

ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Depression, Critique, and Critical Theory as Political Therapy

Jasper Friedrich 

Department of Politics and IR, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

Correspondence: Jasper Friedrich (jasper.friedrich@politics.ox.ac.uk)

Received: 15 March 2024 | **Revised:** 5 September 2024 | **Accepted:** 26 March 2025

Keywords: depression | critique | Frankfurt School | suffering | mental health | alienation | consciousness raising | political therapy

ABSTRACT

Critical theorists, especially in the Frankfurt School tradition, claim that normative thought and critique arise from experiences of suffering and oppression. It seems intuitive that oppression sometimes makes people sad and angry in ways that motivate critique and resistance; yet, other times, it leads to debilitating experiences of depression, resignation, and self-blame. Especially, in the context of our contemporary “mental health epidemic,” it is worth asking whether and how critique and resistance could possibly spring from such experiences. This paper therefore investigates the potential for experiences of depression to disclose social injustice. Drawing on phenomenological accounts of depression, I argue that it is best understood as consciousness of one’s alienation from the social world—and under the right conditions, this consciousness can become politicized and lead to critique. Critical theory, here, can play a crucial role as a form of “political therapy” that supplies the hermeneutical tools for this politicization.

He had to retreat to a point of inner security if only because the world outside had become a place of agonizing decay; he had to ignore the itch, the desire to intervene, for the purpose and significance of action were being corroded away by its thoroughgoing lack of significance; he had to distance himself because the only valid response of a sound mind to this process was to protest against it, or indeed to withdraw, to cut all contact with it and retain one’s distance...

—László Krasznahorkai (2016, 191)

How do you throw a brick through the window of a bank if you can’t get out of bed?

—Johanna Hedva (2022)

1 | Introduction

Critical theorists, especially in the Frankfurt School tradition, claim that political theory and normative thought ought to spring from experiences of suffering and oppression, rather than abstract analysis of normative principles. Perhaps most famously, Adorno claimed that the “need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth” (1973, 17). But not only does this need to understand suffering constitute the *point* of critique, he further claims that “pain and negativity” constitute “the moving forces of dialectical thinking” (1973, 202). That is, experiences of suffering also constitute the *motivating force* for critical thinking. As Iris Marion Young explains elsewhere, “[n]ormative reflection arises from hearing a cry of suffering or distress, or feeling distress oneself” (1990, 5).

These claims seem intuitive in many cases. Axel Honneth’s social theory, for example, gives an account of how experiences

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2025 The Author(s). *Constellations* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

of misrecognition fuel progressive social movements, and, in a somewhat different vein, feminist philosophers have written widely about how feelings, like anger, in Audre Lorde's words, are "loaded with information and energy" (Lorde 2019, 121, see also Spelman 1989; Srinivasan 2018; Cherry 2021; MacLachlan 2010; Frye 1983, 84–94; Friedrich 2025). Yet, far from all negative social experiences seem to lead straightforwardly to furious resistance against injustice. Most obviously, perhaps, in the contemporary context of what is often termed a "mental health epidemic" (Rose 2019, chap. 2), widespread experiences of depression seem to lead to the exact opposite: self-blame, apathy, and inaction. What are we to make of these experiences of suffering which, on the face of it, do not look at all like a "moving force of dialectical thinking"?

One answer could be to reconsider the role of suffering in critical theory. Some theorists, indeed, are strongly opposed to what they perceive as a kind of "suffer-mongering" in left theory and politics (Brown and Halley 2002, 33). Wendy Brown, for instance, has influentially argued that a focus on suffering is not conducive to radical political agency and recommends simply "throwing off the melancholic [...] habits of the Left to invigorate it with a radical [...] critical and visionary spirit again" (1999, 26). This seems very well in theory—and Brown importantly highlights the shortcomings of any approach that assumes a direct connection between suffering and emancipatory agency—yet, in the context of widespread mental health issues, the claim that we simply ought to "throw off" melancholy and depression seems naïve at best. As McNay has argued, such ideas ultimately remain "ungrounded exhortations that do not connect to the embodied experience of the very subjects they wish to mobilize" (2010, 512). Precisely because experiences like depression seem to constitute an obstacle to political action, it seems worthwhile for political theorists as well as activists to pay attention to such emotional states and ask whether there is any latent potential in these experiences to lead to critique and resistance.

This paper takes up that question: can the experience of depression in any way disclose social wrongs? Can it ever be the starting point for critique and ultimately resistance against injustice? While critical theorists have had very little to say about these questions, social epidemiologists and critical psychiatrists have increasingly started highlighting the connection between depression and social ills—not least in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Rose 2020). While evidence is mounting that biochemical explanations of depression have failed (Healy 2015; Moncrieff et al. 2022), calls are growing to address the "social determinants of mental health" (Allen et al. 2014; Marmot 2017; 2010). Increasingly, arguments are made that classifying "depression and other emotional reactions as mental diseases or disorders obscures the relation between our moods and our circumstances. [...] Instead, we need to listen carefully to the message that people's emotional reactions convey, and endeavor to create a society in which all people can flourish" (Read and Moncrieff 2022, 1407).

However, it is usually unclear what is meant by "listening to the messages people's emotional reactions convey." While other feelings, like anger, often involve a clear sense of an external obstacle or object of blame, depression is characterized by internalized blame and guilt—and surely, listening to depression does not

mean accepting these "messages" at face value. Frequently used metaphors likening the experience of depression to seeing the world through a "heavy fog" or a "dark cloud" highlight some of the difficulties of this question: while perhaps it discloses that something is wrong with the world, it usually does not present us with a clear image of what this wrongness consists in. Depression may be "nature's attempt to show us that something in our lives isn't working out" (Garson 2022b)—but how do we know what it is that isn't working out? And if depression, as Mark Fisher claims, is a "form[] of captured discontent [which] can and must be channeled outwards, directed towards its real cause," how do we know the real cause and set this discontent free by turning it "from medicalized conditions into effective antagonisms" (2009, 84)?

In the following section, I begin by considering three possible answers to this question which I find inadequate: I call them depression as symptom, as judgment, and as protest. In Section 3, I then go on to develop my own account of depression. Drawing on first-person phenomenological accounts, I argue that depression is best understood as the consciousness of one's alienation. This approach highlights that, while depression is characterized by hopelessness, it is not a state of pure resignation: Section 4 explains how the depressive is usually painfully aware that something is wrong leading to intensive rumination on the causes of their own misery in a way that can *sometimes* lead to a better understanding of the causes of their alienation. In Section 5, I use the example of feminist consciousness-raising groups to show that, under the right social conditions, feelings of depression can be politicized and lead to knowledge about oppression. Finally, in Section 6, I suggest that critical theory can play an important role in such processes of politicizing and interpreting feelings by providing a kind of "political therapy"—a term I take from Carol Hanisch's (1970) writings on consciousness-raising. In the end, then, I vindicate Adorno's claim that pain and negativity, even in the form of depression, can be the spur to critical consciousness—but with the important qualification that the process of politicization of such experiences is both fraught and demanding, requiring collective forms of meaning-making to succeed.

Before going on, though, it is worth clarifying the scope of my arguments in this paper. I start from the assumption (well-supported by epidemiological evidence; Allen et al. 2014) that depression is often a reaction to social problems and ask whether, in those cases where it is rooted in unjust circumstances, it can disclose these injustices. This is not to say that *all* cases of depression are caused by political problems, nor is it to suggest that we replace therapeutic or pharmaceutical treatments for depression with political consciousness-raising. Politicizing our suffering is not an alternative to trying to alleviate it in other ways, but an addition (see also Cattien 2024; Dyson 2024). While my account highlights the possibilities of politicizing depression, it also highlights the difficulty of doing so, and it bears repeating that, in most cases, depression is an obstacle to political action rather than its instigator. Nevertheless, those of us who believe that the widespread suffering of our "mental health epidemic" cannot ultimately be overcome without abolishing the structural conditions that gave rise to it should be interested in the relation between these forms of suffering and the possibility of consciousness-raising.

2 | Depression as Symptom, Judgment, or Protest

While much has been said about the epistemological and political roles of emotions like anger (Spelman 1989; Srinivasan 2018; Cherry 2018, Friedrich 2025), resentment (MacLachlan 2010), shame (Ahmed 2004, chap. 5; Fischer 2018), and disgust (Ahmed 2004, chap. 4; Nussbaum 2004; Kim 2016, 452–61), there is barely any philosophical work on whether and how depression can similarly lead to knowledge about injustice. Nevertheless, we can reconstruct some approaches which are at least implicitly present in various writings on depression and adjacent phenomena.

One of the reasons, perhaps, for the relative neglect is that depression sits uneasily between a number of different problematics usually addressed under the themes of illness, emotion, and madness, respectively—but with depression being a somewhat marginal member of each of these categories. Seen as an illness, depression can be a *symptom* of social ills; as an emotion it can be a *judgment* about the world; as a form of madness it can be seen as a *refusal* to participate in a corrupt social world. Each of these perspectives captures something relevant about depression, but none of them, I will argue, adequately captures its potential to disclose social wrongs.

2.1 | Depression as Symptom

The first, and perhaps most obvious, way to think of depression as disclosive of injustice is as an illness that may be a symptom of social ills. In this view, depression is not considered a meaningful response to depressing realities but simply a biomedical issue, like cancer or diabetes. As the growing interest in “social determinants of health” makes clear, however, treating something as a biomedical problem does not preclude *also* treating it as a political problem.¹ As Mark Fisher put it, even if “depression is constituted by low serotonin levels, what still needs to be explained is why particular individuals have low levels of serotonin. This requires a social and political explanation” (2009, 41). Here, the critical theorist becomes a social epidemiologist. An early example of this approach is Engels’ *Conditions of the Working-Class* in which he analyses the way capitalism produces various health conditions in workers and “undermines the vital force of these workers gradually, little by little, and so hurries them to the grave before their time” (1973, 122). In what Adler-Bolton and Vierkant call the “social-symptomatic model” of illness, “symptoms present not only a challenge to the survival of ‘the patients’ but also represent a call to arms—not just for reform, but for revolution” (2022, 150). Fabian Freyenhagen, too, argues that critical theory should be understood in just this way: the point of critique is to make causal claims establishing, say, that it is “the capitalist organization of society that produces recognizable patterns of stressful life events that lead to depression” (2019, 418, see also Sik 2022, ch. 4).

The shortcoming of this approach is that it elides the subjective element and the fact that depression, no matter how maladaptive, is still an intelligible reaction to the world. The WHO describes “depressive disorders” as “characterized by sadness, loss of interest or pleasure, feelings of guilt or low self-worth, disturbed sleep or appetite, feelings of tiredness, and poor concentration” (World Health Organization 2017, 2), and to be diagnosed with “mild” or “minor” depression it is sufficient to exhibit persistent depressed

mood and daily thoughts of worthlessness for two weeks (Benazzi 2006). The idea that once these “normal” feelings reach a certain threshold of intensity or duration we should no longer see them as meaningful reactions to one’s environment but rather as dysfunctions is arbitrary. While some instances of depression may have mainly physical etiologies (brain tumors can cause depressive symptoms, for instance), in general, depression is best seen as “‘normal’ human emotion, albeit sometimes extreme and disproportionate—that is as a meaningful reaction to depressing events and circumstances” (Read and Moncrieff 2022, 1402).

To be clear, I do not wish to intervene in debates about whether depression is or is not an illness or disorder—these debates clearly hinge partly on one’s definition of “illness” or “disorder,” and, as Robert Chapman (2023) has pointed out, critiques of the notion of mental illness often rely on problematically naturalizing assumptions about physical illness (see also Chappell 2023 for a defense of the concept of mental illness). Insisting that depression is a meaningful response to one’s circumstances is not to deny that it is harrowing nor that providing relief from it through pharmaceutical or therapeutic means is important. What I want to deny is that we can draw a neat line between “normal” forms of suffering (which may be misguided or maladaptive, but still meaningful) and “clinical” depression as something that cannot be understood as a meaningful reaction to one’s world but must be left to medical diagnosis. In the following I assume that these two perspectives are compatible: we can see depression as continuous with “normal” moods and emotions without denying that they can reach a threshold where medical treatment is an appropriate option.

2.2 | Depression as Judgment

What, then, could it mean to treat depression as a meaningful emotional response to the world? Some have suggested that depression, like other emotions, should be seen simply as an evaluative judgment about the world—and, as such, it can be “a source of moral insight” (Martin 1999, 271; see also Graham 1990). This would be in line with influential cognitive theories of mood disorders which see depression as constituted by “cognitive distortions” leading to more pessimistic judgments about the world (Beck et al. 1979). While psychologists usually see this as a *disordered* form of cognition, one influential theory, termed “depressive realism,” posits that depressed individuals make more pessimistic judgments because they are *free* of certain cognitive biases: non-depressed people tend to distort their image of the world in order to maintain a positive self-image and hope for the future, whereas the depressed are supposedly “sadder but wiser” (Alloy and Abrahamson 1979). On this view, depression discloses injustice simply by revealing the world in all its depravity: the depressed does not see the world unclearly through the fog of a dark cloud, but rather has taken off the rose-tinted glasses.

We have, I believe, cause to be very wary of such views that impute any special clarity to experiences of depression, especially if we want to place them in a political context. It may well be true that depressed people perform better on laboratory tasks about the assessment of agency in a controlled setting,² but this tells us very little about depressive people’s general understanding of the world. For example, depression is associated with excessive guilt, self-blame, and feelings of worthlessness (to the extent that these

are included as standard diagnostic criteria for depression (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 161)). *Prima facie*, this would suggest that depression is not particularly likely to reveal knowledge of injustice since the blame for suffering is often directed towards oneself rather than the world. Thus, unlike a feeling like anger, which many argue can reveal injustice precisely because it “implies a claim to domain” (Frye 1983, 87), depression may often be the result of having internalized society’s denial of one’s worth. It is very possible that such internalization of stigmatization leads to more realistic predictions about one’s future prospects in an oppressive world—but it would be perverse to confuse this with having a “correct” understanding of one’s worth.

In short, unless we accept Schopenhauer’s view that “everything is as it should be, in a world where each of us pays the penalty of existence” (1913, 28), we should not attribute any particular clarity to experiences of depression. Claiming that depression is an *intelligible* response to depressing circumstances—e.g., feeling worthless in the face of persistent marginalization—is not the same as saying that it represents a *correct* understanding of these circumstances.

2.3 | Depression as Protest

We can identify a third perspective on depression that treats it neither as a passive state of illness, nor as a judgment about the world, but rather as a strategy for engaging with the world under difficult circumstances.³ Here, the focus is not on beliefs or judgments about the world, but on the way the depressed person perceives subjective possibilities for engaging with the world (“affordances” in the technical vocabulary of psychological theory (Gibson 2015))—or, crucially, the lack thereof.

Consider, for example, Sartre’s description of the feeling of “melancholy”: when the world no longer furnishes the conditions for my usual agency (e.g., through the loss of a job, money, or the support of a loved one), and I lose “both the ability and the will to carry out the projects I formerly entertained, I behave in such a manner that the universe requires nothing more from me” (2014, 44). A very similar perspective is adopted by more recent Darwinian theories of depression which see it as an adaptive trait: “as difficulties continue and grow and our life’s energies are progressively wasted, this emotion helps to disengage us from a hopeless enterprise” (Nesse and Williams cited in Garson 2022a, 257–58). When facing frustrations of our engagement with the world, we initially tend to respond aggressively trying to restore our agency, but if this strategy consistently fails the world starts looking increasingly unchangeable leading to withdrawal and depression (Klinger 1975).

Some people identify in these features of depression a latent protest against the unjust structures of the world *qua* refusal to participate. Depression, John Andrews writes, “can overspill into [...] collective political sentiments, and an individual incapacity (to feel, to get out of bed, to work) becomes a capacity to refuse or to ask for more of this life” (2009, 172). Johanna Hedva similarly suggests that “once we are all ill and confined to the bed, [...] and there is no one left to go to work, perhaps then, finally, capitalism will screech to its much needed, long-overdue, and motherfuck-

ing glorious halt” (2022). The depressive’s flight from the world, then, can be interpreted as an implicit critique of capitalism.

This line of reasoning is more familiar from debates about madness, and especially schizophrenia. From this perspective, associated, among others, with R. D. Laing, and Deleuze and Guattari, madness “no longer consists in an infantile flight from the pain of rejection; it is a refusal to participate in a corrupt social order” (Garson 2022a, 221). Anti-psychiatrists, like David Cooper, claimed that “all madmen are political dissidents” (1978, 23). The mania of the manic-depressive is *really* an “expression of a protest against the capitalist ethos” (1978, 38). In a very similar way, feminists have often read women’s pathologized behavior as submerged forms of protest against patriarchy. A famous example is Freud’s Dora case: several feminists have argued that Dora’s alleged hysteria was actually an unconscious “rebellion,” “a silent revolt against male power” (Ramas 1985, 152; Moi 1981, 60). For Hélène Cixous, “this girl—like all hysterics, deprived of the possibility of saying directly what she perceived [...]—still had the strength to make it known. It is the nuclear example of women’s power to protest” (Cixous and Clément 1986, 154). The hysteric, the schizophrenic, or the depressive all reveal the injustices of the world through their “silent revolts” which the social theorist then translates into words.⁴

These forms of explanation—both in the case of depression and madness in general—are highly questionable. It is always easy and comfortable for the social critic to simply impute their own claims to the oppressed and suffering. The social theorist claims to simply say out loud what Dora, deprived of her own voice, could not say herself. This is what Gayatri Spivak refers to as the “ventriloquism of the speaking subaltern” (2010, 27). In reality, however, the withdrawal of the depressive or the mad is usually not experienced or intended as an act of political protest on the level of the individual—attributing such political intentions to people is not only theoretically questionable but also risks romanticizing and fetishizing experiences which are actually harrowing and debilitating.

Ultimately, then, neither of the three perspectives—depression as illness, judgment, or protest—gives us a satisfactory account of what it means to “listen to depression.” Nevertheless, each perspective does capture some crucial aspects of the depressive experience which ought to be kept in mind. The illness perspective highlights both the importance of considering social causation and the fact that depression is a debilitating experience (with the latter guarding against any tendency to romanticize or sanitize depression). The judgment perspective emphasizes that depression may be both an intelligible and an apt response to depressing circumstances, whereas seeing depression as a strategic withdrawal from the world highlights that this response is not merely a cognitive judgment but rather an embodied way of engaging with (or disengaging from) one’s environment.

3 | The Phenomenology of Depression

Keeping in mind the above points, I now turn to consider the phenomenology of depression in more detail in order to develop an account that can explain depression’s disclosive function. At this point, it is important to note that the term depression can

cover a wide range of experiences (Stanghellini 2023; Chentsova-Dutton and Tsai 2009), and I am not concerned here with providing anything like a definition that captures all experiences of depression. Nevertheless, recent phenomenological investigations of depressive experiences have uncovered a number of typical features (Fusar-Poli et al. 2023). Since my aim here is to discuss whether experiences of depression have the potential to disclose social injustice, I selectively focus on those aspects of the depressive experience which have usually been taken to *preclude* any such critical consciousness, chief among them the loss of hope and agency (Huber 2023, 96–97).

Consider, to begin with, the following autobiographical descriptions of depression experiences by Ann Cvetkovich, Mark Fisher, and an anonymous survey participant:

I would wake up, but I would be unable to make the next move, as though I were literally paralyzed and the only physical difference between being awake and being asleep was that my eyes were open. My state of immobility seemed aimless and unmotivated, not something I could change in any way. I couldn't even really recognize what possessed me as dread or anxiety. (Cvetkovich 2012, 44)

The depressive experiences himself as walled off from the lifeworld [...] For the depressive, the habits of the former lifeworld now seem to be, precisely, a mode of playacting, a series of pantomime gestures [...], which they are both no longer capable of performing and which they no longer wish to perform—there's no point, everything is a sham. (Fisher 2014, 59)

Whilst depressed, [...] I feel hopeless and useless, and my self-confidence drops so low that sometimes I cannot even leave the house to buy food as I don't feel worthy to be taking up any space and time. (Ratcliffe 2015, 113)

Note how all of these accounts make it clear that depression is much more than merely a judgment that the world is depressing. They highlight how the depressive's whole relation to the world has undergone a change: one feels physically “paralyzed” and “walled off” from the world. Depression, then, is not to be located in a disembodied mind but, rather, is a change in subjects' embodied relation to the world and others.⁵ Accounts of lacking agency, paralysis, and of being cut off from the world in a way that erodes the significance of action are some of the most pervasive themes in first-person accounts of depression (Ratcliffe 2015). To put this in the technical language of psychological theory, one no longer experiences the world as offering up meaningful affordances for action (“everything is a sham”).

The phenomenology of depression may initially seem to make it entirely impossible that political claims should arise from it. For critical theorists, like Iris Marion Young, for instance, experiences of suffering can give rise to critique because they reveal a “desiring negation” (1990, 6): that is, a wish for things

to be otherwise which potentially leads to social critique and political action. Yet, depression, it could seem, involves such a “totalizing experience of personal incompetence and helplessness” (Sik 2022, 98) that any hope for change and any element of desire in the negation is lost. Sik (2022, 94), for example, sees depression as a result of a “coherently distorted social reality” where different elements of the social world all “provide the same experience of the impossibility of pleasure without enabling the emergence of alternative experiences” and therefore lead to “the dissolution of agency.” If an angry person, for example, sees a world that calls for aggressive intervention, the depressive sees no opportunities for action whatsoever, and if anger, consequently, is the “political emotion par excellence” (Gilligan 1990, 290), depression may look like an *anti*-political emotion par excellence (see Huber 2023, 97). As Ratcliffe puts it, in depression “[a] style of anticipation is absent; nothing is practically significant anymore, nothing beckons activities, and so nothing offers the possibility of meaningful change” (2015, 111, emphasis mine). Thus, it could seem that depression is precisely a state of resignation to the existing state of affairs from which no resistance can spring.

There is some truth to such a view, but I want to challenge the view that depression is a “totalizing” experience leaving the individual without even the desire for change. Feeling unworthy of taking up space and unable to even imagine feeling pleasure certainly suggests that there is no longer any disappointment when one is, in fact, denied space, time, and possibilities for fulfilment. Yet, while depression is usually a state of hopelessness, I would argue that it is *not* a state of resignation. We can see why by noting, first of all, that if depression were a “strategy” for avoiding the pain of disappointment, it would be a rather counter-productive one: depression is usually more painful than even a very serious experience of disappointment. If depression were simply about giving up hope in the sense of resigning oneself to the way things are, it is not clear why the experience of depression would be painful. It is true that in depression we may resign ourselves to a great many things that were previously intolerable—specific experiences of disrespect or rejection may be experienced as normal or even deserved to the point where they produce no anger or other strong affect. Yet, the depressed person is not resigned to their situation in the world *as such*—suicidal thoughts being the most extreme expression of this fact. In depression, the “loss of hope is not just the absence of something,” rather, it involves “a painful *awareness* of loss” (Ratcliffe 2015, 102, emphasis mine).

In other words, depression is not merely the loss of hope and meaning but the conscious experience of this loss where “the absence of hope, practical significance, and interpersonal connection is painfully felt” (Ratcliffe 2015, 54). Following Matthew Ratcliffe's work on the phenomenology of depression, we can explain this as follows: while many specific practical expectations have been extinguished, the expectation of finding meaningful possibilities in the world may remain. In more technical terms: “Even if one no longer anticipates *p*, the anticipation of anticipating *p* can remain, and be disappointed when one does not anticipate *p*” (2015, 48). Indeed, if one had never before experienced meaningful possibilities in the world, it is hard to imagine how one could be depressed by this lack. The painful loss of meaning and hope *requires* that meaning and hope were once present. Depression, then, *does* reveal a “desiring negation”: it is

the basic desire to find practical significance in one's environment crashing against a world that denies one all meaning and hope.

We can describe depression as the consciousness of lacking a meaningful relation to the world. Such a loss of meaning and relation is what critical theorists often try to capture with the concept of "alienation," and I would like to suggest that depression is fruitfully understood as the conscious experience of one's alienation from the world. Quoting Rahel Jaeggi, alienation is here understood as

the inability to establish a relation to other human beings, to things, to social institutions and thereby also—so the fundamental intuition of the theory of alienation—to oneself. An alienated world presents itself to individuals as insignificant and meaningless. (2014, 3)

Yet, I differ from Jaeggi in the way I conceive of the normative significance of this experience. For Jaeggi the experience of alienation can ground an immanent critique of society because it reveals "discrepancies between the ideal of control or command and actual impotence with respect to (self-created) relations" (2014, 41). Depression, however, is not the experience of having any explicitly or implicitly held ideal of autonomy disappointed (it could occur in the absence of such ideals⁶), but rather a clash between an expectation of encountering meaningful possibilities for action and a world that leaves one alienated. What I shall go on to argue is that depression is simply a *practical* problem—the problem of finding meaning in the world—which calls for interpretation and problem-solving in a way that may lead to social critique.

Before going on to consider what this process of interpretation looks like, it is worth including a further aside on the concept of alienation. I describe depression as "*consciousness of alienation*" rather than "alienation" simpliciter. This raises the obvious question of whether it is possible to be alienated without being conscious of one's alienation. Is it possible to be unable to find meaningful relations in one's world without subjectively missing anything? I very much doubt that it is empirically possible to be fully alienated from the world in this sense without subjectively feeling a painful lack—ultimately, this is a question of human psychology—but it is certainly conceptually conceivable, and one can, it would seem, be more or less aware of one's alienation. Depression is clearly felt more acutely at some moments while fading into the background at others, and some people may be more sensitive to this loss of meaning than others. Hence it is conceptually important to distinguish between alienation and the consciousness thereof. Note, though, that I am not here appealing to the well-established Hegelian distinction between objective and subjective alienation (Hardimon 1994, 120–21). It is not that there is a fact of the matter about whether or not the objective world is alienating which one can subjectively register or not. Alienation is about how one subjectively perceives the world, yet because subjectivity is very much a part of the material reproduction of society (as feminist social reproduction theorists have long argued (see Gotby 2023)), the state of alienation is also a fact about the material world: alienation is subjective *and* objective. On my view, subjective and objective alienation do not

come apart, yet one can always be more or less conscious of the objectively alienated state of one's own subjectivity.

4 | Depression and the Search for Meaning

Some emotions, like anger, though they also come in more and less concrete forms, usually present themselves as responses to concrete problems. When getting angry, one often has a sense of a concrete obstacle and a feeling that this obstacle (whether it be physical or social) can be overcome through some form of aggressive response. To the depressive, no such practical solutions to their problems appear; they are "walled off from the lifeworld" with its "pantomime gestures [...], which they no longer wish to perform" (Fisher 2014, 59). If anger presents itself as the solution to a problem, we can understand depression as a kind of "crisis of problem-solving." Consider Rahel Jaeggi's descriptions of different levels of problems as they can appear on the level of forms of life:

a sudden period of drought or an unmanageable change in climate is an (empirical) problem that stems from the world; for forms of life it creates a problem with the world. But when [...] such a problem arises as a form-of-life problem, that is, as a shortcoming of the cultural mechanisms for dealing with such problems, then it is a conceptual problem. (2018, 190)

The latter, Jaeggi describes as a "crisis of problem-solving," or a problem with "the interpretive framework of a form of life" (2018, 190). Analogously, consider how anger subjectively reveals an empirical problem, a problem with the world that calls for action, whereas depression reveals a problem in one's relation to the world. One feels the loss of a global interpretative framework that makes action in the world seem meaningful.

The passivity and withdrawal associated with depression are the result of this loss of a meaningful framework for action—but it would be entirely wrong to construe this as a passive state of resignation. A state of depression *is* subjectively perceived as a problem, but not one that can be dealt with through immediate action; rather, it calls for a fundamental change in one's relation to the world. Rather than passivity, depression is often characterized by an intense search for a way of making sense of one's situation. People with depression often report constant rumination on the meanings of their negative feelings and the sources of their problems (this is also termed "recyclic negative thinking" in the psychological literature; see Papageorgiou and Wells 2004; Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, and Lyubomirsky 2008). This search, of course, also does manifest itself in practical actions sometimes—for example, in seeking out help, therapy, or resources for self-help or, tragically, in suicide as a final "effort to escape from self and world" if the search for meaning fails (Baumeister 1990, 90).

Most of the time the constant negative rumination on one's problems is maladaptive on the individual level—Fuchs (2010) describes it as a pathological "hyperreflexivity." Yet, it *can* produce positive changes in some circumstances. While psychologists usually consider it a distorted cognitive pattern, there is

no reason to assume a priori that it cannot produce accurate knowledge of the sources of one's suffering (Graham 1990; Martin 1999). John Stuart Mill famously described how a period of depression had a transformative impact on his view of life. For Mill, the rumination on the causes of his own distress produced insight: it led him to reject the coolly calculative attitude of his father's Benthamite utilitarianism in favor of a view that recognizes the value of aesthetic experience and the "cultivation of the feelings" (Mill 1875, 143). In Mill's case the loss of meaning in the world came from his own overly analytical worldview—"the habit of analysis has a tendency to wear away the feelings" (1875, 137). Once he saw that the source of his alienation was his own worldview, he was able to adjust it accordingly and re-established a meaningful relation to the world.

It is important here to be precise about the epistemological role that depression plays in such cases. Graham (1990), for example, uses Mill as an example to illustrate his view that depression can constitute an apt judgment about the world—however, this interpretation rests on a subtle conflation between the judgment Mill arrives at, namely that his former worldview was lacking, and the depression itself. The depression is in no way constituted by the judgment: Mill is not depressed *about* his hyperrationalist worldview; rather, the world simply appears depressing and hopeless to him. Depression is the painful perception of a problem calling for a solution—this search for answers may produce knowledge, but depression in itself does not constitute knowledge or judgments. Graham further argues that depression can offer insight *only* when we are depressed *about* something specific, but that it does not even make sense to ask about the epistemic value of "non-intentional" depression (1990, 406). But the very example of Mill, which Graham cites, actually shows the opposite. It is an entirely non-intentional and diffuse feeling of dejection—"A drowsy, stifled, unimpassioned grief"⁷—that leads Mill towards his new understanding of life.

Depression, then, is the perception that something is fundamentally wrong with how one finds oneself in the world. Rather than passive resignation to this state, depression is characterized by an often-desperate search for understanding of, and a way out of, this alienated state. The example of Mill showed how experiences of depression sometimes *can* lead to an understanding of what was wrong with one's life. However, what we can learn from Mill is very limited by the fact that his is a highly individualized case. At least in his own description, his depression was entirely caused by his own worldview and not by any problem in the world (because the world, of course, offered someone in Mill's social position every conceivable opportunity and comfort). What, then, if the problem is not in me but in the social world I inhabit? The question remains whether depression, with its tendency towards inwardness, can disclose anything about the external world and its injustices.

5 | Depression and Consciousness Raising

It is not hard to see that *in theory* experiences of depression are open to collective forms of interpretation and meaning-making that can serve to externalize feelings of self-blame and turn personal misery into political problems. In principle, because depression presents itself as what Jaeggi calls a "conceptual

problem," that is, a problem with one's overall interpretative framework, these experiences should lend themselves to such processes which can supply new interpretative frameworks through a bottom-up way of making sense of shared structures of experience. In this section, I will discuss the practice of feminist consciousness-raising (CR) as an example of how a collective process of interpretation of personal feelings like depression can yield knowledge about oppression.⁸ In the next section, I will argue that this process can extend beyond the setting of explicitly organized CR groups.

Some psychologists in the 1970s and 80s started arguing that the radical feminist practice of CR could have beneficial therapeutic effects on those with depression (Weitz 1982; Warren 1976). One empirical research paper from 1982 argues that by analyzing "shared problems in the women's lives as social, rather than personal, problems," CR groups could provide "new external attributions of blame [that] may serve to alleviate the feelings of self-reproach that characterize depression" (Weitz 1982, 235). This suggests that empirically some women *were* using their experiences of depression as a spur to make sense of their problems in new, politicized ways.

Radical feminists, however, were staunchly critical of the idea that CR was therapeutic in the sense of making individuals feel better (Rosenthal 1984). For them, the idea that CR was a way of dealing with individual psychological problems or making "lifestyle" changes was a way of depoliticizing the movement: "There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action" (Hanisch 1970, 76). However, feminists like Carol Hanisch were happy to admit that CR constituted a kind of "political," rather than individual, form of therapy precisely because it externalizes blame: "Can you imagine what would happen if women, blacks, and workers [...] would stop blaming ourselves for our sad situations? It seems to me the whole country needs that kind of political therapy" (1970, 76). The disagreement, thus, is not about whether CR has the effect of allowing people to externalize blame for problems they face in their lives—rather, the reason feminists resisted the label of "therapy" is because it implies that the aim is *personal* transformation when, they insist, the aim is actually collective resistance against oppression. This is an important point. Externalizing blame for personal problems is not important primarily because it makes people feel better, but because this is a way of generating political knowledge: "Our feelings will lead us to our theory, our theory to our action" (Sarachild 1970, 78).

It is not clear how many participants in CR groups had feelings that are aptly described as "depression," but it seems that at least some did. Let us reconstruct how the process of transforming feelings of depression into feminist theory might paradigmatically look from a subjective, phenomenological point of view. Encountering isolated difficulties and obstacles in one's life, as I have explained, typically leads to anger if one has the feeling that obstacles can be removed through some form of assertive action. Yet, if such problems prove intractable, and especially if one's anger about issues is persistently dismissed, as women's anger often is (Frye 1983, 84–94), one might start feeling hopeless and depressed: the world is no longer perceived as affording meaningful possibilities for action, things no longer seem to be under one's control. This leads to a painful feeling that one's

relation to the world is somehow “wrong” and concomitantly not a desire for practical solutions to individual problems but a way “out.” Sharing such experiences and collectively analyzing them through a feminist lens can lead to significant shifts in one’s interpretative framework: rather, say, than seeing unsatisfying interactions between men and women as the expression of individual persons and their faults, one sees them as an expression of an underlying patriarchal system that interlinks with capitalist and racist oppression.

Such a shift in one’s perception of the world can help reduce self-blame, but it does not in itself provide solutions to underlying problems nor does it *necessarily* make people feel better. What it can do, however, is provide new affordances and transform one’s feelings. One participant recounted that “[CR] helped me discover that I was [angry]. I had told myself I felt depressed. Now I have some sense of being angry and can begin to ask myself what I’m angry about and work on the problems” (cited in Warren 1976, 4). The development of a new, explicitly political, interpretative framework in this case leads to perceptions of new possibilities for collective action—though, to be clear, mere knowledge is not enough: for these affordances for collective action to appear viable, the existence of organized social movements that make such action possible is also required (Friedrich 2025, 14). Forming part of a group that understands itself as oppressed by a given social structure not only transforms people’s understanding of the causes of their suffering, but also changes their embodied relationship to their environment and other people through revealing new affordances for collective action.

While personal problems do not become any less intractable, conceiving them as part of structural injustices at least makes it possible to begin thinking about organized responses to this oppression. To the extent that this involves a transformation of one’s perception of the world from one where no meaningful affordances exist to one where aggressive collective action seems possible, this is a transformation of depression into something more akin to anger. Naturally, such consciousness can also lead to new frustrations: collective organizing can be hugely draining and often disappointing leading to exhaustion and burnout (Proctor 2024).⁹ This is precisely why early organizers of feminist CR groups were so keen to emphasize that CR’s primary aim is *not* to make people feel better but to generate political knowledge.

It may seem as if I have now described the process of consciousness raising in such a way that depression plays no valuable epistemological role at all: anger is what reveals injustice and motivates action whereas depression is merely a hindrance to be overcome. This, however, would ignore the important role that depression plays in revealing the need for a new interpretative framework through which to understand one’s relation to the world. In order to bring this point home, let us reconsider the previously mentioned Darwinian theories of depression as an adaptive form of disengagement from the world. Such theories, recall, claim that when our attempts at overcoming obstacles to our goals repeatedly prove futile, depression “helps to disengage us from a hopeless enterprise so that we can consider alternatives” (Nesse and Williams cited in Garson 2022a, 257–58). If this is interpreted as resigning oneself to not bettering one’s position, depression clearly plays a purely conservative role—but as I have argued depression is not really a state of resignation. Instead,

we can see depression as a “way of wrenching ourselves from the established values of our world” as Robert Solomon (1993, 237) puts it: for example, one could withdraw from the project of being a “good woman,” a “good housewife,” a “good employee,” or a “good citizen” in the face of persistent failure. If anger reveals concrete problems in the world that need to be overcome, depression, as argued, reveals a “conceptual problem”; depression tells us to take a step back from the world and reconsider our most basic understanding of our own place in it.

Consider this in relation to Adorno’s well-known opposition to “pure activism” (2008, 47):

a practice that simply frees itself from the shackles of theory and rejects thought as such [...] leads to the production of people who like organizing things and who imagine that once you have organized something, [...] you have achieved something of importance, without pondering for a moment whether such activities have any chance at all of effectively impinging on reality (Adorno 2000, 6).

As long as we remain within our intuitive, pre-reflective understanding of the world, it is likely that our actions simply reproduce reality as it is. The epistemological role of depression is that it makes us “retreat from the dominant realm of practical activity in order to think about something essential” (Adorno 2000, 7). Yet, while Adorno tends to invoke the figure of the solitary philosopher using their powers of reflection to question social reality, the example of CR highlights the power of *collective* forms of reflection and reinterpretation of the world.

All of the above notwithstanding, it is extremely important to stress that coming to an emancipatory political standpoint is by no means a necessary or typical outcome of depression. It is probably fair to say that the vast majority of people who go through depression gain no political insights—and, of course, not every case of depression is the result of oppression in the first place (Mill’s being a case in point). What I am highlighting is the *possibility* of coming to a political standpoint on the basis of experiences of depression. This is, of course, less likely the more severe a case of depression is—but the possibility of consciousness-raising in *some* cases means that even where depression is severe, therapeutic efforts can help people reach a point where it becomes possible for them to externalize blame for their suffering. Actually coming to a political understanding of one’s own misery is a hard-won political achievement—and one that is never accomplished by singular individuals but always through collective processes of analysis and meaning-making. Such processes can literally involve getting together in groups to share experiences and collectively come to new interpretations of them as in feminist CR—but, as I will now go on to discuss, they are not confined to this setting.

6 | Critical Theory as Political Therapy

At this point, an objection might go as follows: it is all well and good to show that *in theory* depression can lead to political consciousness, but how likely is this to happen? How

likely are depressed people to go out and join radical feminist consciousness-raising groups? The point of discussing feminist CR above was not that such groups are the only or even a typical way that people come to understand their suffering as political. Rather, I focused on CR simply because it provides an especially clear example of how this process *can* take place. In reality, a CR group is simply a more organized and declaredly political microcosm of the kind of processes of interpretation of our experience that take place constantly. Any act of interpretation of one's feelings is already in a sense collective because reliant on collective hermeneutic resources—what is special about CR groups is that they intervene in these interpretative processes in a reflexive and explicitly emancipatory way. What I want to suggest now is that a core task of critical theory is precisely to intervene in how we interpret our own negative emotions by supplying frameworks for making sense of experiences like depression with an emancipatory aim. The following are but a few initial remarks on how critical theory can take on this task—a more complete account would require at least an entire paper of its own.

Depression serves to make particularly clear something which is, arguably, true of all emotions: our feelings are not immediately accessible to us in any raw form but always rely on the mediation of shared interpretative resources. Depression makes this very clear not only because the dominant understandings of this feeling have historically shifted widely, from religious sin to biochemical imbalance (Cvetkovich 2012, 85–114; see also Garson 2022a; Lawlor 2012), but also because, on the subjective level, it often presents itself as a diffuse feeling that is hard to articulate and to understand. Hence the great demand for resources, from self-help literature to psychotherapy, which help people to interpret their feelings of depression. If other feelings, like anger, often seem much more immediately transparent to us, this is not, in fact, because they rely any less on shared interpretative frameworks, but simply because they often rely on shared meanings in a less reflexive way (think of arguments about how reactionary forms of anger at immigrants or minorities may actually be “misdirected” forms of anger about one's material circumstances (Jaeggi 2022; Emerick and Yap 2023)). All feelings are understood from within a certain interpretative framework and reinterpretations are always possible.

Our own feelings are never fully “our own” in the sense of being totally and objectively knowable through introspection alone; as Lauren Berlant puts it, “psychic pain experienced by subordinated populations” therefore cannot be treated “as prelapsarian knowledge or a condensed comprehensive social theory” (2002, 127; see also Fraser and Honneth 2003, 204). Arriving at political knowledge on the basis of emotions is a political *achievement* (see Friedrich 2025)—and it is one that critical theory should aim to contribute to.

How? Adorno and other theorists want critical theory to “lend a voice to suffering” (Adorno 1973, 17; Renault 2010; 2009; McNay 2012), but usually it is left rather vague how exactly theory can be said to do so. My suggestion is that ideally critical theory can play the part of a kind of “political therapy” in the sense that Carol Hanisch (1970, 76) used to describe CR. This means that theory, like CR, should take the shape of a *dialogic* process where negative social experiences are interpreted, analyzed, and ultimately transformed into “effective antagonisms” (to use Mark

Fisher's (2009, 84) expression). “Dialogic” in this case means that the perspectives of the addressees of the theory need to feed into the theoretical work, but also that, in order to be successful, the theory actually needs to gain *uptake* among those whose experiences it purports to explain.

On this approach, suffering plays three distinct roles in critical theory (which are not usually disambiguated in the existing literature):

1. Suffering constitutes the motivation for critical reflection and the *raison d'être* of critical theory: “Normative reflection arises from hearing a cry of suffering or distress, or feeling distress oneself” (Young 1990, 5).¹⁰
2. Suffering constitutes an important part of the subject matter of critical theory. Our theories need to make visible and offer causal explanations for widespread experiences of distress (Freyaen 2019; Renault 2010; Sik 2022).
3. Suffering constitutes the motivation for subjects to engage with critical theory and give it uptake. For critical theory to have any effect, someone must actually make use of it to interpret their own social experiences, and the reason for people to do so is presumably that they feel discontent and the accompanying desire to make sense of what it is that is wrong with their world.

While the first two roles of suffering have been noted many times, the third is generally ignored¹¹—but it is a key condition if critical theory is to be more than an ineffectual, monological description of the social. Looking at depression specifically makes the question of “lending a voice to suffering” less abstract and serves to highlight both the importance and the possibility of writing critical theory that actually gains meaningful uptake. After all, the popularity of various types of therapy as well as self-help literature shows that there is clearly a felt need among people with depression for resources that help make sense of a harrowing and frequently disorienting experience. In this context, there is, I believe, a real opportunity for critical theorists to make interventions in the public discourse on depression and provide meaningful alternatives to existing individualizing and depoliticizing narratives. To some extent, this is already being done: examples include Ann Cvetkovich's partly autobiographical, partly theoretical book *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012), some of the late Mark Fisher's (2014; 2009; 2012) writings on depression which received wide uptake, as well as Micha Frazer-Carroll's (2023) recent book on the politics of mental health. While these three authors differ considerably in their style and theoretical approaches, they all try to make public interventions into the way personal experiences of distress are interpreted. As such, they provide models for what a critical theory as a kind of “political therapy” can look like.

7 | Conclusion

I started this paper with Adorno's claim that “[a]ll pain and all negativity [are] the moving forces of dialectical thinking” (1973, 202). In the context of depression this statement might initially seem not only characteristically hyperbolic but also plainly misguided. Can this painful experience with all its loss of hope

and meaning really be said to be a “moving force of dialectical thinking”? I have argued that in a sense Adorno is right. Rather than a state of indifferent resignation, depression is a painful awareness of one’s own alienation that tends to induce intense rumination on one’s relation to the world. There is certainly no guarantee that the struggle to make sense of experiences of depression takes an emancipatory (let alone “dialectical”) shape. But then again, no other painful emotional experiences can provide that guarantee. What I have argued is that depression *can* be a spur to look for radically different interpretations of one’s relation to the social world and, if one’s social and hermeneutic environment enables it, this can lead one to new understandings of how one’s alienation is caused by injustice and oppression.

If an emotion like anger, as many philosophers and social theorists have argued, is often politically useful because it reveals concrete injustices and motivates resistance, depression, in a sense, reveals problems that run deeper.¹² It calls not for immediate action but for a fundamental change in one’s relation to the world. In the best case, we can find such a change through a kind of “paradigm shift” in our understanding of the social world (see Haslanger 2021, 43). I may realize, for example, that my attempts to find fulfillment by being a successful employee were never going to lead anywhere because wage labor is inherently exploitative and alienating, and I may instead find new opportunities for meaningful action by organizing with my co-workers in a union. If critical theorists want to deliver on their promise of “lending a voice to suffering,” then engaging concretely with experiences like depression and providing the hermeneutical resources to reinterpret them as political problems in this way would be a promising start.

To be clear, political consciousness is not going to *cure* depression. While it can be cathartic to come to an understanding of the political sources of one’s oppression (Cattien 2024), this alone will not remove the sources of alienation and suffering. Nevertheless, understanding one’s suffering as a political problem is a necessary condition for political action, and given the prevalence of depression and other mental health issues, neither critical theorists nor activists can afford to ignore them. This is why, to quote Carol Hanisch’s (1970, 76) words again, we may all “need [a] kind of political therapy.”

Acknowledgments

For their wonderful feedback and helpful discussion, I would like to thank Joe Ward, Theo Hickfang, Lois McNay, and participants in the Oxford Work in Progress in Political Theory (OWIPT) Workshop.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

¹ Critics of the biomedical view sometimes conflate medicalization with individualization. For example, Read and Moncrieff write that “[c]lassifying anxiety, depression and other emotional reactions as mental diseases or disorders obscures the relation between our moods and our circumstances [and] leads society to believe that social structures are unchangeable” (2022, 1407). If this rings true, it is because, as a

matter of fact, we tend to individualize medical problems, not because there is any fundamental incompatibility between seeing something as a medical *and* social-structural problem.

² Although it should be noted that the evidence, even in laboratory experiments, is rather conflicting and could be interpreted differently (Allan, Siegel, and Hannah 2007).

³ For a general overview of how accounts of mental illness have historically oscillated between explanations in terms of dysfunction and in terms of strategy, see Garson (2022a).

⁴ For a general discussion and critique of the notion that intellectuals are “giving voice” to subaltern subjects, see Spivak (2010).

⁵ Fuchs, for example, describes depression as a “disorder of intercorporeality and interaffectivity” (Fuchs 2013, 219; see also Doerr-Zegers et al. 2017; Fuchs and Schlimme 2009, 572–73).

⁶ I agree with Ehrenberg and others that the neoliberal promotion of ideals of self-entrepreneurship are likely to foster high levels of depression, but this is a contingent, not a necessary relationship. High levels of feelings of individual responsibility will make people fall into depression more easily when their real experiences of powerlessness clash with these expectations, yet this is not the *only* cause of depression (Ehrenberg 2010). See also Honneth (2004).

⁷ These are words from a Coleridge poem which Mill cites to describe his feelings (Mill 1875, 134).

⁸ For a broader discussion of the political epistemology of CR, see Haslanger (2021). In my view, Haslanger neglects the role of feelings in this process which is something feminist organizers of CR groups emphasized.

⁹ As one anonymous reviewer pointed out to me, the process of coming to political consciousness, participating in collective action, but failing to achieve one’s goals can lead to a new state of depression caused by the perception that all action is futile. This is, of course, a risk that can hardly be mitigated given the immense obstacles that stand in the way of actually achieving emancipation. At the very least, however, we can say that *this* state of depression at least relies on a correct understanding of its own causes and, insofar as the failures are understood as a result of the objective difficulty of social change rather than as a personal shortcoming, it will be free of self-blame.

¹⁰ In discussions of critical theory and suffering, it is often assumed that is the “other” who suffers, but Young’s addition that the suffering could be felt by the theorist themselves is important. Ann Cvetkovich’s work on depression, which combines autobiography with critical social theorizing, is an excellent example (Cvetkovich 2012).

¹¹ One exception is Robin Celikates who includes some cursory discussion of this in his discussion of the parallels between critical theory and psychoanalysis, for example quoting Freud that the “primary motive force in the therapy is the patient’s suffering and the wish to be cured that arises from it” (Celikates 2018, 151).

¹² This is not meant to imply that depression tends to reveal injustices that are graver than those revealed by anger—just that the problem resides on a different level conceptually.

References

- Adler-Bolton, B., and A. Vierkant. 2022. *Health Communism*. Verso.
- Adorno, T W. 1973. *Negative Dialectics*. Routledge.
- Adorno, T W. 2000. *Problems of Moral Philosophy*. Polity.
- Adorno, T W. 2008. *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*. Polity.
- Ahmed, S. 2004. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Allan, L G., S. Siegel, and S. Hannah. 2007. “The Sad Truth About Depressive Realism.” *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* 60, no. 3: 482–495.

- Allen, J., R. Balfour, R. Bell, and M. Marmot. 2014. "Social Determinants of Mental Health." *International Review of Psychiatry* 26, no. 4: 392–407.
- Alloy, L. B., and L. Y. Abramson. 1979. "Judgment of Contingency in Depressed and Nondepressed Students: Sadder but Wiser?" *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 108, no. 4: 441–485.
- American Psychiatric Association. 2013. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5*. 5th ed. American Psychiatric Publishing.
- Andrews, J. 2009. "Depression Today, or New Maladies of the Economy." *Social Text* 27, no. 2: 167–173.
- Baumeister, R. E. 1990. "Suicide as Escape From Self." *Psychological Review* 97, no. 1: 90–113.
- Beck, A. T., A. J. Rush, B. F. Shaw, and G. Emery. 1979. *Cognitive Therapy of Depression*. The Guilford Press.
- Benazzi, F. 2006. "Various Forms of Depression." *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 8, no. 2: 151–161.
- Berlant, L. 2002. "The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, and Politics." In *Left Legalism/Left Critique*, edited by W. Brown and J. Halley, 105–133. Duke University Press.
- Brown, W. 1999. "Resisting Left Melancholia." *Boundary 2* 26, no. 3: 19–27.
- Brown, W., and J. Halley. 2002. "Introduction." In *Left Legalism/Left Critique*, edited by W. Brown and J. Halley, 1–37. Duke University Press.
- Cattien, J. 2024. "Neurotic Situations: A Critical Dialogue Between Freud and Fanon." *Political Theory* 52, no. 6: 956–980. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00905917241239910>.
- Celikates, R. 2018. *Critique as Social Practice: Critical Theory and Social Self-Understanding*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Chapman, R. 2023. "A Critique of Critical Psychiatry." *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology* 30, no. 2: 103–119.
- Chappell, Z. 2023. "In Defence of the Concept of Mental Illness." *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 94: 77–102.
- Chentsova-Dutton, Y. E., and J. L. Tsai. 2009. "Understanding Depression Across Cultures." In *Handbook of Depression*, edited by I. H. Gotlib and C. L. Hammen, 2nd ed., 363–385. The Guilford Press.
- Cherry, M. 2018. "Love, Anger, and Racial Injustice." In *The Routledge Handbook of Love in Philosophy*, edited by A. M. Martin, 157–168. Routledge.
- Cherry, M. 2021. *The Case for Rage: Why Anger Is Essential to Anti-Racist Struggle*. Oxford University Press.
- Cixous, H., and C. Clément. 1986. *The Newly Born Woman*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Cooper, D. 1978. *The Language of Madness*. Allen Lane.
- Cvetkovich, A. 2012. *Depression: a Public Feeling*. Duke University Press.
- Doerr-Zegers, O., L. Irrazábal, A. Mundt, and V. Palette. 2017. "Disturbances of Embodiment as Core Phenomena of Depression in Clinical Practice." *Psychopathology* 50, no. 4: 273–281.
- Dyson, E. 2024. "From Critical Theory to Critical Therapy: Towards a Permanent Psycho-Political Revolution between Subjective and Objective Disalienation." *Philosophy and Social Criticism*. Online first. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01914537241284541>.
- Ehrenberg, A. 2010. *The Weariness of the Self*. McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Emerick, B., and A. Yap. 2023. "Betrayed Expectations: Misdirected Anger and the Preservation of Ideology." *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 24, no. 3: 352–370.
- Engels, F. 1973. *The Conditions of the Working-Class in England*. Progress Publishers.
- Fischer, C. 2018. "Gender and the Politics of Shame: A Twenty-First-Century Feminist Shame Theory." *Hypatia* 33, no. 3: 371–383.
- Fisher, M. 2009. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Zero Books.
- Fisher, M. 2012. "Why Mental Health Is a Political Issue." *The Guardian*, July 16. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jul/16/mental-health-political-issue>.
- Fisher, M. 2014. *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. Zero Books.
- Fraser, N., and A. Honneth. 2003. *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*. Verso.
- Frazer-Carroll, M. 2023. *Mad World: The Politics of Mental Health*. Pluto Press.
- Freyenhagen, F. 2019. "Critical Theory and Social Pathology." In *The Routledge Companion to the Frankfurt School*, edited by P. E. Gordon, E. Hammer, and A. Honneth, 410–423. Routledge.
- Friedrich, J. 2025. "The Bellwether of Oppression: Anger, Critique, and Resistance." *Hypatia*, 40, no. 1: 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.57>.
- Frye, M. 1983. *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. Crossing Press.
- Fuchs, T. 2010. "The Psychopathology of Hyperreflexivity." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 24, no. 3: 239–255.
- Fuchs, T. 2013. "Depression, Intercorporeality, and Interaffectivity." *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 20, no. 7–8: 219–238.
- Fuchs, T., and J. E. Schlimme. 2009. "Embodiment and Psychopathology: A Phenomenological Perspective." *Current Opinion in Psychiatry* 22: 570–575.
- Fusar-Poli, P., A. Estradé, G. Stanghellini, et al. 2023. "The Lived Experience of Depression: A Bottom-Up Review Co-Written by Experts by Experience and Academics." *World Psychiatry* 22: 352–365.
- Garson, J. 2022a. *Madness: A Philosophical Exploration*. 1st ed. Oxford University Press.
- Garson, J. 2022b. "The Helpful Delusion." *Aeon*, November 14. <https://aeon.co/essays/evidence-grows-that-mental-illness-is-more-than-dysfunction>.
- Gibson, J. J. 2015. *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Psychology Press.
- Gilligan, C. 1990. *Joining the Resistance: Psychology, Politics, Girls, and Women*. The Tanner Lectures on Human Values. https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_resources/documents/a-to-z/g/Gilligan_91.pdf.
- Gotby, A. 2023. *They Call It Love: The Politics of Emotional Life*. Verso.
- Graham, G. 1990. "Melancholic Epistemology." *Synthese* 82, no. 3: 399–422.
- Hanisch, C. 1970. "The Personal Is Political." In *Women's Liberation: Notes from the Second Year*, edited by S. Firestone, and A. Koedt, 76–78. Radical Feminism.
- Hardimon, M. O. 1994. *Hegel's Social Philosophy: The Project of Reconciliation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Haslanger, S. 2021. "Political Epistemology and Social Critique." In *Oxford Studies in Political Philosophy Volume 7*, edited by D. Sobel, P. Vallentyne, and S. Wall, 23–65. Oxford University Press.
- Healy, D. 2015. "Serotonin and Depression." *BMJ* 350: h1771.
- Hedva, J. 2022. "Sick Woman Theory." *Topical Cream*, April 1. <https://www.topicalcream.org/features/sick-woman-theory/>.
- Honneth, A. 2004. "Organized Self-Realization: Some Paradoxes of Individualization." *European Journal of Social Theory* 7, no. 4: 463–478.
- Huber, J. 2023. "Hope From Despair." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 31, no. 1: 80–101.
- Jaeggi, R. 2014. *Alienation*. Edited by F. Neuhauser. Columbia University Press.
- Jaeggi, R. 2018. *Critique of Forms of Life*. The Belknap Press.
- Jaeggi, R. 2022. "Modes of Regression: The Case of Ressentiment." *Critical Times* 5, no. 3: 501–537.

- Kim, J. Y. 2016. "Racial Emotions and the Feeling of Equality." *University of Colorado Law Review* 87: 437–500.
- Klinger, E. 1975. "Consequences of Commitment to and Disengagement From Incentives." *Psychological Review* 82, no. 1: 1–25.
- Krasznahorkai, L. 2016. *The Melancholy of Resistance*. Tuskar Rock Press.
- Lawlor, C. 2012. *From Melancholia to Prozac: A History of Depression*. Oxford University Press.
- Lorde, A. 2019. *Sister Outsider*. Penguin Classics.
- MacLachlan, A. 2010. "Unreasonable Resentments." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 41, no. 4: 422–441.
- Marmot, M. 2010. 'Fair Society, Healthy Lives: The Marmot Review'. *Institute of Health Equity*. <https://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/fair-society-healthy-lives-the-marmot-review/fair-society-healthy-lives-full-report-pdf.pdf>.
- Marmot, M. 2017. "Social Justice, Epidemiology and Health Inequalities." *European Journal of Epidemiology* 32, no. 7: 537–546.
- Martin, M. W. 1999. "Depression: Illness, Insight, and Identity." *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology* 6, no. 4: 271–286.
- McNay, L. 2010. "Feminism and Post-Identity Politics: The Problem of Agency." *Constellations* 17, no. 4: 512–525.
- McNay, L. 2012. "Suffering, Silence and Social Weightlessness: Honneth and Bourdieu on Embodiment and Power." In *Embodied Selves*, edited by S. Gonzalez-Arnal, G. Jagger, and K. Lennon, 230–248. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mill, J. S. 1875. *Autobiography*. Henry Holt and Company.
- Moi, T. 1981. "Representation of Patriarchy: Sexuality and Epistemology in Freud's 'Dora'." *Feminist Review* 9: 60–74.
- Moncrieff, J., R. E. Cooper, T. Stockmann, S. Amendola, M. P. Hengartner, and M. A. Horowitz. 2022. "The Serotonin Theory of Depression: A Systematic Umbrella Review of the Evidence." *Molecular Psychiatry* 28: 3243–3256. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41380-022-01661-0>.
- Nolen-Hoeksema, S., B. E. Wisco, and S. Lyubomirsky. 2008. "Rethinking Rumination." *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3, no. 5: 400–424.
- Nussbaum, M. C. 2004. *Hiding From Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*. Princeton University Press.
- Papageorgiou, C., and A. Wells, eds. 2004. *Depressive Rumination: Nature, Theory and Treatment*. Wiley.
- Proctor, H. 2024. *Burnout: The Emotional Experience of Political Defeat*. Verso.
- Ramas, M. 1985. "Freud's Dora, Dora's Hysteria." In *In Dora's Case: Freud–Hysteria–Feminism*, edited by C. Bernheimer and C. Kahane, 149–180. Columbia University Press.
- Ratcliffe, M. 2015. *Experiences of Depression: a Study in Phenomenology*. Oxford University Press.
- Read, J., and J. Moncrieff. 2022. "Depression: Why Drugs and Electricity Are Not the Answer." *Psychological Medicine* 52, no. 8: 1401–1410.
- Renault, E. 2009. "The Political Philosophy of Social Suffering." In *New Waves in Political Philosophy*, edited by B. de Bruin and C. F. Zurn, 158–176. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Renault, E. 2010. "A Critical Theory of Social Suffering." *Critical Horizons* 11, no. 2: 221–241.
- Rose, N. 2019. *Our Psychiatric Future: The Politics of Mental Health*. Polity.
- Rose, N. 2020. "Against 'Mental Health'." *BioSocieties* 15: 487–490.
- Rosenthal, N. B. 1984. "Consciousness Raising: From Revolution to Re-Evaluation." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 8, no. 4: 309–326.
- Sarachild, K. 1970. "A Program for Feminist 'Consciousness Raising'." In *Women's Liberation: Notes from the Second Year*, edited by S. Firestone and A. Koedt, 76–78. Radical Feminism.
- Sartre, J.-P. 2014. *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*. Routledge.
- Schopenhauer, A. 1913. *Studies in Pessimism: A Series of Essays by Arthur Schopenhauer*. Edited by T. B. Saunders. 9th ed. George Allen & Company.
- Sik, D. 2022. *Empty Suffering: A Social Phenomenology of Depression, Anxiety and Addiction*. Routledge.
- Solomon, R. C. 1993. *The Passions: Emotions and the Meaning of Life*. Hackett Publishing Company.
- Spelman, E. V. 1989. "Anger and Insubordination." In *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, edited by A. Garry and M. Pearsall, 263–273. Unwin Hyman.
- Spivak, G. C. 2010. "Can the Subaltern Speak?." In *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, edited by R. C. Morris. Columbia University Press.
- Srinivasan, A. 2018. "The Aptness of Anger." *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 26, no. 2: 123–144.
- Stanghellini, G. 2023. "The Heterogeneity of Depressions: a Phenomenological Viewpoint." *European Psychiatry* 66, no. 1: e32.
- Warren, L. W. 1976. "The Therapeutic Status of Consciousness-Raising Groups." *Professional Psychology* 7, no. 2: 132–140.
- Weitz, R. 1982. "Feminist Consciousness Raising, Self-Concept, and Depression." *Sex Roles* 8, no. 3: 231–241.
- World Health Organization. 2017. *Depression and Other Common Mental Disorders: Global Health Estimates*. World Health Organization. <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/254610/WHO-MSD-MER-2017.2-eng.pdf?ts>.
- Young, I. M. 1990. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton University Press.