminist theory and practice to develop reflective judgement and the courage to criticize oneself and others. For the ability to judge involves attention to and interest in others, their particularities, their sufferings, their concerns, but also their hopes and aspirations for emancipation. The critical feminist focus cannot be limited to self-reflection, because the self to be reflected and criticized presupposes the living perception of others. Thus, the activity of judging is subjective and trans-subjective at once, and is able of overcoming egoism and isolation. The decline and erosion of feminist judgement is also linked to the current widespread identity political house arrest and the fragmentation of experience into a culture-industrialized, commodified abstract particularism. As in the neo-liberal condition, so in the post-colonial one, subjects find themselves increasingly thrown back on themselves. To judge anything other than one’s own immediate experience is increasingly frowned upon. But since the perception and experience of one’s own is inseparable from the other, self-reflection also suffers from this isolation. As a result, solidarity with other women’s struggles diminishes, as Iranian women who are currently risking their lives in revolt against the misogynist mullah regime have tragically experienced in recent months. They feel abandoned by Western feminists who see “Woman Life Freedom” not as a universal

feminist issue, but as an internal Iranian political issue for which Iranian women would have to fight on their own. The same goes for Afghan women under Taliban rule or Kurdish women fighting ISIS – they too experience that their feminist struggles against extreme patriarchal violence are obscured by an ethnicized view in the West. Too often, Western feminists shy away from supporting feminist struggles against patriarchy in cultures other than their own, misunderstanding such involvement as neo-colonialism and thus inadvertently strengthening the very patriarchal structures they are fighting against elsewhere. I simply call this a lack of empathy and solidarity.

At present, this is also connected with a massive authoritarian destruction of public discourse, which is not only visible in the increasing instrumentalization of emancipatory feminist concepts for anti-emancipatory purposes by the far-right and Islamists. It also manifests itself in cultural relativisms, in which autonomy, subjectivity, freedom and democracy are seen as essentially entangled in contexts of domination and exploitation. But instead of a redemptive critique that would reflect on the dialectics of subjectivity, freedom or autonomy, cultural relativism completely abandons emancipatory concepts and ideas. The result is that women are tied to their supposed culture or religion and deprived of Western freedoms.

It is true that critical theory starts from subjective experiences such as grief and suffering in order to think about how to end suffering, about emancipation, freedom and happiness – seen from the perspective of the marginalized other. But here again, a concrete differentiation is necessary, because not all forms of otherness carry the longing for freedom and emancipation. Often, under the cloak of a culture, minoritarian or not, women are made to disappear as subjects by no longer distinguishing their individuality from the roles culturally assigned to them. This happens when recognition is not tied to the subject, but is tied to a whole culture or tradition. This sort of recognition can be mobilized against feminist demands for freedom, emancipation and self-determination within minority cultures and reveals the dialectic of pluralism and situated being. According to Seyla Benhabib, the situated self that is so important in feminist theory is not defined exhaustively by the roles that constitute their identity. Thus, situating the self is not about accepting uncritically the social roles ascribed to women in different cultures, because this would eventually amount to an erasure of the female subjects in their cultures. What is needed instead, particularly against the background of a cultural industrial commodification of identity, is the perspective of a feminist-dialectically educated individualism that does not conceive the subject as monadic, but as the “self in context”. This context consists not only of traditions and roles into which women are socialized and which are also imposed on them, but also of resistance against tradition and cul-

ture and of women's struggle for self-determination. Only from this perspective can we measure a state in which otherness no longer provokes strength, as Adorno says in an oft-quoted passage from *Minima Moralia*. I think it is here where feminist power of negation is to be found today.

### **Critical Theory and Feminism Today: An Interview with Karin Stögner**

In this contribution we present to the readers of "Scenari" a conversation on critical theory and feminism with the German sociologist Karin Stögner. The text includes four questions written together by Stefano Marino and Ines Zampaglione, and four long, complex and detailed answers to those questions written by Karin Stögner. The questions and answers included in this interview are partly based on the structure and contents of the book *Kritische Theorie und Feminismus*, co-edited by Karin Stögner with Alexandra Colligs, and published by Suhrkamp press in 2022.

**KEYWORDS:** Critical theory. Feminism. Intersectionality. Frankfurt School. Culture industry.