

2005

Review of Key Concepts in Critical Social Theory by Nick Crossley, 2005, Sage

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Recommended Citation

Murphy, Anne (2005) "Review of Key Concepts in Critical Social Theory by Nick Crossley, 2005, Sage," *Level 3*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 7.

doi:10.21427/D7FT75

Available at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/level3/vol3/iss1/7>

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Book Review

Crossley, Nick (2005) *Key Concepts in Critical Social Theory*, London: Sage.

This book is intended to help students who are working with or attempting to read about aspects of contemporary critical social theory....I hope that students will use this book to check their own understanding of concepts, to fill in gaps and perhaps also to achieve the preliminary clarification that is sometimes necessary for pressing ahead with complex materials.

(Preface: vii)

This publication by Nick Crossley, University of Manchester, is one in a series of SAGE 'key concepts': the others in the series relate to sociology, gender studies, social research, leisure studies and urban studies. The purpose and intent of the series is stated on the back cover and introductory pages of the paperback edition as follows:

The Sage Key Concepts series provides students with accessible and authoritative knowledge of the essential topics in a variety of disciplines. Cross-referenced throughout, the format encourages critical reflection through understanding. Written by experienced and respected academics, the books are indispensable study aids and guides to comprehension.

Crossley describes his guide as a 'bit of a leg-up' for students who find primary texts difficult to understand as independent learners. He mentions in the Foreword that books like this are necessary for contemporary students principally because the modularized structure of higher education has resulted in less direct teaching and therefore less opportunity for students to get a thorough introduction to the field. Additionally, he contends that the great writings of critical social science are often opaque and alienating for students, thus justifying books such as his.

Fifty-seven key concepts in critical social theory are dealt with in 323 pages and there is an additional, very useful nine-page bibliography. Crossley justifies his choice of concepts by admitting to excluding concepts that he considers incoherent or weak or based primarily on practice and already written about in inaccessible, non-academic style. He claims his selected concepts are from classical contemporary literature, are durable, have useful application in other disciplines such as philosophy or psychology, and emphasize the theory of concepts rather than their application: all have a critical or critique function.

The concepts in the book are presented in alphabetical order from 'alienation' to 'the unconscious', with page length for each concept ranging between three and twelve pages. Each entry ends with a list of related concepts or themes. The historic origin of each concept is presented succinctly, together with variations on the concept developed by key thinkers. The cross-referencing between the concepts is especially useful and readers are given definite direction in further reading from the primary sources, with the help of micro annotated bibliographies.

Crossley claims his style of writing is accessible and integrating. This is true, but the writing cannot disguise the complexity of the content and the challenge of trying to be coherent and 'non-opaque' without reducing highly theoretical notions to over-simplification.

The section on the concept of 'discourse' is skilfully reduced to three pages with most of the references contained in the 'further reading' section. The footnotes are cleverly used instead of lengthening the section and risking the loss of succinctness.

There seems to be a preference for Bourdieu, with 20 entries in the bibliography and several instances of cross-referencing between related concepts, compared for instance, to Habermas or Foucault.

Overall, what makes this type of book different is definitely the effective use of cross-referencing with obvious pedagogical intent. Its main usefulness is indeed that it can be used

by students quite independently of the teaching process, as it explicitly directs the reader to the key primary sources, and to related primary sources. The series is targeted at undergraduate students, and it would be fair to say that this volume on critical social theory would indeed be challenging for that level of student without supporting taught elements. For postgraduate students, though, it is an ideal self-help primer with application across disciplines other than sociology and social studies.