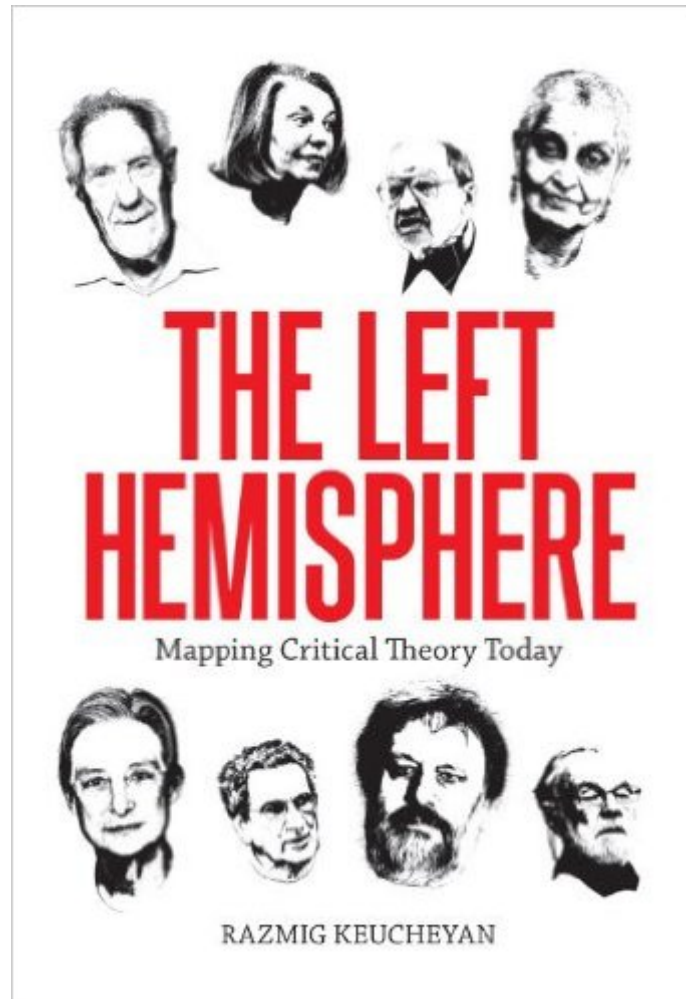


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# Left Hemisphere: Mapping Contemporary Theory



## Synopsis

As the crisis of capitalism unfolds, the need for alternatives is felt ever more intensely. The struggle between radical movements and the forces of reaction will be merciless. A crucial battlefield, where the outcome of the crisis will in part be decided, is that of theory. Over the last twenty-five years, radical intellectuals across the world have produced important and innovative ideas. The endeavour to transform the world without falling into the catastrophic traps of the past has been a common element uniting these new approaches. This book is aimed at both the general reader and the specialist and offers the first global cartography of the expanding intellectual field of critical contemporary thought. More than thirty authors and intellectual currents of every continent are presented in a clear and succinct manner. A history of critical thought in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is also provided, helping situate current thinkers in a broader historical and sociological perspective.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I agree with the assessment of the other two reviewers but I thought this book deserved a little more of a descriptive review. Razmig Keucheyan (hereafter RK) starts his book with the assertion that contemporary critical theory is a reaction to the defeat of leftist movements in the 1980s. RK's assessment is that the triumph of the Reagan-Thatcher brand of neo-liberalism, the capitalist turn in China, the fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of Islam as a modern political alternative demonstrated the inadequacies of critical theory up until the 1980s. The tasks of a renewed critical

theory are three-fold as I read RK. There is a need for a new theory of the system or the ontology we are critiquing. The capitalism of classical Marxism has failed to develop as predicted and badly needs to be re-theorized. What is the nature of capitalism at the current time? Is the nation-state still the locus of political power or are there trans-national entities that are as oppressive? Can we understand the current international scene as exemplifying a form of imperialism and, if so, what kind? Is it necessary to address the diffusion of power throughout our lives and cultural experience or is political power the necessary focus of change? RK addresses these questions in Chapter 4 on System by looking at thinkers like Hardt and Negri, Panitch, Cox, David Harvey, Benedict Anderson, Jurgen Habermas, Etienne Balibar, Giorgio Agamben and many others. The second major theme RK explores is who is to be the revolutionary subject. One of the predictive failures of classical Marxism has been the development of the working classes. RK cogently argues that we must re-theorize critical subjectivity and the relationship between the individual/citizen/outsider/indigene and the critical intellectual. RK examines the work of Ranciere, Badiou, Zizek, Haraway, Butler, Spivak, Linera, Honneth and others to suggest the way that feminism, native Indian movements in South America and ideas about equality and conflictual identities all argue for a broadening of the debate about what the left is trying to achieve and with whom. Which leads to RK's third theme- the need for critical intellectuals to actually engage in political movements and to let their theorizing to develop out of that experience. As we are involved in the actual work of political change, as we come to represent the needs of more and more different kinds of people perhaps then we can begin to theorize an overall subject who is both particular and inclusive. And as we understand more of how various systems impact the lives of various types of people, perhaps we will then develop a more systematic theory of how power is wielded. One sign of hope for RK is that the intellectuals who are critical theorists are increasingly non-European or North American. The emergence of theorists from South America, Asia and Africa allows for the emergence of new experiences being brought to bear on critical theory and its relevance. RK talks occasionally about the political history of Bolivia all of which was a revelation to me. Overall this book has many strengths. There are terse cogent discussions of somewhere between thirty and forty thinkers which serve to orient the reader to further reading. There are also some wonderful thoughtful observations throughout the book. Consider the following: "...the incorporation of Gandhian precepts into a new strategic reason would make it possible to grasp the fact that violence not only always has a human and social cost, but also adversely affect the very identity of those who use it. This idea, claims Balibar, is foreign to Marxism, whose conception of violence was mainly tactical, not ontological" p. 253. We are what we practice. The habitual becomes our ontology. This is a nice insight and essential to keep in mind. RK

has some weaknesses as well. He is a sociologist and so occasionally gets the philosophy or the history wrong. But these are minor problems that an editor or a good reader should have caught. It is also pretty obvious who he admires and doesn't admire among his discussed theorists. No one should rely on this book for an introduction to Habermas. But it is hard not to catch his enthusiasm for David Harvey. My major problem with the book is his discussion on feminism. I am not a fan of Donna Haraway and wished he had used almost any other thinker instead of her. He apologizes for not being able to further discuss feminism for reasons of space. But if you are going to talk about creating a new critical subjectivity, you had better be willing and able to take a long deep dive into feminist theory. No other theory goes as deeply into how power and the possibility of violence is expressed in our daily lives. In spite of this flaw, RK's book is successful. I have great admiration for writers who can come up with a thinker in eight to ten well-written pages. To do it with this many thinkers is really impressive. I also believe his overall analysis sets the right course for the further development of critical theory. I would love to hear what others who have read the book think. Please educate me in the comments.

In *Left Hemisphere: Mapping Critical Theory Today*, Razmig Keucheyan has managed to assemble a rigorous and comprehensive cartography of the contemporary field of critical theory. Bold in ambition, panoramic in scope and praiseworthy in execution, I would certainly recommend this title to anyone seeking a coherent port of entry into the vast and often labyrinthine world of the critical left. For newcomers and veterans alike, this is undoubtedly an ideal offering.

The author offers very thoughtful and stimulating accounts of many of the best and most widely discussed and influential of contemporary left giants. Exceptionally concise, informative and rigorous. A remarkable achievement.

very informative for anybody interested in contemporary thought and its thinkers. very thoughtful and very well written indeed. wonderful and informatively revelant.

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