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A SOCIAL PATHOLOGY OF REASON

On the Intellectual Legacy of Critical Theory

With the turn of the new century, Critical Theory appears to have become an intellectual artifact. This superficial dividing point alone seems to greatly increase the intellectual gap separating us from the theoretical beginnings of the Frankfurt School. Just as the names of authors who were for its founders still vividly alive suddenly sound as if they come from far away, so, too, the theoretical challenges from which the members of the school had won their insights threaten to fall into oblivion. Today a younger generation carries on the work of social criticism without having much more than a nostalgic memory of the heroic years of Western Marxism. Indeed, the last time the writings of Herbert Marcuse and Max Horkheimer were read as contemporary works already lies over thirty years in the past. There is an atmosphere of the outdated and antiquated, of the irretrievably lost, which surrounds the grand historical and philosophical ideas of Critical Theory, ideas for which there no longer seems to be any kind of resonance within the experience of the accelerating present. The great chasm that separates us from our predecessors must be comparable to that which separated the first generation of the telephone and movie theater from the last representatives of German Idealism. The same irritated astonishment with which Walter Benjamin or Siegfried Kracauer may have looked at the photo of the late Friedrich Schelling must today overcome a

young student who, on her computer, stumbles across a photo of the young Horkheimer, posing in a bourgeois Wilhelmine interior.

However much the traces of lost experiences are reflected in the physiognomy of now-forgotten faces, so much greater are the presuppositions of the past age reflected in its intellectual premises and constructions. Critical Theory, whose intellectual horizon was decisively formed in the appropriation of European intellectual history from Hegel to Freud, still relies on the possibility of viewing history with reason as its guiding thread. But there may be no other aspect of Critical Theory more foreign to today's generation, which has grown up conscious of cultural plurality and of the end of "grand narratives," than social criticism founded on this sort of philosophy of history. The idea of a historically effective reason, which all the representatives of the Frankfurt School from Horkheimer to Jürgen Habermas firmly endorsed, will be incomprehensible if one can no longer recognize the unity of a single rationality in the diversity of established convictions. And the more far-reaching idea that the progress of reason is blocked or interrupted by the capitalistic organization of society will only trigger astonishment, since capitalism can no longer be seen as a unified system of social reason. Though thirty-five years ago, starting from the idea of an "emancipatory interest," Habermas once again tried to ground the idea of emancipation from control and oppression in the history of the species, today he concedes that "such a form of argumentation belongs 'unambiguously' to the past."

The political changes of the past several decades have not been without influence on the status of social criticism. Consciousness of a plurality of cultures and the experience of a variety of different social emancipation movements have significantly lowered expectations of what criticism ought to be and should be capable of. Generally speaking, there is prevalent today a liberal conception of justice that uses criteria for the normative identification of social injustice without the desire to further explicate the institutional framework of injustice by embedding it within a particular type of society. Where such a procedure is felt to be insufficient, appeals are made to models of social criticism that are constructed in the

spirit of Michel Foucault's genealogical method or in the style of Michael Walzer's critical hermeneutics.² In all these cases, however, criticism is understood as nothing more than a reflective form of rationality that is supposed to be anchored in the historical process itself.

Critical Theory, in contrast—and in a way that may be unique to it—insists on a mediation of theory and history in a concept of socially effective rationality. That is, the historical past should be understood from a practical point of view: as a process of development whose pathological deformation by capitalism may be overcome only by initiating a process of enlightenment among those involved. It is this working model of the intertwining of theory and history that grounds the unity of Critical Theory, despite its variety of voices. Whether in its positive form with the early Horkheimer, Marcuse, or Habermas or in its negative form with Theodor Adorno or Benjamin, one finds the same idea forming the background of each of the different projects—namely, that social relationships distort the historical process of development in a way that one can only practically remedy. Designating the legacy of Critical Theory for the new century would necessarily involve recovering from the idea of a social pathology of reason an explosive charge that can still be touched off today. Against the tendency to reduce social criticism to a project of normative, situational, or local opinion, one must clarify the context in which social criticism stands side by side with the demands of a historically evolved reason.

In what follows, I take a first step in that direction. First, I detail the ethical core contained in Critical Theory's idea of a socially deficient rationality. Second, I outline how capitalism can be understood as a cause of such a deformation of social rationality. Third and last, I establish the connection of practice to the goal of overcoming the social suffering caused by deficient rationality. Each of these three stages involves finding a new language that can make clear in present terms what Critical Theory intended in the past. Still, I often have to content myself here merely with suggesting lines of thought that would have to be pursued to bring the arguments of earlier Critical Theory up to date.

Even if it may be difficult to discover a systematic unity in the many forms of Critical Theory, taking the notion of the negativity of social theory as our point of departure will serve us well in establishing a first point of common interest.³ Not only the members of the inner circle but also those on the periphery of the Institute for Social Research perceive the societal situation on which they want to have an effect as being in a state of social negativity.⁴ Moreover, there is widespread agreement that the concept of negativity should not be restricted in a narrow way to offences committed against principles of social justice but, rather, should be extended more broadly to violations of the conditions for a good or successful life.⁵ All of the expressions that the members of the circle use to characterize the given state of society arise from a social-theoretical vocabulary grounded in the basic distinction between “pathological” and “intact, non-pathological” relations. Horkheimer first speaks of the “irrational organization” of society; Adorno speaks later of the “administered world”; Marcuse uses such concepts as “one-dimensional society” and “repressive tolerance”; and Habermas, finally, uses the formula of the “colonization of the social life-world.”⁶

Such formulations always normatively presuppose an “intact” state of social relations in which all the members are provided an opportunity for successful self-actualization. But what is specifically meant by this terminology is not sufficiently explained by merely pointing out the fact that it contrasts with the language of social injustice in moral philosophy. Rather, the distinctiveness of the expressions only becomes manifest when the obscure connection taken to exist between the social pathology and defective rationality comes to light. All the authors mentioned above assume that the cause of the negative state of society is to be found in a deficit in social rationality. They maintain an internal connection between pathological relationships and the condition of social rationality, which explains their interest in the historical process of the actualization of reason. Any attempt to make the tradition of Critical Theory

fruitful for the present must thus begin with the task of bringing this conceptual connection up to date, one grounded in an ethical idea whose roots are in the philosophy of Hegel.

The thesis that social pathologies are to be understood as a result of deficient rationality is ultimately indebted to Hegel's political philosophy. He begins his *Philosophy of Right* with the supposition that a vast number of trends toward a loss of meaning manifested themselves in his time, tendencies that could be explained only by the insufficient appropriation of an "objectively" already possible reason.⁷ The assumption behind Hegel's diagnosis of his own time lies in a comprehensive conception of reason in which he establishes a connection between historical progress and ethics. Reason unfolds in the historical process by re-creating universal "ethical" institutions at each new stage; by taking these institutions into account, individuals are able to design their lives according to socially acknowledged aims and thus to experience life as meaningful. Whoever does not let such objective ends of reason influence his or her life will suffer from the consequences of "indeterminacy" and will develop symptoms of disorientation. If one transports this ethical insight into the framework of the social processes of an entire society, Hegel's diagnosis of his time basic to his *Philosophy of Right* emerges in outline form. Hegel saw the outbreak of dominant systems of thought and ideologies in his own society that, by preventing subjects from perceiving an ethical life that was already established, gave rise to widespread symptoms of the loss of meaning. In light of this diagnosis, Hegel was convinced that social pathologies were to be understood as the result of the inability of society to properly express the rational potential already inherent in its institutions, practices, and everyday routines.

When this view is detached from the particular context in which it is embedded in Hegel, it amounts to the general thesis that each successful form of society is possible only through the maintenance of its most highly developed standard of rationality. According to Hegel, this claimed connection is justified on the basis of the ethical premise that it is only each instance of the rational universal that can provide the members of society with the orientation according

to which they can meaningfully direct their lives. And this fundamental conviction must still be at work, when, despite their different approaches, critical theorists all claim that it is a lack of social rationality that causes the pathology of capitalist society. Without this ethical assumption, already found implicitly in Hegel, one cannot justify establishing such a connection. The members of society must agree that leading a successful, undistorted life together is only possible if they all orient themselves according to principles or institutions that they can understand as rational ends for self-actualization. Any deviation from the ideal outlined here must lead to a social pathology insofar as subjects are recognizably suffering from a loss of universal, communal ends.

Nevertheless, this ethical core of the initial hypothesis, common to the various projects of Critical Theory, remains for the most part overlaid by anthropological premises. The rational universal that is supposed to vouchsafe an “intact” form of social life is understood as the potential for an invariant mode of human activity. Horkheimer’s thought contains such an element in his conception of work, according to which the human mastery of nature is directed “immanently” toward the goal of a social condition in which individual contributions transparently and mutually complement one another.⁸ One might then say with Marx that the emergence of social pathology depends on the fact that the actual organization of society falls short of the standards of rationality that are already embodied in the forces of production. In the case of Marcuse, the authority of a rational universal is shifted increasingly in his later writings to the sphere of aesthetic practice, which appears as the medium of social integration in which subjects can satisfy their social needs in noncoerced cooperation.⁹ Here, then, the social pathology sets in at that moment in which the organization of society begins to suppress the rational potential that is at home in the power of the imagination anchored in the lifeworld. Finally, Habermas secures the Hegelian idea of a rational universal by means of the concept of communicative agreement, whose idealizing presuppositions are supposed to meet the concern that the potential of discursive rationality regains universal acceptance at every new stage of social development. We

can speak therefore of a social pathology as soon as the symbolic reproduction of society is no longer subjected to those standards of rationality which are inherent in the most highly developed form of linguistic understanding.¹⁰

In all these approaches to Critical Theory, the same Hegelian idea—namely, that a rational universal is always required for the possibility of fulfilled self-actualization within society—is continually incorporated, only in different characterizations of the original human practice of action. Just as with Horkheimer’s concept of human work or with Marcuse’s idea of an aesthetic life, Habermas’s concept of communicative understanding above all serves the aim of fixing the form of reason whose developed shape provides the medium for both a rational and a satisfying integration of society. It is with reference to such an authority of rational practice that critical theorists can analyze society according to a theory of reason qua diagnosis of social pathologies. Deviations from the ideal that would be achieved with the social actualization of the rational universal can be described as social pathologies since they must accompany a regrettable loss of prospects for intersubjective self-actualization.

In the path of intellectual development from Horkheimer to Habermas the idea of a universal rationality changed, of course, not only in regard to its content but also in regard to its methodological form. While Horkheimer combines with his concept of work the notion of a rational potential that is to serve subjects directly as an aim of cooperative self-actualization in a “community of free human beings,”¹¹ Habermas understands the idea of communicative understanding no longer as a rational aim but only as the rational form of a successful mode of socialization. In Habermas, the idea that only a fully realized rationality guarantees a successful community of the members of society is radically proceduralized insofar as the rationality that gives rise to action oriented toward understanding is now supposed to ensure only the conditions for, and no longer the fulfillment of, autonomous self-actualization.¹² Yet this formulation cannot obscure the fact that an ethical idea hides beneath anthropological ways of speaking about an original mode of human action. The concept of communicative action, whose rationality imposes on

human beings an invariant constraint, still indirectly contains the idea of a successful social life that one finds directly in Horkheimer's concept of work and Marcuse's concept of aesthetic practice.

The representatives of Critical Theory hold with Hegel the conviction that the self-actualization of the individual is only successful when it is interwoven in its aims—by means of generally accepted principles or ends—with the self-actualization of all the other members of society. Indeed, one might even claim that the idea of a rational universal contains the concept of a common good, which the members of a society must have rationally agreed on in order to be able to relate their individual freedoms to one another cooperatively. The different models of practice that Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Habermas offer, then, are all only representatives of that one thought, according to which the socialization of human beings can only be successful under conditions of cooperative freedom. However the particulars of the anthropological ideas may be sorted out, they ultimately stand for an ethical idea that places the utmost value on a form of common practice in which subjects can achieve cooperative self-actualization.¹³

Even those writings that appear to have been farthest from Critical Theory's fundamental ethical ideas reflect this first premise. In *Minima Moralia*, for example, Adorno vehemently denies any possibility of a universal moral theory by arguing that the "damages" of social life have already led to such fragmentation of individual conduct that orientation in terms of comprehensive principles is no longer possible. Instead, his "reflections" are supposed to show only in aphoristic, isolated cases which ethical and intellectual virtues remain that might resist instrumental demands by stubbornly insisting on nonpurposive activity. But the standards by which Adorno measures the harm done to the form of societal interaction betray his retention of the ideal of a cooperative self-actualization in which the freedom of the individual makes possible that of the other. In various places in the text, he explains even the historical genesis of social damage by direct reference to the loss of "good universal."¹⁴ Moreover, Adorno takes as basic a concept of practice that, following Hegel's example, ties ethical principles to the presupposition of rationality. Only where common modes of action are established

that individuals can accept as rational goals of self-actualization can there be a question of a successful form of socialization. The fact that Adorno at the same time has in mind above all the model of “nonpurposive” or “disinterested” communication—for which he takes unselfish, unalloyed giving or love as his paradigmatic examples¹⁵—follows from the quasi-aesthetic premise he shares with Marcuse: the forms of mutual action that are best suited to self-actualization are those in which human nature achieves noncoerced expression by fulfilling sensuous needs through interplay with the other.

The idea of the rational universal of cooperative self-actualization that all the members of the Frankfurt School fundamentally share is as critical of liberalism as it is of any intellectual tradition today that one might call “communitarian.” While a certain approximation to liberal doctrines is reflected in the young Habermas because of the increasing weight he gives to the legal autonomy of individuals, he does not go as far as to say that there are no differences between the social-ontological premises of liberalism and those of Critical Theory. Instead, he continues to hold the conviction (as did Marcuse, Horkheimer, and Adorno) that the actualization of individual freedom is tied to the assumption of a common practice that is more than just the result of the coordination of individual interests. All the concepts of rational practice that find application in Critical Theory are tailored according to their intended use to actions whose implementation requires a higher degree of intersubjective agreement than liberalism allows. To be able to cooperate on an equal basis, to interact aesthetically, and to reach agreements in a noncoerced manner, a shared conviction is required that each of these activities is of an importance that justifies, if necessary, the neglect of individual interests. To this extent, Critical Theory presupposes a normative ideal of society that is incompatible with the individualistic premises of the liberal tradition. Orientation in terms of the idea of cooperative self-actualization includes, instead, the notion that, as long as subjects are not able to achieve a successful social life, they have not recognized the common core of convictions regarding values that lie behind their respective individual interests. The idea of a “community of free human beings” that Horkheimer

formulates in his essay “Traditional and Critical Theory”¹⁶ also forms the normative leitmotif of Critical Theory, where the concept of community is strictly avoided because of its ideological misuse.

Were one to press this line of thought further, one could easily get the impression that the normative concern of Critical Theory coincides with that of “communitarianism.”¹⁷ But just as it differs from liberalism in its orientation toward a “universal” of self-actualization, one can distinguish Critical Theory from communitarianism in terms of the link between this universal and reason. No critical theorist has ever abandoned the Hegelian idea that cooperative practice, along with the values attendant to it, must possess a rational character. Indeed, it is precisely the point of Critical Theory to see individual self-actualization as tied to the assumption that there is a common practice, one that can only be the result of an actualization of reason. Far from understanding the tie to comprehensive values as an end in itself, the critical theorist views the establishing of a cooperative context as fulfilling the function of increasing social rationality. Otherwise, there would be no way to imagine why the identified forms of practice in each case should always be the result of a social rationalization and no way to understand why the negative state of the present must always be an expression of deficient rationality. In contrast to communitarianism, Critical Theory subjects universality—which should, at the same time, be both embodied by and realized through social cooperation—to the standards of rational justification. While there may be various conceptions of reason in Critical Theory from Horkheimer to Habermas, they all ultimately come down to the same idea—namely, that the turn to a liberating practice of cooperation should not result from affective bonds or feelings of membership or agreement but from rational insight.

The tradition of Critical Theory thus differs from both liberalism and communitarianism by virtue of a particular kind of ethical perfectionism. To be sure, unlike the liberal tradition, Critical Theory holds that the normative aim of society should consist in reciprocally making self-actualization possible. At the same time, it understands its recommendation of this aim to be the well-grounded result of a certain analysis of the human process of development. As is

the case with Hegel, it seems that the boundaries between description, on the one hand, and prescription and normative grounding, on the other, are blurred here as well. The explanation of the circumstances that have blocked or skewed the process of the actualization of reason should have in and of itself the rational force to convince subjects to create a social practice of cooperation. The perfection of society that all the members of Critical Theory have in mind must be, according to their common view, the result of enlightenment through analysis. The explanatory interpretation that they offer to this end, however, is no longer written in the language of Hegel's philosophy of spirit. To the contrary, there is a general consensus that a definitive "sociologizing" of the categorial frame of reference is a precondition for such an analysis. The second defining feature of Critical Theory then, consists in the attempt to explain the pathological deformation of reason sociologically. It deserves a place in the legacy of Critical Theory for today in the same way as should hold for the idea of cooperative self-actualization.

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There is a growing tendency today to carry out social criticism in a form that does without sociological explanation. This development arises from the fact that, for the most part, it is considered sufficient to expose certain injustices in society on the basis of well-founded values or norms. The question of why those affected do not themselves problematize or attack such moral evils is no longer seen to fall within the purview of social criticism as such. The division that has been thereby established is deeply shaken, however, as soon as a causal connection is produced between the existence of social injustices and the absence of any public reaction. Social injustice would then be seen as possessing, among other things, the property of causing directly and on its own the silence or apathy that is expressed by the absence of public reaction.

A supposition of this kind serves as the basis for most of the approaches of Critical Theory. However strongly influenced by Marx they may be in their particulars, almost all of the approaches to

Critical Theory share a central premise of his analysis of capitalism concerning this one point: the social circumstances that constitute the pathology of capitalist societies have the peculiar structural feature of disguising precisely those states of affairs that would otherwise provide particularly urgent grounds for public criticism. Just as one can find the assumption sketched here in Marx's account of "fetishism" or in his theory of "reification,"¹⁸ it is present in Critical Theory in concepts like "false consciousness," "one-dimensionality," and "positivism."¹⁹ Such concepts are means to characterize a system of convictions and practices that has the paradoxical quality of distracting one's attention from the very social conditions that structurally produce that system. For the kind of social criticism that Critical Theory practices, this observation leads to a broadening of the tasks that must be carried out. In contrast to the approaches that have achieved dominance today, Critical Theory must couple the critique of social injustice with an explanation of the processes that obscure that injustice. For only when one can convince the addressees by means of such an explanatory analysis that they can be deceived about the real character of their social conditions can the wrongfulness of those conditions be publicly demonstrated with some prospect of their being accepted. Because a relationship of cause and effect is assumed to obtain between social injustice and the absence of any negative reaction to it, normative criticism in Critical Theory has to be complemented by an element of historical explanation. A historical process of the deformation of reason must causally explain the failure of a rational universal, a failure that constitutes the social pathology of the present. This explanation must at the same time make intelligible the de-thematization of social injustice in public discussion.

Within Critical Theory there has always been agreement that the historical process of a deformation of reason can only be explained within a sociological framework. Although the ethical intuition behind the whole undertaking ultimately sustains itself on the Hegelian idea of a rational universal, its proponents are at the same time so much the heirs of classical sociological thinkers that they are no longer able to draw on the Idealist concept of reason when explaining deviations from that universality. Instead, the processes of de-

formation that have contributed to a lack of social rationality—to the establishment of a “particular rationality”²⁰—come to be analyzed within a categorial framework that emerges from Horkheimer to Habermas, in which there is a theoretical synthesis of Marx and Weber. Indeed, Marx had already stood the Hegelian concept of reason “right side up again” when he tied the expansion of justified knowledge to the completion of a social practice in virtue of which subjects might incrementally improve the conditions of their material reproduction. It would no longer be the internal compulsion of spirit but, rather, the external challenges of nature that would lead to a learning process consisting in a science of experience that justifies talk of the actualization of reason.

But for the critical theorists, Marx’s anthropological epistemology was insufficient to give a truly sociological explanation of the historical process that Hegel had described in his philosophy as the self-unfolding of spirit. Only by taking up key concepts in Weber—whose early reception was often influenced by an unconventional Lukácsian reading²¹—is the picture made complete, at least insofar as the connection between any practice-bound learning process and social institutionalization is significantly clarified. In blending together Weber and Marx, the members of the Frankfurt School arrive at the shared conviction that the potential of human reason unfolds in a historical learning process in which rational solutions to problems are inextricably bound up with conflicts regarding the monopolization of knowledge. Subjects respond to the objective challenges repeatedly posed by nature and social organization at each new stage by constantly improving their knowledge of action, yet this knowledge is so deeply embedded in social conflicts over power and control that it achieves lasting form in institutions often only to the exclusion of certain other groups. For Critical Theory it thus remains beyond doubt that one must understand the Hegelian actualization of reason as conflictual—that is, as a multilayered learning process in which generalizable knowledge is only gradually won through improved solutions to problems and against the opposing groups in power.

Of course, in the history of Critical Theory this fundamental idea has also been subject to constant revision. Initially, Horkheimer

only relates this conflictual learning process to the treatment of nature, making it difficult to imagine how rational improvements are also supposed to have taken place in the organization of social life.²² Adorno widens the spectrum in the wake of Weber's sociology of music by recognizing rationalization in the arrangement of artistic material, which serves the goal of extending calculative sovereignty into aesthetic practice.²³ In the work of Marcuse one can find indications that would seem to justify the assumption of a collective learning process in the acquisition of internal nature, with corresponding setbacks resulting from power formations.²⁴ Habermas is the first to achieve a systematic breakdown of the various learning processes, an analysis he grounds on the variety of ways in which human beings relate to the world through their linguistic practice. He is convinced that we can expect human rational potential to develop along at least two paths: one directed toward an increase in knowledge of the objective world; the other toward a more just solution to interactive conflicts.²⁵

But the gain in differentiation comes at the cost of no longer being able to consider historical growth in rationality together with those social conflicts which, following Weber's sociology of domination, were more clearly before the eyes of early Critical Theory. In Habermas's work we find a gulf between the dimension that, for instance, Bourdieu investigated in the cultural formation of monopolies,²⁶ and rational learning processes—a gulf whose presence is fundamentally inconsistent with the original concerns of the critical tradition. Nevertheless, because Critical Theory requires a post-Idealist version of the thesis that Hegel outlined in his conception of the actualization of reason, it cannot forego the degree of differentiation exemplified by the Habermasian conception of rationality. To be able to see the ways in which socially institutionalized knowledge has rationalized itself—that is, how it has exhibited an increasing degree of reflexivity in overcoming social problems—one must distinguish just as many aspects of rationality as there are socially perceivable challenges involved in the reproduction of societies, which depends on agreement.

In contrast to the Habermasian approach, which carries out such a differentiation on the basis of the structural particularities

of human language, there may be a superior conception that ties the aspects of social rationalization (in an internal realist sense) more closely to the ability of socially established values to disclose problems. In that case, invariant values of linguistic communication would not reveal the direction in which the rationalization of social knowledge is to proceed. Rather, the historically produced values present in social spheres of meaning would play this role. Furthermore, the concept of reason with which Critical Theory attempts to grasp the increases in rationality in human history is subject to the pressure of incorporating foreign and new, particularly non-European, points of view. For this reason, it is not surprising that the concept of social rationality must also take on an ever-wider and more differentiated meaning to be able to take into account the multifaceted nature of learning processes. In any case, it is a post-Idealist version of the Hegelian notion of the actualization of reason that now provides the necessary background for the idea that may well form the innermost core of the entire Critical Theory tradition, from Horkheimer to Habermas. According to that tradition, the process of social rationalization through the social structure that is unique to capitalism has become interrupted or distorted in a way that makes pathologies that accompany the loss of a rational universal unavoidable.

One finds the key to this thesis, in which all the elements treated separately until now are brought together, in a concept of capitalism energized by a theory of rationality. It is not difficult to see that Critical Theory has achieved such a concept less through a reception of Marxist works than through the impetus provided by the early theory of Lukács. With *History and Class Consciousness*, it is first possible to glimpse in the institutional reality of modern capitalism an organizational form of society that is structurally tied to a certain, limited state of rationality. For Lukács, who was by his own admission significantly influenced by Weber and Georg Simmel, the characteristic feature of this form of rationality consists in the fact that its subjects are forced into a type of practice that makes them “spectators without influence” of events, divorced from their needs and intentions.²⁷ The mechanized division of labor and the exchange of goods call for a form of perception in which all other

human beings appear to be unfeeling, thing-like entities, with the result that social interaction is bereft of any attention to those qualities that are valuable in themselves. If we were to describe the result of Lukács's analysis in a terminology closer to contemporary ideas, we might say that a certain form of practice achieves dominance in capitalism that compels indifference to those aspects of other human beings that are valuable. Instead of relating to one another with mutual recognition, subjects perceive themselves as objects that are recognized only according to the interests of each.²⁸ In any case, it is this diagnosis by Lukács that provides Critical Theory with a categorical framework within which it is possible to speak of an interruption or distortion of the process of the actualization of reason. With the historical learning process taken as basic, the structural forces of society that Lukács reveals in modern capitalism present themselves as obstacles to the potential of rationality socially latent on the threshold of the modern age. The organizational form of social relations in capitalism prevents rational principles that, as far as our cognitive potential is concerned, are already at hand, from applying to practical life.

Of course, we must again qualify this explanatory scheme according to the various presuppositions regarding the manner and course of the historical process of rationalization that are at work in each case of Critical Theory. In Horkheimer, for example, one finds the thesis that the capitalist organization of production brings with it an opposition to individual interests that is hindered by the "application of the whole spiritual and physical means of dominating nature."²⁹ Horkheimer later broadens his reflections in concert with Adorno via the somewhat implausible hypothesis that there is an emotional rationality inherent in the form of interaction within nineteenth-century bourgeois families whose potential could not be brought into play because of increasing tension introduced by competition and monopolization.³⁰ The work of Adorno, in particular *Minima Moralia*, is full of such speculations that inevitably take the form of a diagnosis of the growing impossibility of a type of love which, in the family, was able to reconcile individual with general interests without coercion. The social privileging of rationally purposeful, utilitarian attitudes in capitalism prevents the

development of a nonlegalistic form of rational universal that is inherent in the structure of private relationships in the form of mutual affection and forgiveness.³¹ Marcuse, roughly taking Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind* as his guide, describes the process of increasing aesthetic sensibility as ending with modern capitalism—a form of society which he, like Lukács (though also with an air of Heidegger), depicts as a complex of generalized knowledge at one's disposal.³² Finally, in Habermas we find the idea that one cannot separate the potential of communicative rationality from capitalist conditions because the imperative of economic exploitation penetrates even the sphere of the social lifeworld. Even though the family and the political public have long since emancipated themselves from their traditional bases of legitimization, the principles of rational communication cannot gain acceptance in those settings because they are increasingly infiltrated by the mechanisms of systematic management.³³

However different these attempts at explanation may be, the basic scheme that underlies each of these criticisms of capitalism remains the same. Critical theorists, not unlike Lukács (though in a more sophisticated manner and without the excessive historical emphasis on the proletariat), perceive capitalism as a social form of organization in which practices and ways of thinking prevail that prevent the social utilization of a rationality already made possible by history. At the same time, this historical obstruction presents a moral or ethical challenge because it precludes the possibility of orienting oneself in terms of a rational universal, the impetus to which could only come from a fully realized rationality. Whether the concept of capitalism, grounded in a theory of rationality and underlying the interpretation of history outlined here, can once again be recovered today is certainly an open question. The possibilities for organizing the activity of a capitalist economy seem too multifarious, as well as too mixed up in other non-rationally purposive patterns of social activity, to reduce the attitudes of the actors involved to a single pattern of instrumental rationality. Newer studies also suggest, however, that, in capitalist societies, those attitudes or orientations most rewarded with social success are those whose fixation on individual advantages demands merely strategic

associations with oneself and other subjects.³⁴ As a result, we cannot exclude the possibility of still interpreting capitalism as the institutional result of a cultural lifestyle or of a product of social imagination in which a certain type of restricted, “reifying” rationality is the dominant practice.³⁵

But the commonalities within Critical Theory transcend this point. Its central representatives share not only the formal scheme of diagnosing capitalism as a set of social relations of blocked or distorted rationality but also the idea of the proper method of therapy. The forces that contribute to the overcoming of the social pathology are supposed to stem from precisely that reason whose actualization is impeded by the form of organization present in capitalist society. Just as was the case with the other elements of the theory, a classical figure of modern thought plays a formative role here; Freud has the same significance for the central content of Critical Theory as do Hegel, Marx, Weber, and Lukács. It is from his psychoanalytic theory that Critical Theory takes the thought that social pathologies must always express themselves in a type of suffering that keeps alive the interest in the emancipatory power of reason.

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Today even the question of how one might practically overcome injustice no longer generally falls within the domain of social criticism. With the exception of approaches modeled on Foucault that take transformation of the individual’s relation to herself as a condition of criticism,³⁶ the question concerning the relationship between theory and practice remains closed off from contemporary consideration. Explanation of the causes that may be responsible for obscuring social injustice are thought to belong just as little to the business of criticism as do perspectival characterizations of the conversion of knowledge into practice. One such perspective calls for a social-psychological theory of the subject that makes intelligible why individuals who themselves are conditioned by a particular way of thinking and practice should be further responsive to the rational content of the theory. It must explain whence the subjective

forces can come that, despite all the delusion, one-dimensionality, and fragmentation, would still offer a chance for conversion of knowledge into practice. However heterogeneous the field of social criticism may be today, one feature is typical: there is hardly an approach that understands such a characterization to be part of its proper task. The question of the motivational state of the subjects that must be the focus of attention here is instead largely passed over because one no longer expects reflection on the conditions of conversion into practice to be a part of critique.

Nevertheless, from its beginnings, Critical Theory has been so greatly indebted to the tradition of left-Hegelianism that it considers the initiation of a critical practice that can contribute to the overcoming of social pathology to be an essential part of its task.³⁷ Even where skepticism regarding the possibility of practical enlightenment prevails among its authors,³⁸ the drama of the question of enlightenment arises out of the mere assumed necessity of an internal connection between theory and practice. Critical Theory, however, no longer understands the determination of this mediation as a task that one might undertake by philosophical reflection alone. Instead of appealing to a speculative philosophy of history, which for Marx and Lukács remained wholly self-evident, Critical Theory relies on the new instrument of empirical social research for information about the critical readiness of the public.³⁹ The result of this methodological reorientation, which constitutes a further distinctive feature of Critical Theory, is a sobering assessment of the state of consciousness of the proletariat. Contrary to what is assumed by the Marxist wing of left-Hegelianism, the working class does not automatically develop a revolutionary readiness to convert the critical content of theory into society-changing practice as a result of the consummation of the mechanized division of labor.⁴⁰ The idea that Critical Theory could provide the continuity between theory and practice by merely appealing to a certain predetermined addressee is thus abandoned. The considerations that are being employed in its place all come down to the expectation that the conversion into practice will be effected by precisely the rationality that the social pathology has distorted but not wholly dispossessed. In place of the proletariat, whose social situation had previously been considered

the guarantor of responsiveness to the critical content of the theory, a submerged rational capacity must resurface for which all subjects in principle have the same motivational aptitude.

Admittedly, this kind of change of perspective requires an additional line of thought, for at first glance it is not at all clear why the motivation for critical practice should be expected from the same rationality that according to the theory is highly deformed. In other words, how can critical theorists trust that they will find a necessary degree of rational readiness for the conversion into practice if the socially practiced rationality turns out to be pathologically disrupted or distorted? The answer to this question falls within an area of Critical Theory that is established on a continuum between psychoanalysis and moral psychology. Its continual task is to uncover the motivational roots that sustain the readiness for moral cognition in individual subjects, despite any rational impairment.

Here it is helpful to distinguish between two steps of the argument, even if critical theorists have not always drawn a clear distinction between them. From the fact that a deficit in social rationality leads to symptoms of social pathology, one first infers that subjects suffer from the state of society. No individual can avoid seeing himself or herself as being impeded by the consequences of a deformation of reason (or being so described) because, with the loss of a rational universal, the chances of successful self-actualization, which depends on mutual cooperation, are also diminished. Critical Theory no doubt takes Freudian psychoanalysis as its methodological model for how it establishes a connection between defective rationality and individual suffering. Certainly, a similar connection is already found in Hegel's critique of Romanticism, which cannot have been without influence on the Frankfurt School, But the impetus to bring the category "suffering" into connection with the very pathologies of social rationality probably finds its origin in the Freudian idea that every neurotic illness arises from an impairment of the rational ego and must lead to individual cases of stress from suffering.⁴¹

The methodological application of this fundamental psychoanalytic idea to the field of social analysis is not just a theoretical move

that Habermas has contributed to Critical Theory.⁴² In his early essays, Horkheimer already describes social irrationality in concepts modeled on Freud's theory, insofar as they measure the degree of social pathology by the effect of forces foreign to the ego.⁴³ And everywhere Adorno speaks of individual or social suffering, one can hear overtones of the Freudian supposition that subjects have to suffer under the neurotic restriction of their genuinely rational capacities. Thus one reads in *Negative Dialectics* that every suffering possesses an "inward-turning form of reflection": "the moment of the flesh proclaims the knowledge that suffering ought not be, that things should be different."⁴⁴ The use of such a concept of suffering, which surfaces here as an instance of the experience of the interplay between spiritual and physical forces, has unfortunately remained until now largely unexplored within the reception of Critical Theory.⁴⁵ A more precise analysis would likely show that, as with Freud, suffering expresses the feeling of not being able to endure the "loss of ego [capacities]."⁴⁶

From Horkheimer to Habermas, the idea that the pathology of social rationality leads to cases of impairment that frequently manifest themselves in the painful experience of the loss of rational capacities has guided Critical Theory. In the end, this idea comes down to the strong and frankly anthropological thesis that human subjects cannot be indifferent about the restriction of their rational capacities. Because their self-actualization is tied to the presupposition of cooperative rational activity, they cannot avoid suffering psychologically under its deformation. This insight, according to which there must be an internal connection between psychological intactness and undistorted rationality, is perhaps the strongest impetus Freud provides Critical Theory. Every investigation that nowadays points in the same general direction (though with improved methods) approaches its concerns from here.

But it is only by taking a second step, which Critical Theory does only rather implicitly, that one can extract from this thesis a means by which the severed relations to practice can be intellectually restored. And it is again Freud who provides the decisive suggestion: the stress from suffering presses toward a cure by means of exactly

the same rational powers whose function the pathology impedes. An assumption about what in general is to count as a self-evident condition for admission into psychoanalytic treatment also accompanies this suggestion—namely, that the individual who subjectively suffers from a neurotic illness also wants to be free from that suffering. In Critical Theory, it is not always clear whether the stress from suffering that strives toward its cure pertains only to subjective experience or also to an “objective” event. While Adorno, who speaks of suffering as a “subjective impulse,” seems to have the first alternative in mind, Horkheimer frequently uses formulations in which social suffering is treated as a magnitude of feeling capable of objective attribution. In the case of Habermas, there is sufficient evidence, particularly in his *Theory of Communicative Action*, to suggest the subjective way of speaking, whereas in Marcuse one can find both alternatives.⁴⁷

In any case, Critical Theory presupposes that this subjectively experienced or objectively attributable suffering among the members of society must lead to that same desire for healing and liberation from social evils that the analyst must impute to his or her patients. Moreover, in each case, the interest in one’s own recovery is supposed to be documented by the readiness to reactivate, against any resistance, those rational powers the individual or social pathology has deformed. All the thinkers belonging to the inner circle of Critical Theory expect in their addressees a latent interest in rational explanation or interpretation, since only winning back an integral rationality can satisfy the desire for a liberation from suffering. It is this risky assumption that permits a different connection of theory to practice than the Marxist tradition provides. The critical theorists share with their audience neither a space of common objectives nor one of political projects but, rather, a space of potentially common reasons that holds the pathological present open to the possibility of transformation through rational insight. Here, as well, one must consider the differences of opinion that prevail between the individual members of the Frankfurt School. One can best assess them by seeing which social-psychological or anthropological assumptions substantiate the thesis that individual responsiveness

to rational arguments remains possible within any deformation of social life.

Turning to Horkheimer on this point, we find the idea that the memory of emotional security in early childhood sustains the interest in overcoming that form of rationality committed to a merely instrumental disposition. It remains unclear, however, how such a psychological drive is supposed to be directed at the same time toward attaining an “intact,” undiminished rational power. If we assemble Adorno’s scattered reflections on the topic, there is something to be said for seeing in the “mimetic sense” more than just an impulse to assimilate (to) the threatening object. Rather, one must also see suggested in it the inexhaustible remnant of a desire to grasp the other intellectually in a way that leaves the other his or her singular existence.⁴⁸ One can find such characterizations in Marcuse, as is well known, in a theory that involves erotic impulses of a life-drive whose aesthetic actualization requires a “conscious effort of free rationality.”⁴⁹ It is frequently asked of this project, however, whether or not it sufficiently guarantees an expanded concept of social rationality.⁵⁰ Finally, Habermas had originally assumed in his version of an anthropology of knowledge of the human species an “emancipatory interest” that focuses on the experience of a discursive practice that is structurally present in a state of noncoercion and equality.⁵¹ This early conception has since given way to a theory of discourse that no longer makes anthropological claims yet retains an assumption that the practice of argumentative discourse always allows the individual to be responsive to better reasons.⁵²

All of these reflections present answers to the question of what experiences, practices, or needs allow an interest in full rational realization to continue to exist in human beings, despite the deformation or skewing of social rationality. Only as long as the theory can count on such a rational impulse for its grounding will it be able to relate itself reflexively to a potential practice in which the explanation it offers is implemented with a view to liberation from suffering. Critical Theory will only be able to continue in the form in which it has developed from Horkheimer to Habermas if it does not forsake the proof of such interests. Without a realistic concept

of “emancipatory interest” that puts at its center the idea of an indestructible core of rational responsiveness on the part of subjects, this critical project will have no future.

With this last thought, the development of the motifs that constitute the core content of the legacy of Critical Theory has reached a matter-of-fact conclusion. The sequence of systematic ideas developed in this essay form a unity from which a single component cannot be omitted without consequences. As long as we do not abandon the aim of understanding Critical Theory as a form of reflection belonging to a historically effective reason, it will not be easy to give up the normative motif of a rational universal, the idea of a social pathology of reason, and the concept of an emancipatory interest. Yet it is also apparent that, of these three components of thought, none can still be maintained today in the theoretical form in which the members of the Frankfurt School originally developed it. All require conceptual reformulation and the mediation of the present state of our knowledge if they are still to fulfill the function that was once intended for them. That said, the field of tasks is outlined—tasks now left to the heirs of Critical Theory in the twenty-first century.

Translated by James Hebbeler