

# The Routledge Companion to the Frankfurt School



Edited by Peter E. Gordon, Espen Hammer, and Axel Honneth

# THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

The portentous terms and phrases associated with the first decades of the Frankfurt School – exile, the dominance of capitalism, fascism – seem as salient today as they were in the early twentieth century. *The Routledge Companion to the Frankfurt School* addresses the many early concerns of critical theory and brings those concerns into direct engagement with our shared world today. In this volume, a distinguished group of international scholars from a variety of disciplines revisit the philosophical and political contributions of Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, and others.

Throughout, the *Companion's* focus is on the major ideas that have made the Frankfurt School such a consequential and enduring movement. It offers a crucial resource for those who are trying to make sense of the global and cultural crisis that has now seized our contemporary world.

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*Edited by*  
*Peter E. Gordon*  
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# EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

## Introduction

The “Frankfurt School” is a name that carries a multitude of associations and forbids facile summary. Broadly speaking, it serves as the common term for a certain emancipatory and critical orientation in social theory that brings modern philosophy into an alliance with the social sciences. Founded in the early 1920s at the newly established Frankfurt University, the Institute for Social Research (often called the “Frankfurt School”) was originally conceived as a multidisciplinary academic group that readily acknowledged its theoretical debt to historical materialism and its practical commitments to the aims of organized labor and socialism. Already by the end of the decade, its research agenda had expanded, and under the directorship of Max Horkheimer the Institute developed a distinctive philosophical and social style of thought that came to be known as “critical theory.” The tradition of Frankfurt School critical theory focuses its attention most of all on the problems of late-capitalist modernity so as to identify both its manifest pathologies and its latent utopian possibilities. This companion provides the reader with an intellectual portrait of the Frankfurt School. Although no such portrait could be fully comprehensive, we have tried in this volume to promote a balanced understanding that allows for internal variation and common themes, though our presentation naturally places greater emphasis on those topics that we feel deserve most attention in light of current interests today. The Frankfurt School, as we portray it here, is more than its history, and it is also more than a list of intellectual luminaries. It is a living and self-reflexive critical-theoretical practice that keeps its sights on the ideal of a rational social order in the future.

## The Origins of the Frankfurt School

The Frankfurt School first emerged at a moment of great political uncertainty that followed the harrowing experiences of the First World War, the Bolshevik seizure of power in Russia, and the abortive revolution in Germany in late 1918 and early 1919. The Weimar Republic, Germany’s first parliamentary democracy, was plagued from the beginning with economic instability and political factionalism, and it took several years for it to gain some measure of equilibrium. But its difficulties were also a source of dynamism, and it is perhaps not by coincidence that this troubled era should also have served as a crucible of some of the most consequential movements in cultural modernism. Their names are familiar: expressionism, Dadaism, surrealism, the Bauhaus, and the “new objectivity.” Such movements ranged in their politics as in their aesthetic ideals, from the moody dreamscapes of the poet Gottfried Benn to the confrontational left militancy of Bertolt Brecht, and from the mandarin neo-classicalism of Stefan George and his circle to the humane socialist realism of Käthe Kollwitz. In philosophy too, this was an age of experimentation and rebellion in which established traditions were overthrown. The Frankfurt School was born

from the spirit of Weimar modernism: with its explosive union between uncompromising intellectualism and radical social critique, it ranks among the most enduring legacies of the interwar era.

From the very beginning, the Institute saw itself as a center for socially engaged research in an explicit alliance with Marxist theory. But this orientation steered clear of all political dogma. The Frankfurt School, especially in its early years, can be understood as one expression of the complex intellectual tradition that we now call "Western Marxism," in contradistinction to the more unyielding ideologies of Soviet-style socialism in the Eastern bloc. By "Western Marxism" we mean the philosophical movement that emerged in the liberal democracies of Western Europe after the Bolshevik revolution, when social theorists on the left came to see that capitalist societies were reaching a point of economic stability and cultural integration that orthodox Marxists would never have predicted. This situation seemed to call for explanatory methods beyond the somewhat reductive understanding of society as theorized within the official framework of "historical materialism" developed by party ideologists such as Friedrich Engels and Karl Kautsky. The apparent failure of the working classes in Western Europe to emerge after the First World War as a self-conscious and genuinely revolutionary collective prompted a reexamination of the category of consciousness itself. The specific problem of working-class consciousness, alongside more general questions of ideology and culture, would emerge as the focal point for Western Marxist theorists such as Georg Lukács, Karl Korsch, and Antonio Gramsci. A similar emphasis on consciousness and its modern distortions in bourgeois society was to become a dominant though by no means exclusive concern for the theorists associated with the Frankfurt School.

The Institute for Social Research was founded in June, 1924, with financial support from the wealthy industrialist and socialist Felix Weil, and with the economic historian Carl Grünberg as its first director. Grünberg was primarily interested in the history of the worker's movement, and under his leadership the Institute devoted its attentions primarily to research on the history of socialism, the history of organized labor, and the history and analysis of political economy. The Institute also played an important role in preparing for the first historical and critical edition of the complete works of Marx and Engels. Following Grünberg's retirement in 1929, the official task of directing the Institute eventually passed to Max Horkheimer (1895–1973), a relatively young scholar who had recently been appointed Professor of Social Philosophy at the University of Frankfurt. Horkheimer was officially named director of the Institute in October 1930. Under his leadership, the Institute continued its multidisciplinary agenda for research in both philosophy and the empirical social sciences, but it did so under the auspices of what Horkheimer, in his 1931 inaugural lecture, called a "social philosophy." Alongside Horkheimer, its core membership came to include the important economist Friedrich Pollock (1894–1970), the philosopher Theodor W. Adorno (1903–1969), the sociologist Leo Löwenthal (1900–1993), the philosopher Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979), the psychologist Erich Fromm (1900–1980), the historian Paul Massing (1902–1979), the political scientist Otto Kirchheimer (1905–1965), and the political scientist Franz Neumann (1900–1954). It also extended financial support to other, affiliated researchers such as Walter Benjamin (1892–1940). Both members and affiliates contributed to the Institute's journal, the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, which began publication in 1932 and continued until 1941. The journal also appeared in English as *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*.

The early history of the Frankfurt School is forever marked by a single, traumatic event: the emergence of fascism. The fact that a political movement of such irrationality and brutality could inspire mass enthusiasm and seize control of governments in Western Europe posed a major challenge to all inherited philosophies of social and historical progress. It is not incidental to note here that nearly all of the core members of the early Frankfurt



School were of Jewish descent. Although few of them retained more than the most lingering attachment to their ancestral religion, they held fast to Enlightenment ideals of tolerance and universal freedom, and they could not help but see the ascent of an overtly anti-Semitic political movement as an affront to the ideal of a genuinely enlightened civilization. With the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, the Institute was forced into exile, first to Geneva and then to New York, where they were able to reestablish themselves at Columbia University. Most of the members and affiliates of the Frankfurt school survived the war years in the United States, though Walter Benjamin, a close friend of Adorno, died by self-administered poison during his flight from the Nazi invaders. In the early 1940s, Adorno and Horkheimer lived not far from one another in Los Angeles, and after the war they returned to Frankfurt, where they both emerged as teachers and symbols for the revival of a critical spirit in the German Federal Republic. Adorno lectured on a wide variety of philosophical themes and also spoke with some frequency in public or on the radio on topics such as the meaning of "working through the past." It was a major theme of the early Frankfurt School that no sharp line could be drawn between the extremity of political fascism and the more everyday social pathologies of bourgeois capitalism in the West. Instead, they tended to see underlying continuities especially on the level of mass consciousness. It is in this light that we must read Horkheimer's much-quoted remark from 1939 that "those who do not wish to speak of capitalism should be silent about fascism."

The problems and themes that drew the attention of the Frankfurt School extended well beyond fascism. Already in the 1930s, the Institute expanded its field of research and its methodological range with deepened attention to the cultural pathologies of modern bourgeois society. With this broadening of vision came new programs of research in the sociology of literature and cultural criticism alongside empirical studies in working-class and middle-class consciousness that often made innovative use of theories and explanatory categories drawn from psychoanalysis. Benjamin contributed numerous essays on literature and theories of mass culture. Adorno, a serious musician and composer, was especially attuned to problems in modern music and also wrote controversial essays on popular music such as jazz. During its years of exile, Horkheimer saw to it that the Institute would organize the "Studies in Prejudice," a series of historical and empirical-sociological research projects that sought to explain the emergence of fascism and anti-Semitism in the modern era, including the collaborative research study, *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), to which Adorno served as a contributor.

Alongside these more empirical studies, the leading members of the Frankfurt School also developed comprehensive philosophies of history. The best known of these is *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), a coauthored philosophical inquiry in which Adorno and Horkheimer gave free rein to their most speculative impulses. This bold and broad-ranging work addresses the question as to why humanity's attempt to gain some measure of freedom and rational knowledge of the world has ended in failure, or why "enlightenment" (in the widest sense) has led not to genuine freedom but to a new barbarism. This ironic denouement is due to the one-sided character of reason itself: reason first emerged as a mere instrument by which humanity could wrest itself free of nature. Even ancient myths represented a bid to explain and control nature's terrifying powers. But reason as a mere instrument is unreflective and leaves humanity with no normative purpose beyond the task of self-preservation. The exercise of instrumental reason culminates in a modern condition of thoughtlessness and repetition that betrays the Enlightenment's true promise: "Myth is already Enlightenment, and Enlightenment reverts to mythology." Adorno and Horkheimer explore this irony in philosophical and literary texts (such as Homer's *Odyssey* and the writings of the Marquis de Sade) but also in the domain of the mass media that they call the "culture industry." Although they thought of their book as preparing the terrain for the "rescue" of the

Enlightenment, their grim diagnosis of the modern condition left many readers with the impression that no such rescue was truly possible. Other theorists in the first generation of the Frankfurt School offered no less comprehensive analyses of modern social pathology. Herbert Marcuse, for example, contributed to the critical reassessment of psychoanalysis in *Eros and Civilization* (1955) and offered a generalized critique of mass conformity and consumerism in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), a work that indicted the pervasive irrationality of "advanced industrial society." Marcuse's notion of a "great refusal" was taken up as a popular theme in the countercultural protests of the 1960s.

Meanwhile, Adorno continued to work out some of his own distinctive philosophical insights in works such as *Minima Moralia* (a collection of dense and fascinating aphorisms written between 1944 and 1947 that he dedicated to Horkheimer) along with critical studies on themes in the history of philosophy such as Husserlian phenomenology (*Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie*, published in 1956; in English as *Against Epistemology*); Hegelian dialectics (*Drei Studien zu Hegel*, 1963); alongside *The Jargon of Authenticity* (1963), a polemic against the cultural ascendancy of existentialism in postwar Germany. But it is also important to note that Adorno devoted a great share of his time to studies in musicology. Throughout his life, he wrote on a wide range of historically significant composers, such as Berg, Wagner, Schoenberg, and Stravinsky, together with problems in the sociology of modern music, most famously (and controversially) the essays on jazz. At the time of his death, Adorno left behind a treasure of notes for a never-completed study of Beethoven, whose late compositions embodied a "late style" of fragmentation that Adorno understood as a kind of model for his own critical-philosophical method: "One can no longer compose like Beethoven," Adorno wrote, "but one must think as he composed." In 1966 Adorno published the culminating philosophical statement of his career under the title of *Negative Dialectics*, a work which attempted to sustain the oppositional force of the dialectic while resisting the conservative impulses in Hegel's gesture of reconciliation. For Adorno philosophy had to commit itself to the paradoxical task of thinking against the power of the concept by granting primacy to the "nonidentical." Only in this way could it honor the deepest lessons of materialism while also forging a philosophy responsive to the damaged state of the world "after Auschwitz." His final and incomplete *Aesthetic Theory* (published posthumously in 1970) explores the dialectical relation between the formal (internal) and social (external) features of modern art. As a philosophical counterpoint to the analysis of the culture industry, it offers a meditation on the possibility of what Adorno called "autonomous art."

### Later Generations of Critical Theory

In 1951, as its old members were gradually returning from exile and new associates added, the Institute for Social Research moved into a new building in Frankfurt, aiming to recommence its research activities within the radically changed cultural and political setting of the Federal German Republic. Considered narrowly, in strictly institutional terms, this research, led mainly by Horkheimer and Adorno, continued well into the 1960s yet ended, largely, with Adorno's death in 1969. By that time the Institute for Social Research had lost almost all of its famous theoreticians, and while turning in the 1970s and onward toward empirical sociological research, the institutional history of the "Frankfurt School" may arguably be said to have come to an end around 1970.

This is not true, however, of "critical theory" considered more normatively, as a set of meta-philosophical and meta-sociological commitments centered on offering a progressively oriented critique of contemporary social pathologies and forms of injustice. As early as in the mid-1950s a new voice began to make an impact – a voice belonging to a thinker who, despite producing his most influential work outside of the institutional framework of the

"Frankfurt School," would ultimately go on to change the nature of critical theory. Jürgen Habermas (1929–), who later became the fore-runner of so-called second-generation critical theory, started his career as Adorno's research assistant while working on social theory from a roughly Marxist angle. A contributor to contemporary political debate as well, Habermas's first major work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (originally his habilitation and published in 1962), traced the rise of the category of the "public sphere" from the eighteenth-century coffee houses, journals, literary salons, and social clubs to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century culture of mass media. While Habermas's study situated the category within a Marxist framework, arguing that the bourgeois invention of the public sphere must be approached critically, focusing on ideological distortion and misrepresentation, it also highlighted its progressive and emancipatory dimension, however idealized it may have been. As concerned citizens meet in a context in which they each view each other as equal partners in a free and open dialogue, they come to incorporate and anticipate a life-form committed to the value of reason.

While Adorno and Horkheimer retained their view of reason as largely instrumental, threatening end-oriented reason with oblivion and driving contemporary society further and further into what they saw as an almost impenetrable crisis of meaning and orientation, Habermas identified the category he later would call "communicative reason" with the intent of creating a vision of critical theory that would be less defeatist, more engaged with contemporary political reality, and rather more attuned to the genuine achievements of liberalism. In a number of essays and books from the 1960s, it became increasingly clear that the notion of communicative reason presented a strong contrast with the concept of reason as understood both in the Marxist tradition and in first-generation critical theory. The Marxist category of "labor," for example, while indispensable as a tool for theorizing man's relationship to nature and society's reproduction, remains oblivious to man's activities as a creature of communicative reason. For the latter to be properly taken into account, Habermas argued, one needs a two-dimensional theory of society and social reproduction centered both on labor *and* interaction.

Habermas's research on communicative rationality culminated in the 1981 publication of *The Theory of Communicative Action*, a vast, two-volume account of the nature of rationality and social rationalization in the modern age. Weaving together insights from both sociology and philosophy, Habermas proposed that societies should be considered under two aspects: in terms of the *lifeworld*, on the one hand, in which agents' actions and self-interpretations are integrated communicatively, and, on the other, in terms of the *system*, in which integration takes place systemically, via the impersonal mechanisms of capitalist exchange and bureaucratic procedure. Two aims stand out as particularly central. *First*, Habermas hoped to provide his own version of Adorno and Horkheimer's thesis of the dialectic of enlightenment. Like his predecessors, he locates social pathologies – including the famous Weberian "loss of meaning" – arising from the excessive employment of formal-instrumental reason. The system, he claims, tends in modernity to "colonize" the lifeworld, thereby depriving it of its capacity to provide agents with opportunities for viewing themselves as freely and rationally involved in both assessing pre-given cultural content and setting meaningful goals. *Second*, Habermas draws on speech act theory (Austin, Searle) and pragmatism to formulate a theory of rationality based on an appeal to linguistic performance. Utterances, he argues, are made intelligible within rational frameworks of giving, and attending to, reasons. Moreover, as reasoning speakers implicitly or explicitly lay claim to universal validity, they anticipate a universal forum in which their utterances may find rational validation. This is the case both for utterances claiming theoretical and practical validity. For utterances expressing an inner world of emotions, however, the relevant claim to sincerity gets expressed via consistency in action. To the three different kinds of utterances – constatives, regulatives,

and expressives – correspond three value spheres that in modernity are, and in Habermas's view should be, differentiated: the scientific, the moral/juridical, and the aesthetic.

Subsequent to the publication of *The Theory of Communicative Action*, the notion of discourse, and of communicative rationality as a communal endeavor being distinctly different from instrumental rationality, suggested to Habermas a number of vistas for further research. Seeking to articulate a principle of universalization from the commitments purportedly undertaken by participants in moral discourse, he formulated a discourse ethics. In the 1990s and onward, Habermas also brought his theory to bear on the legal realm, constructing a liberal, communicative, and universalist theory of the modern *Rechtsstaat*. Sharply distancing himself from legal positivism and decisionism, he promoted close ties between the institutions and procedures of liberal democracy (including a functioning public sphere) and the self-constitution, through the creation of law, of the liberal-democratic order as sovereign.

A staunch proponent of the values of the Enlightenment, and highly critical of anti-Enlightenment thinking from Heideggerian *Seinsdenken* to deconstruction and postmodernism, Habermas has rightly been received as a rationalist thinker in the Kantian mold. In the first two decades of the new millennium, however, stimulated in part by his 2004 conversation with Joseph Ratzinger, who went on to become Pope Benedict XVI, a considerable amount of his attention has been focused on religion. Along with his continued commitment to “post-metaphysical thinking,” Habermas now grants religion an important role in modern society, legitimately articulating visions of the good life and inspiring social change. While in a liberal order its language should be made compatible with the constraints of rational speech, he grants that it may also present the “unbelieving sons and daughters of modernity” with a sense of limitation and open-mindedness toward metaphysically informed will-formation.

With Axel Honneth and associates such as Rainer Forst, Rahel Jaeggi, Seyla Benhabib, Maeve Cooke, Amy Allen, and many others too numerous to mention here, the tradition of critical theory has added yet another generation. A former assistant of Habermas at the University of Frankfurt, Honneth has been building on his mentor's work while also challenging and adding to it in a number of ways. His perhaps most distinct contribution has centered on developing an account of social recognition. While Habermas has tended to view recognition in terms of rational behavior – for him recognition is largely about acknowledging the other as a free and equal partner in argumentative exchange – Honneth, drawing on developmental psychology and sociology, while repeatedly returning to Hegel, has turned to concrete social processes of conflict, exclusion, and recognition (at the level both of love relations, moral relations, and legal relations). For Honneth, the struggle for recognition becomes the key to theorizing social movements and social progress, suggesting that emancipation is a multifaceted and not always exclusively rational process.

### The Actuality of the Frankfurt School

The German term *Aktualität* – “actuality” – suggesting both contemporaneity, relevance, and the more demanding Hegelian idea of expressing the needs of one's own time in thoughts – was always of great importance to the Frankfurt School. Rather than aspiring to universal validity and risking a divorce from concrete engagement, philosophy and social thought should self-reflectively acknowledge their own historicity and reflect on issues arising in the society from which the theory evolves. Proponents of critical theory, in other words, have prided themselves of voicing a form of critical and historical self-reflexivity, bringing society to greater awareness both of its pathologies and its potentials for progressive social change.

In light of this stance, a volume such as this may risk seeming curatorial, as if it wished only to embalm the achievements of this complex trajectory in a timeless museum of mere

theory. However, it is the editors' hope that rethinking the legacy of critical theory can be of public and contemporary, in addition to merely scholarly, value. By revisiting the theories and stances of possibly the most sustained critical reflection on modern society in the twentieth century, we may find resources to grapple with the urgent challenges of our own time.

Although many of the questions raised by the Frankfurt School are still with us today, new generations of thinkers and activists committed to progressively oriented critique are faced with a world that has changed in a number of ways. Forty years of neoliberal ideology and governance have created a global corporate capitalism whose power and influence now extends far beyond what theorists such as Horkheimer and Adorno had envisioned. In the United States, in particular, we have witnessed an especially egregious intensification of social inequality. The environmental crisis – including climate change – is of a magnitude not previously anticipated and calls for entirely new modes of conceptualizing the achievement and viability of our technological civilization. In Europe and the United States, the idea of communism (or other radical visions of communal self-organization) no longer threatens as the enemy of the capitalist West, nor does it fascinate many theorists on the left. Indeed, the 1989 fall of the Berlin wall seems to have created a very different climate in which to conceive of progressive social change. In what has been a complicated process of theoretical reflection and political experimentation, the left has been forced to reorient itself and abandon much of its erstwhile resistance toward liberal and social democracy. However, we have also witnessed a number of other political transformations, many of them addressing questions of marginalized social identity. Some relate to problems of ethnic diversity and racial oppression, others center on gender and sexual orientation. According to some critics, the Frankfurt School subscribed to a model of historical progress that betrays a persistent if hidden complicity with narratives of patriarchy and imperialism. If that is correct, then the legacy of the Frankfurt School tradition will have to be critically interrogated and revised.

Perhaps the most serious, yet also relevant, challenge for theorists in this tradition is the rise of populist right-wing movements in both Europe and the United States. Today more than ever the old phenomenon of fascism that preoccupied the attention of the first generation of Frankfurt School theorists seems to have reared its head once again. This calls both for new reflection and for returning to the original analyses that have by no means lost their power.

No contemporary proponent of critical theory can afford to ignore these questions. In addition to the many essays focusing on the Frankfurt School considered as a historical phenomenon, this volume also includes contributions that address concerns either untheorized or unanticipated by it. If the volume proves able to serve as a toolbox for both rethinking and reactualizing critical theory, it will have served its purpose.

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Part I

# BASIC CONCEPTS



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# 1

# THE IDEA OF INSTRUMENTAL REASON

*J.M. Bernstein*

## Introduction

If the identification of the normative sources of critique remains the most contested area of Frankfurt School Critical Theory, the focal object of its critical efforts has remained remarkably constant: the formation of capital domination and exploitation that is realized through the rationalization of social relations as a whole under the dominion of instrumental rationality. Although it will require modification, we can take *instrumental rationality* to mean simply means-end rationality, the form of reason required to calculate the necessary and potentially most efficient means for realizing stipulated ends. Critical Theory argues that capital recruits the whole of society to its end of wealth creation – increased capital – by implementing the demands of instrumental reason throughout all the major institutions of society while delegitimizing all competing forms of rational reflection, rational action, and rational interaction. Once we remind ourselves that wealth creation is only a means, an instrument for realizing the satisfaction of human needs, then the societal actualization of instrumental reason, and its virtual hegemony over competing models of rationality, projects a society in which all meaningful human ends disappear.

The names for instrumental reason and its other are multiple; a simple two-column chart makes the range of possibilities evident:

<i>Instrumental reason</i>	<i>Substantive reason</i>
Means-ends rationality	Ends rationality
Hypothetical reason	Moral reason
Causal reason	Teleological reason
Theoretical reason	Practical reason
Scientific reason (“is”)	Normative reason (“ought”)
Technocratic reason	Dialectical reason
Conceptual reason	Mimetic rationality
Identity thinking	Nonidentity thinking
Purposive-rational reason	Communicative reason
Strategic reason	Communicative reason
Moral universalist reason	Dialogic/recognitive reason
Economic reasoning	Political reasoning
Neoliberal reason	Democratic reason



These terms for instrumental reason and its other could be multiplied. The purpose of stating the contrasts in these ways will become evident later.

We will begin by tracing some of the historical antecedents of the critique of instrumental reason (Section II). In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno provide a genealogy of instrumental reason, demonstrating that modern scientific rationality is, in fact, a version of instrumental rationality, making the idea of instrumental rationality more capacious than it originally appears (Section III). An effort to make good on Horkheimer and Adorno's failure to explain how instrumental reason can effectively become total is made first by Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (Section IV), then by Jürgen Habermas's foundational essay "Technology and Science as 'Ideology'" – an essay dedicated to "Herbert Marcuse on his seventieth birthday, July 19, 1968" (Habermas 1971: 81) (Section V). In Section VI, I argue that instrumental reason has now become total through the contemporary installation of neoliberal reason and rationality.

### On the Irrationality of Instrumental Reason: Modern and Ancient Antecedents

Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* stands unequivocally as the first modern critique of instrumental-scientific reason (Velkley 1989). Kant understood that if Newton's new mathematical physics – uniting terrestrial and celestial mechanics under one uniform set of causal laws – was taken as total, then all human freedom and all moral norms would be dissolved within the determinism of mechanical nature. Kant's effort to save practical-moral reason from the depredations of theoretical-scientific reason turned on arguing that theoretical reason was but one, albeit necessary, mode of encountering the world and that even the demandingness of causal necessity, invisible to Humean empiricism, came not from the world but from reason's own conception of what constitutes the world as an object of knowledge. Because reason in part actively *constitutes* its object domain by imposing a rational form on the deliverances of the senses, then what we know under an all-too-human set of projected categories – space, time, substance, causality, and community – is the world as it appears to human subjects and not as it is in itself. Having limited the claims of theoretical knowing, Kant thereby left rational room for alternative modes of rational encounter. As opposed to the demands of theoretical reason, Kant argued that moral reason *normatively* governs the grounds on the basis of which it is rational to act: "Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (Kant 1959: 421). Reason *injects* the norm of universality into the deliberative considerations through which reasons for action are formed. While theoretical and practical reason are both products of human spontaneity, theoretical reason involves a third-person, spectator point of view, while practical reason institutes a first-person, agent perspective; by itself, this provides a good reason for considering reason as at least dual – irreducibly theoretical and practical – if not plural in character.

Later idealists supported Kant's heroic effort to salvage human freedom and morality from the ravages of mechanistic science, distinguishing the claims of instrumental-theoretical reason from moral-practical reason. However, beginning with Schiller and Hegel, they also argued that Kant's construction of morality as requiring "universal law" was, appearances to the contrary, another version of scientific-instrumental reason (Bernstein 2001: 136–187). By requiring that agents disown their empathic identifications and sympathetic concerns, that they bracket and even repress immediate desires, loves, passions, needs, and orienting cares in the name of universal law, rational morality becomes a form of alienation and domination. Kant's moral universalism, it is argued, is insufficiently distinct from the universalism of theoretical reason; it is theoretical reason dressed in practical terms. The simplest version of

this critique is to say that Kant's monological conception of reason, in requiring only that all others *formally* be counted in our moral deliberations – our maxims of action must be ones that all others *could*, in principle, share – effectively disqualifies the voices of *actual* dialogue partners from appearing and being heard.

In Kant's own critique of instrumental reason, the fundamental contrast is between theoretical-scientific reason and practical reason: theoretical-scientific reason would *become irrational* if it vanquished all practical reason and claimed to be total; science, after all, cannot even explain the *norms* governing scientific reason itself. In the idealist critique of Kantian moral reason, two different fundamental contrasts are at stake: (i) universal/abstract/formal reason versus particular/situated/context-sensitive reason and (ii) monological reason versus dialogical-communicative reason. In these cases, the claim is that universalist moral reason *becomes irrational*, first, when it dissolves affectively charged claims of sensuous particularity – say, the suffering of another – or overrides contextually formed reasons for action and, second, when it places the demands of abstract rationality – “You must never lie!” – in place of the achievements of communicative interaction. While all versions of Critical Theory are concerned with the emergent authority of scientific-technological reason driving out the claims of practical reason, Horkheimer and Adorno's genealogy of reason focuses primarily on the contrast between abstract universality and concrete sensuous particularity, while Habermas is primarily concerned with the duality between monological reason and communicative reason.

Yet these constructions of reason that have their origin in Kant's engagement with Newtonian science and Hegel's critique of Kantian moral reason seem remote from capital domination and the instrumental logic of wealth creation. In order to draw a bead on the logics of economic reason, we need to step back even further in history.

In Chapters VIII–XI of Book I of *The Politics*, Aristotle interrogates the art of acquisition, “chrematistic” or, as we might call it, economic reasoning. What quickly becomes evident is that Aristotle means his analysis to distinguish rational economic activity from irrational economic activity in a situation in which what he regards as irrational practices of wealth acquisition are fast becoming normalized and dominant (Aristotle 1962: I.ix.16). What is at stake in the debate is what counts as true wealth. Aristotle's answer to this question is that true wealth is “the amount of household property which suffices for a good life” (Aristotle 1962: I.viii.14), that is, true wealth involves having all and only those goods that are “necessary for life and useful to the association of the polis or the household, which are capable of being stored” (Aristotle 1962: I.viii.13). The sudden lurch into “useful to the association of the polis” indicates the true end of wealth acquisition: fulfilling one's ethical destiny as a *zoon politikon*. Which thus explains that final phrase – “which are capable of being stored”: true wealth is naturally *limited* and *finite* because what human living requires are only those goods that are themselves necessary for virtuous living. What is in excess of what is necessary is ethically and rationally superfluous, and hence irrational to pursue or acquire.

If true wealth involves having the ethically requisite goods, illusory or irrational wealth comes into play when the natural practice of exchanging goods, barter – exchanging a chair for three pairs of sandals, say – is replaced by exchange conducted through the medium of currency, money, for profit. While Aristotle agrees that retail trade, selling goods for a profit, can be convenient for a community, it becomes radically distorting and irrational when the endless accumulation of monetary wealth becomes the social measure of true wealth. Not only is monetary wealth useless in itself – you cannot eat a gold coin or live in one, which is the point of the Midas fable – but the idea of monetary wealth makes the art of acquisition *unlimited*, hence without end, so purposeless or meaningless in itself. If even goods and chattels are simply *means* for well-being, then money is solely a *means for acquiring the means* for well-being; money, we might say, is intrinsically instrumental, intrinsically without meaning

or purpose in itself, and thus only a means for acquiring true wealth which, again, is also only a means. While anxiety about one's livelihood and the desire for physical enjoyments that belong to human well-being (Aristotle 1962: L.ix.16) may lead to seeking a superfluity of means, the psychological explanation for this pursuit does not amount to a justification of it. Seeking unlimited monetary wealth is a paradigm of irrational conduct. Or so it seemed to Aristotle; yet we have come to accept it as natural, rational, and even collectively necessary.

In his incisive essay "Industrialization and Capitalism in the Work of Max Weber," Marcuse outlines and extends Weber's account of how *capitalist rationality* – which involves abstraction, the reduction of quality (use values) to quantity (exchange values), and universal functionalization, all enabling "the calculable and calculated *domination* of nature and man" (Marcuse 1968: 205) – turns what was once considered irrational, or merely instrumentally rational, into rationality itself.

If it remains the case that the ultimate or final aim of economic activity is the provision of human needs, how does it come about that the means to this end, the seeking of unlimited monetary wealth, has itself become the driving force of economic life and the condition of societal reproduction? Two historical facts are sufficient to accomplish this transposition of means into end: (1) the pursuit of economic ends is "carried out in the framework of private enterprise and its calculable chances of gain, that is, within the framework of the profit of the individual entrepreneur or enterprise; and (2) consequently, the existence of those whose needs are to be satisfied *depends* on the profit opportunities of the capitalist enterprise" (Marcuse 1968: 206; italics JMB). Once private ownership over the means of production becomes effectively universal, it follows that all goods can be acquired only through market transactions, through exchange. Hence, need satisfaction is only available through the mechanisms that conduce to capitalist profit making. At the extreme, Marcuse underlines, this dependence of the existence of all on the profit-making opportunities of the capitalist is realized when humans have to sell their labor to entrepreneurs in order to survive.

Once money, the doubly instrumental means to well-being, the means for acquiring the other means for survival and more than survival, becomes universally required as a means, the once irrational proposition of acquiring unlimited wealth becomes the presumptive end of collective economic activity, hence rational in itself.

In the unfolding of capitalist rationality, *irrationality* becomes *reason*: reason as frantic development of productivity, conquest of nature, enlargement of the mass of goods (and their accessibility for broad strata of the population); irrational because higher productivity, domination of nature, and social wealth become destructive forces.

(Marcuse 1968: 207)

While the gist of the idea that capitalist reason unleashes "destructive forces" and is thereby irrational in itself is clear enough, in this setting, Marcuse does not say enough as to why capitalist reason should be regarded as irrational, the conversion of a means into an end that is end-destroying. It is just making precise this critique of instrumental reason that is the recurrent object of Critical Theory.

### The Genealogy of Instrumental Reason

In offering a genealogy of instrumental reason, Horkheimer and Adorno explain why we should regard modern scientific reason as a form of instrumental reason and why that formation of reason is potentially irrational in itself unless it comes under the control of or is paired

off in relation to a reason that conduces to substantive human ends. Let me begin with the obvious; here is a list of twenty-seven acts, each of which has reasonable title to be thought of as cognitive or rational, works of human sapience (in whole or part), that in being rule- or norm-governed are thus *rationaly criticizable* – which is a fair criterion of what makes a practice cognitive: naming, reporting, narrating, describing, evaluating (either weighing options or on a determinate scale), measuring, deliberating, explaining, communicating, expressing, interpreting, understanding, imitating, representing, experimenting, determinative judging, reflective judging, translating, presenting, remembering, acts of deduction, induction and abduction, mapping, scanning, composing (e.g., a fugue), and so on. Whether the acts listed are fully distinct, or some are really species of another (explaining a species of the genus deduction, for example) can be left open. What is striking is that already in Kant's anatomy of human reason, effectively only theoretical and practical reason (in its hypothetical and moral forms) are left standing as unequivocally authoritative *and rational*, with reflective judging scrunched haplessly between them (Bernstein 1992: Chapter 1). Even before the emergence of modern positivism, cognition had been effectively reduced to either scientific knowing or moral legislation – with morality precariously balanced, doomed to fall off the pedestal of rationality during the following century. The effective triumph of instrumental reason begins with the hegemony of modern science over human knowing – any claimed cognition that cannot be further translated into science is eliminated from the cognitive canon – leaving instrumental reason to practically install itself through capital's insistent effort to recruit and regiment the whole of social practice to its ends.

The two gestures are united, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, because instrumental reason emerges from its very beginnings in a form in which abstract universality – the unchanging structure of a unitary natural world – devours sensuous particularity and concrete singularity. Genealogically, they perceive the idea of the unity of science as but a further version of mythic patterns of seasonal change: “The world as a gigantic analytic judgment, the only surviving dream of science, is of the same kind as the cosmic myth which linked the alternation of spring and autumn to the abduction of Persephone” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 20). Pressing this thought further, they argue that this model of knowledge, “the subsumption of the actual, whether under mythical prehistory or under mathematical formalism,” is one opposed to radically transformative human action and human invention because, in reducing the different to the same, or what is its equal, making “the new appear as something predetermined which therefore is really the old,” any future that is not repetition is occluded (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 21). Why is this structure, “the principle of immanence, the explanation of every event as repetition” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 8), so rationally powerful?

In order to answer that question, we need crude beginnings. Why do humans propose mythic accounts of the world in the first place? Horkheimer and Adorno propound fear of overwhelming and threatening nature as one motive engine behind efforts of human knowing.

The concept, usually defined as the unity of the features of what it subsumes, was rather, from the first, a product of dialectical thinking, in which each thing is what it is only by becoming what it is not. This was the primal form of the objectifying definition, in which concept and thing became separate ...The gods cannot take away fear from human beings, the petrified cries of whom they bear as their names. Humans believe themselves free of fear when there is no longer anything unknown. This has determined the path of demythologization, of enlightenment, which equates the living with the nonliving as myth had equated the nonliving with the living. *Enlightenment is mythical fear radicalized.* The pure immanence of

positivism, its ultimate product, is nothing other than a form of universal taboo. Nothing is allowed to remain outside, since the mere idea of the “outside” is the real source of fear.

(Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 11; italics JMB)

There is much to unpack in this remarkable passage. Broadly, Horkheimer and Adorno take myth to have been originally equal parts mimetic responsiveness, narration, and (pseudo-) explanation. Myth finally fails because, while it succeeds in making the unfamiliar familiar, as in the cycle of seasons, it does not enable practical control. Enlightenment – which throughout is the code term for the process through which instrumental reason eviscerates its others and becomes hegemonic over knowing and rationality – begins when enlightenment critiques myth. The enlightenment critique of myth operates through virtually the same mechanisms as concept formation generally: the reflective process through which each object becomes what it is not.

What Horkheimer and Adorno mean by this hyperbolic locution of “making things into what they are not” is that in order for some immediately invasive, unknown phenomenon to become known, its immediacy must be negated, and further, it must be placed into a pattern of like occasions: tiny-buzzing-objects-delivering-small-bites is given a concept name, “mosquito,” little fly. The concept detaches the living phenomenon from the experience of it and hence de-subjectivizes it and makes it a worldly element. The actual living-and-biting mosquito is delivered over into the nonliving, abstract species: *mosquito*, the *Culicidae* family. We can acquire confidence that our concept is objective if we can control individual specimens; covering our ears so we don’t hear the buzz doesn’t stop the bite, but vigorously waving a palm leaf does. Further insight and control is enabled when we can bring “mosquito” under a wider, even more abstract concept, say the genus *Culex*. Notice the pattern of this knowing: (i) *reiteration*, that is, taking a singular experience-item and turning it into a repeating kind; (ii) *ascent* from sensuous immediacy to some empirical universality that can be repeated by ascent to a more abstract universality *ad infinitum*; and (iii) taking as true solely those patterns that enable *causal manipulation and control*, thus making reference to the gods otiose (Bernstein 2001: 77–90). In this way, knowledge as deduction from first principles, like Newton’s laws of motion, and knowledge as the possibility of causal manipulation and control are joined. Genealogy reveals how science and technology are grammatically joined from the outset. Instrumental reason, so understood, is all that knowing can be. How can the narrating of past events, say, compare with that?

Enlightenment demythologization can now be interpreted as the critical process through which *any* feature of experience that depends upon subjective experience for its reality – paradigmatically, the perceiving of sensory color arrays – is to be eliminated as less than fully real. Because the emphatic form of scientific knowledge is genealogically bound to its formation out of fear of the unknown and the desire for control and mastery, even at its heights, scientific knowledge is the drive to self-preservation in rational form. It further follows that the same method of negation and overcoming of the naturally given can structure rational morality: “all that reminds us of nature is inferior, so the unity of the self-preserving thought may devour it without misgivings... The sublime mercilessness of the moral law was this kind of rationalized rage at nonidentity” (Adorno 1973: 23).

Horkheimer and Adorno take it as patent that the same underlying mechanisms of rationalization that enjoined the mathematization of nature have enjoined the procedures of capital production whereby every qualitative use value must be quantified into an exchange value (Marx 1976: 125–244), with further mechanisms of supply and demand, monetary policy, borrowing rates, financialization, etc. allowing the economy as a whole to become a complex, presumptively law-governed machine. Critical Theory begins with the pessimistic

thought that not socialism but fascism represents the realization of modern rationality since it continued reason's work of domination through integration and unification. Auschwitz completes the process: "in the camps it was no longer an individual but a specimen who died" (Adorno 1973: 362). In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, however, Horkheimer and Adorno, looking forward to our present, exemplify their thesis that instrumental rationality has now become total in their account of the culture industry (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 94–135). They argue that the culture industry – the name intended as an oxymoron; the process it depicts the turning of culture away from resistant ideality and toward disabling pacification (Bernstein 1991: 1–25) – is the form society integration takes in liberal capitalist regimes. While the idea of the culture industry seems plausible enough (Adorno 1991), giving it the role of demonstrating how instrumental rationality becomes total is implausible. However numbing Hollywood cinema could be and however exhausting soap opera television would become, they can hardly be thought of as the realization of instrumental rationality, the final piece of the puzzle that allows it to become total. The culture industry thesis is too remote from the truly dynamic and innovative powers of capital. And it is there we need to look in order to gain a clearer insight into how instrumental reason could not only become hegemonic with respect to human knowing and morality – for that claim, Horkheimer and Adorno's theory seems powerful (Bernstein 2001) – but also become effectively total for social practice generally.

### Capitalist Reason: Fusing Technology and Domination

In the 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx argues that within an economic regime, the scientific, technological, and material forces of production continue to grow and develop until such time as the existing relations of production, the existing legally codified property relations of the regime, become "fetters" to continuing development; at this moment "begins an epoch of social revolution" (Marx 1971: 21). On this account, an economic regime becomes irrational when its relations of production prevent continued and further development of existing forces of production, preventing the expansion, improvement, and creation of new forces of production. Yet, as Marx himself was aware, this is a poor description of capitalism. As he famously urges in *The Communist Manifesto*,

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society...Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones.

(Marx 1977: 224)

In *Capital, Volume I*, Marx is even more explicit about how, by the nineteenth century, the traditional craft development of manufacturing processes suddenly gave way to development through "the modern science of technology." Marx continues,

Modern industry never views or treats the existing form of a production process as the definitive one. Its *technical basis is therefore revolutionary*, whereas all earlier modes of production were essentially conservative. By means of machinery, chemical processes and other methods, it is continually transforming not only the technical basis of production but also the functions of the work and the social combinations of the labor process.

(Marx 1976: 617; italics JMB)

Later in the same paragraph, Marx goes on to chart the human costs of the now revolutionary technical basis for large-scale industry.

We have seen how this contradiction does away with all repose, all fixity and all security as far as the worker's life-situation is concerned; how it constantly threatens, by taking away the instruments of labour, to snatch from his hands the means of subsistence, and by suppressing his special function, to make him superfluous. We have seen, too, how this contradiction bursts forth without restraint in the ceaseless human sacrifices required from the working class, the reckless squandering of labour-powers, and the devastating effects of social anarchy. This is the negative side.

(Marx 1976: 617–618)

If one were in doubt about whether Marx was here making an *ethical critique* of capital, he concludes this same paragraph by arguing that the “monstrosity, the disposable working population held in reserve, in misery” for whatever labor capital might require at any time should be replaced by “the individual man,” by, that is, “the totally developed individual, for whom different social functions are different modes of activity he takes up in turn” (Marx 1976: 618).

Arguably, Marx adopted this ethical mode of critique because, in fact, capital relations of production are perfectly suited to the science and technology-driven revolutionary growth in forces of production that have become intrinsic to capital development in general. But if this is the case, then from where *within capital* is such a critique to be lodged? For maximizing the sheer growth potential of modern technology, capital's own restless process of seeking wealth creation seems an ideal partner: the desire for profit spurs technological innovation, and technological innovations spur new paths for profit making and wealth creation. It is the premise of Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* that it is this entanglement of science and technology with capital that is *now* the source of the *rationality deficits* of capital, that capital should be understood as the ensemble of technocratic rationality (one version of instrumental rationality) and capitalist relations of production (another version of instrumental rationality) whose essential character is to eviscerate and dissolve competing conceptions of reason and rationality. After all, if one thinks that modern science is the paradigm case of human knowledge, and modern technology is the paradigm case of the practical utilization of modern scientific knowing for benefiting human living, then because capital's restless pursuit of profit and wealth occurs through the maximization of technological advancement, it follows that under conditions in which growth in need satisfaction is the erratic but continuous by-product of economic growth, *capital reason can authorize itself as the social form appropriate to modern technological rationality, making the capital-technology ensemble the realization of a wholly modern idea of rationality – instrumental rationality become total*. Marcuse's version of the thesis that there is now no alternative to capital thus states, “when technics becomes the universal form of material production, it circumscribes an entire culture; it projects a historical totality – a ‘world’” (Marcuse 1986: 154).

Marcuse's orienting thesis that the ensemble of science, technology, and capital should be construed as a totalizing *political* project in which capitalist exploitation – the interests and power of the capitalist class – is veiled by technological rationality is an incisive insight into modern societies. Notoriously, however, in order to forge an appropriate critique of technocratic capital, Marcuse is tempted by the thesis that neither modern science nor modern technology are neutral in themselves; they are intrinsically dominating and destructive: “It is my purpose to demonstrate the *internal* instrumentalist character of this scientific rationality

by virtue of which it is a *a priori* technology, and the *a priori* of a *specific* technology – namely, technology as a form of social control and domination” (Marcuse 1986: 157–158).

Here is the gist of Marcuse’s disastrous argument:

The principles of modern science were *a priori* structured in such a way that they could serve as conceptual instruments for a universe of self-propelling productive control; theoretical operationalism came to correspond to practical operationalism. The scientific method which to the ever-more-effective domination of nature thus came to provide the pure concepts as well as the instrumentalities of the ever-more-effective domination of man by man *through* the domination of nature.

(Marcuse 1986: 158)

Although it is not transparent to which “principles” Marcuse is referring, let us assume that he intends the abstraction from context and sensuous particularity that enabled the reduction of quality to quantity and the elimination of all features of things not subject to causal manipulation. Jointly, these requirements empty the world of value properties. It is these features of scientific rationality that, again, *a priori* make scientific results available for instrumental employment.

Scientific knowledge is potentially technologically exploitable because it is causally bound. Nonetheless, there is a huge gap between items being in principle subject to causal manipulation and the claim that what arises through these means is biased in the direction of control and domination. Surely, the most obvious feature of modern technology is that it is *indiscriminate* – effectively neutral – between productive and destructive uses: the undeniable progress that comes with the invention of electric lighting, indoor plumbing, energy production, and lifesaving vaccines can be contrasted with the emphatic destruction of the polluting of vital water supplies, the depositing of carbon dioxide and greenhouse gases into the atmosphere causing global warming, deforestation, and the extinction of whole species of living beings at between 1,000 and 10,000 times the (naturally occurring) background rate on the other.

Such indiscriminateness between what is humanly productive and what is insistently naturally and humanly destructive is a kind of irrationality in its own right, albeit one very different from the direct “fusion of technology and domination” (Habermas 1971: 85) that Marcuse had in mind. Indiscriminateness, it might thus be argued (Feenberg 1988: 242–244), reveals a bias within presumptive neutrality when what is being evaluated is not science and technology on their own but solely as components of the *capitalist ensemble*, a linkage of science to technology and technology to capital production that has been the social shape of all these practices since the nineteenth century. Because societal rationalization under the dominion of technological reason has occurred within capitalist relations of production, “rational” advances have always leaned emphatically toward those suitable for wealth creation. What appears indiscriminate from the perspective of human advancement is determined and rational from the perspective of wealth creation. Hence, capital reason is indiscriminate and irrational.

We have now returned to the exact place where our discussion of the long paragraph from *Capital* broke off, namely, with capital’s technologically charged revolutionary dynamic being indifferent to the human and natural wreckage it leaves in its wake. The question we raised there remains: from what vantage point is the critique of capital reason to be lodged? Whither the presumptive authority of the human and natural good that technology destroys? A vindicable critique of instrumental reason minimally involves legitimating a



contrasting form of reason. Marcuse's effort to legitimate "dialectical reason" is more gesture than irrefragable argument. Scientific knowing is always *descriptive*, binding knowledge to *the given* in its insistent present, a simple saying of how things truly are. Dialectical reason, conversely, conceives of things in light of what can be regarded as their "essential potentialities" (Feenberg 1988: 246): just as it is the essential potentiality of the acorn to become an oak, it is the essential historical potentiality of modern technology, Marcuse argues, to be oriented toward "pacification" (of the struggle for existence between man and nature, and man and man) and the "free development of human needs and faculties" through *determinate negation*, that is, through practices that see in the current situation occluded possibilities that would become available for realization through the negation of specific limiting factors – above all, capitalist class relations (Marcuse 1986: 218–223).

### Labor and Interaction: Practical Reason versus Communicative Reason

Even if one is sympathetic to Marcuse's modest adumbration of an alternative social ontology, he does not go nearly far enough in sourcing it within social relations. From the beginning of his career, Habermas sought to distinguish and vindicate an alternative to instrumental rationality while providing a systematic explanation of its all too evident social triumph. Habermas distinguishes two irreducible forms of human action: purposive-rational action and communicative action. Purposive-rational action comes in two varieties: actions directed toward things, instrumental action, and actions directed toward human others as if they were mere things, strategic action. Communicative action is a form of symbolic interaction among humans governed

by binding *consensual norms*, which define reciprocal expectations about behavior and which must be understood and recognized by at least two acting subjects. Social norms are enforced through sanctions. Their meaning is objectified in ordinary language communication. While the validity of technical rules and strategies depends on that of empirically true or analytically correct propositions, the validity of social norms is grounded *only in the intersubjectivity of mutual understanding of intentions and secured by the general recognition of obligations*.

(Habermas 1971: 92)

Habermas provides a useful chart distinguishing the two action types (Habermas 1971: 93) (Table 1.1):

The thought that ordinary language is a mechanism of communication and interaction, and, simultaneously, a repository of authoritative norms and values – some internalized as components of rational personality while others remaining external social norms, laws, governing reluctant conduct – would seem *prima facie* unassailable. Over the course of his career, Habermas has been routinely tempted by panicky and exorbitant defenses of the authority of communicative action; for example, "What raises us out of nature is the only thing whose nature we can know: *language*. Through its structure, autonomy and responsibility are posited for us. Our first sentence expresses unequivocally the intention of a universal and unconstrained consensus" (Habermas 1972: 314). None of these claims possess even *prima facie* plausibility. Nonetheless, the space to which communicative action points, of normatively structured practices of interdependence among socially cooperating subjects, is essential to even a minimal conception of human self-consciousness (Bernstein 2015).

Habermas's broad thesis is that traditional society was held in place by the validity of intersubjectively shared norms and values accepted as immune to critical interrogation,

Table 1.1

	<i>Institutional framework: symbolic interaction</i>	<i>Systems of purposive-rational (instrumental and strategic) action</i>
Action-orienting rules	Social norms	Technical rules
Level of definition	Intersubjectively shared ordinary language	Context-free language
Type of definition	Reciprocal expectations about behavior	Conditional predications, conditional imperatives
Mechanisms of acquisition	Role internalization	Learning of skills and qualifications
Function of action type	Maintenance of institutions (conformity to norms on the basis of reciprocal enforcement)	Problem-solving (goal attainment, defined in means-ends relations)
Sanctions against violation of rules	Punishment on the basis of conventional sanctions: failure against authority	Inefficacy: failure in reality
“Rationalization”	Emancipation, individuation; extension of communication free of domination	Growth of productive forces; extension of power of technical control

hence by the subordination of subsystems of rational action to symbolic norms. Because within modern societies, those same subsystems of rational action have institutionalized incessant innovation, their very revolutionizing dynamism makes the domain of intersubjective normativity subject to adaptive pressures from below, and, at the same time and thereby, critique, thus making the norms hibernating in communicative reason in continuing and urgent need of reflective validation (Habermas 1971: 94–96). The innovative dynamism of the subsystems of rational action – science, technology, and the market – inevitably expand their reach, including under their control practices heretofore normatively regulated: “the organization of labor and of trade, the network of transportation, information, and communication, the institutions of private law, and, starting with financial administration, the state bureaucracy” (Habermas 1971: 98). In this way, logics of instrumental action begin overtaking and absorbing domains previously subject to solely communicative modes of justification and validation. This is what Marcuse meant by the “functionalization” of society.

From this point on, Habermas’s argument can join hands with Marcuse’s, with some noteworthy variations: the institution of the market in which propertyless individuals exchange their labor power “promises that exchange relations will be and are just owing to equivalence,” thus making bourgeois justice emerge from below (in the market) rather than from above (from political authority); traditional worldviews are replaced by “subjective belief systems and ethics”; the new modes of instrumental legitimation, by criticizing the dogmatism of traditional metaphysical beliefs systems, can don the mantle of science; this latter process entails that “ideologies are coeval with the critique of ideology” (Habermas 1971: 97–99). Where Marcuse and Habermas join is over the threefold claim: (i) “With the advent of large-scale industrial research, science, technology, and industrial utilization were fused into a system” (Habermas 1971: 104); (ii) with the “institutionalization of scientific-technical progress, the potential of the productive forces has assumed a form owing to which *men lose consciousness of the dualism of work and interaction*” (Habermas 1971: 105; italics JMB); and (iii) technocratic consciousness, as the ideological alibi for

capital expansion, no longer appears *as ideology* because “it is not based in the same way on the causality of dissociated symbols and unconscious motives, which generates both false consciousness and the power of reflection to which the critique of ideology is indebted” (Habermas 1971: 111).

Although Habermas will expand and elaborate these theses at length, the second in particular is on its surface peculiar: so hypnotized have we become by technology and science as ideologies, we have simply *lost consciousness* of the dualism of work and interaction. Even in 1968, this was a dubious account of the fate of value consciousness in late modernity, as if ‘68 itself never happened, or civil rights, or feminism, or the return of religious consciousness, or protests to save the environment, or any of the other clarification calls of value-oriented (value-rational) consciousness. Such consciousness may indeed have become increasingly ineffective, in part because it has been subordinated to the adaptive demands for economic growth as a societal *a priori*, but is that a full and adequate explanation for the evident and continuing dissolution of effective democratic decision making into “plebiscitary decisions about alternative sets of leaders of administrative personnel” (Habermas 1971: 105)?

### Neoliberal (Instrumental) Reason: The End of Democracy?

Despite the jeremiads of Critical Theory, the heroic battles by labor unions to protect the rights and lives of workers, and the great struggles of socialist and communist parties throughout Europe, the truth is that from the end of the nineteenth century through the first three-quarters of the twentieth century, what can be called *the great settlement* between capitalist production and liberal democracy looked to an emerging majority of citizens of the North Atlantic civilization as a viable and worthy civilizational option. The ruthless yet spectacular productivity of capital, despite its recurrent crises, appeared to be an increasingly viable mechanism for need satisfaction, while the liberal democratic state, however compromised by big business and financial capital, seemed legitimate enough as it fought to offset the human costs of capital; adopted pro-employment Keynesian economic policies; and, by expanding educational opportunities, increased the proportion of the population having access to its benefits. Piquantly capturing a vital moment of twentieth-century desire and hopefulness, Paola Marrati states that “The American dream is...no less universal than the communist dream. The American nation-civilization distinguishes itself from the old nations: it wants to be the country of all immigrants, *the new world*, but the new world is precisely the one that finally accomplishes the broken promises of the old world” (Marrati 2008: 102).

All that American dreaming and European welfare state desire and hopefulness that were especially vibrant and gripping in the years immediately following World War II are now – as of January 1, 2017 – in shreds: the historic tendency of capital to increase the inequality between the wealthy and the rest of the populace has massively reasserted itself (Piketty 2014); everywhere the welfare state is being slowly dismantled and/or privatized, and the pace of destitution of the environment increases daily. Whatever democratic self-determination once meant, it now seems but a thin accompaniment to a plutocratic capitalism, a willing henchman for securing the worst.

But this new state of political paralysis, this current and even more emphatic reduction of democracy to becoming the administrative helpmate of capital domination, is less a product of the science and technology ideological contouring of capital, although that ideological tune can still be heard, basso, in the winds of change, than of a new formation of instrumental reason: neoliberal reason. There is a hint of this transformation in Habermas when he argues that “technocratic consciousness reflects not the sundering of an ethical

situation but the repression of ‘ethics’ as such as a category of life. The common, positivist way of thinking renders inert the frame of reference of interactions in ordinary language” (Habermas 1971: 112). Nonetheless, the thesis that it is “technocratic consciousness” that represses ethics “as a category of life” is too narrow to be an adequate explanation. Habermas, like Marcuse, thinks of capital as “emanating” a form of repressive rationality rather than instituting a new political rationality of its own (Brown 2015: 119–120). Neoliberal reason is a *constitutive* form of political reason that operates through a restructuring of subjectivity and self-consciousness; it operates by giving the agent a new normative self-understanding by instituting new rational norms for action, a new conduct of conduct (Foucault 2008), that means to systematically *displace* and finally *erase* ethical normativity as such. It is in the work of Michel Foucault and Wendy Brown that we find this completion of the Critical Theory account of instrumental reason.

In the first instance, neoliberalism emerges as an ideological project, namely, to model the overall exercise of political power on the principles of the market economy. Initially, this leads to a familiar bundle of policy prescriptions: the deregulation of enterprises and financial markets, the reduction of welfare state provisions, the removing of state protections for the most vulnerable, the privatizing and outsourcing of what had been public goods, and a shift away from progressive tax schemes and toward regressive ones (Brown 2015: 28). But these policy shifts themselves ride on the back of two more far-reaching, norm-destroying structural transformations. As noted earlier, even if honored only in the breach, the idea of *fair exchange* belongs to the normative infrastructure of market relations under capital that stretches up and into the ideals of liberal justice. Neoliberalism replaces the exchange of commodities by “mechanisms of *competition*” that are in no way natural, not a product of the “natural interplay of appetites, instincts, behavior”; rather, competition is conceived of as a privilege and a formalization of social interactions set in place through “the price mechanism” (Foucault 2008: 147; 120; 131). After all, it is competition among enterprises rather than a fair exchange of commodities that promotes economic growth. But once one makes competition primary over exchange, the very idea of *equality* and equality-driven conceptions of justice must be surrendered. *Inequality* is not only inevitable in capitalism; it is also a necessary consequence of a system of competition in which there are winners and losers; any effort to correct for inequality would hence disturb the dynamic of competition which is the motor of growth.

In order for these shifts from normative regulation – fair exchange and equality – into competitively structured instrumental practices of wealth acquisition to become fully actual, economic agents must somehow reconceive their fundamental acts: if workers are not exchanging their labor power as a commodity for money, what are they doing? Neoliberals argue that economics is not the analysis of processes but the analysis of an activity; hence, it perceives workers not as objects of capitalist mechanisms but as subjects of market interactions. Here is Foucault’s description of the path through which labor is reconceived of as *human capital*, beginning with the obvious thought that people work for a wage, and their wage equals their income:

From the point of view of the worker, the wage is an income, not [*pace* Marx] the price at which he sells his labor power ... An income is quite simply the product or return on a capital. Conversely, we will call “capital” everything that in one way or another can be a source of future income... Now what is the capital of which the wage is the income? Well, it is all those physical and psychological factors which make someone able to earn this or that wage... [If] capital is thus defined as that which makes future income possible, this income being a wage, then you can see that it is a capital which in practical terms is inseparable from the person who

possesses it... This is not a conception of labor power; it is a conception of capital-ability which according to diverse variables, receives a certain income that is a wage, an income wage, so that the worker himself *appears as a sort of enterprise for himself*.

(Foucault 2008: 224–225)

If wages can be taken as a return on capital, then the worker herself, all the abilities she does or could invest in her working, is capital; hence, she is effectively an enterprise. If the worker can appear as an enterprise for herself, then it follows that the whole of society can be theorized as made up of “enterprise-units, [which] is at once the principle of decipherment linked to [neo]liberalism and its programming for the rationalization of a society and an economy” (Foucault 2008: 225). The rationalization of society can be completed if market relations can become the model of all social interactions, that is, if social relations as a whole can be economized; this becomes possible once the principle of optimizing “the allocation of scarce resources to a determinate end” can be generalized (Foucault 2008: 269). But this can be generalized to any actions that are necessarily “sensitive to modifications in the variables of the environment” in nonrandom ways (Foucault 2008: 269).

Neoliberalism is not exhaustively a set of economic policies, a phase of capitalist development, or an ideology; it is a form of reason that turns citizen-subjects into human capital, into enterprises and entrepreneurs of their own lives (Brown 2015: 31). Neoliberalism universalizes market instrumental rationality by turning citizen-subjects into uniformly atomistic economic units who are forced to conceive of themselves in entrepreneurial and enterprise terms. Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theoretical way of modeling economic life, but by instituting a series of policies – privatizing public goods, removing welfare protections, legitimating competition and inequality, etc. – it comes to *require* a new self-fashioning of the subject where each, in order to participate in society and in order to survive, must conceive of herself as human capital and hence adopt new norms of rational behavior – instrumental norms. For example, even the economic refugee is no longer a hungry and needy subject in search of work; he is a part of the enterprise culture: “Migration is an investment; the migrant is an investor. He is an entrepreneur of himself who incurs expenses by investing [= migrating] to obtain some kind of improvement” (Foucault 2008: 230). And casting the net even wider, mothering can be conceived of as investing in “the child’s human capital, which will produce an income,” while the mother’s return on her investment “will be a psychological income” (Foucault 2008: 244). Nothing escapes the net of rationalization; all human relations are instrumental.

In this world, there are no affective bonds and no recognized human dependencies; good governance becomes problem-solving rather than justice making; the rule of law is instrumentalized, and the market itself becomes the ultimate truth-maker, “the site of veridiction” (Brown 2015: 67). Above all, Brown argues, *homo politicus* disappears.

This subject, *homo politicus*, forms the substance and legitimacy of whatever democracy might mean beyond securing the individual provisioning of individual ends; this “beyond” includes political equality and freedom, representation, popular sovereignty, and deliberation and judgment about the public good and the common.

(Brown 2015: 87)

As we have argued throughout, the critique of instrumental reason depends on the sustaining of “a different lexical and semiotic register from capital” (Brown 2015: 208). Moral reason, dialectical reason, and communicative reason are each an effort in this direction.

Arguably, however, whatever the conceptual bona fides of these competing rationalities are, they can only be effective in relation to neoliberalism's economization and financialization of social relations through a competing *institutional practice*. In urging the claims of democracy against the market, Brown is also urging the rationality of *homo politicus* as a theoretical and practical critical counterweight to the incipient reign of *homo oeconomicus*. If the republican ideal of active citizenship promoting the public good truly fades from view, finally stops inspiring collective public action, there is no reason to believe that a philosophical critique of neoliberal reason, instrumental reason triumphant, could matter.

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## Further Reading

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S. Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Polity Press, 1998), is the most helpful introduction to his philosophy available. William Leiss, *The Domination of Nature* (Boston: Beacon, 1974) provides a masterful overview of this central idea of Marcuse. Peter Dews (ed.), *Habermas: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) remains the most useful critical collection of essays on Habermas' thought, while T. McCarthy's *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas* (London: Hutchinson 1978) is still the most thorough reconstruction of the

central doctrines. Max Horkheimer, *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, trans. M.J. O'Connell and others (New York: Continuum, 1974) offers his less-known views on the triumph of the state-bureaucratic apparatus in the twentieth century. Within a huge literature, two helpful accounts of neoliberalism are: Jamie Peck, *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); and A. Saad-Fiho (ed.), *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader* (London: Pluto Press, 2014). For an account of the debate around instrumental rationality in current analytic philosophy, see the excellent article by Niko Kolodny and John Brunero in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rationality-instrumental/>).

## 2

# THE IDEA OF THE CULTURE INDUSTRY

*Juliane Rebentisch and Felix Trautmann*

The chapter on the cultural industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is without a doubt one of the most influential texts in the history of film, media, and cultural studies, albeit as a kind of negative horizon against which these new disciplines could emerge. Although the pessimism, rigidity, and totalizing character of its argumentation has given occasion for corrections and differentiations, the issues addressed by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer continue to reappear in these disciplines in ever new forms. In fact, historicizing the many turns back to this text and inquiring about its future potential within the respective fields would probably demand a study of its own. The aim of this text is somewhat different as it reaches beyond the specialized interests of film, media, and cultural studies, and focuses instead on just a few, though quite fundamental, questions within the broad debate on the current relevance of the “idea of the culture industry.”

In order to identify these questions, we first need to reach past Adorno and Horkheimer all the way back to Alexis de Tocqueville, who offered the earliest theory of the culture industry (Part I). His book *Democracy in America* centers on his claim that democracy is endangered by distorted versions of the value of equality so crucial to democracy: homogeneity and conformism, averageness, and mediocrity threaten to hollow out the life of democracies from within. Tocqueville offers various different, not entirely compatible interpretations of this problem (see Rebentisch and Trautmann 2017) – one of which would have a significant influence on the analysis of the idea of the culture industry in the first half of the twentieth century. He presents a political critique of commodified [*ökonomisierte*] culture, of how it transforms the nature of production, consumption, and products themselves, as well as of their ethical and political implications. Following this critique, one must distinguish between two different lines of argumentation. Whereas the first tends to associate the culture industry with mass culture, contrasting both with art (Part II), the second regards the idea of the culture industry as enabling a critical perspective within an investigation of mass culture; it does not reject mass culture out of hand but defends it for all its ambivalences (Part III). If the concept of the culture industry is not equated with the concept of mass culture, but rather indicates certain problems within mass culture, this concept proves fruitful even today, just as the analyses of Adorno and Horkheimer prove, despite their historical nature, extraordinarily prescient (Parts IV and V).

### **Tocqueville’s Early Theory of the Culture Industry**

In the chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that deals with the culture industry, Adorno and Horkheimer confirm explicitly Tocqueville’s diagnosis of a democratic “tyranny of



the majority,” which does not suppress the body, but rather encourages a conformism of the mind. They claim that this diagnosis “has in the meantime proved wholly accurate” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997: 133). “Culture now impresses the same stamp on everything” (Ibid: 120) is one of the more well-known formulations in this connection. Tocqueville’s description of artistic productions in early democratic American mass culture does, in fact, anticipate aspects that would also come to dominate Adorno and Horkheimer’s claims about the late-capitalist culture industry over one hundred years later. If Tocqueville’s book *Democracy in America* indeed contains, as Claus Offe put it, a “surprisingly developed theory of a ‘culture industry’” (Offe 2005: 27), this is especially true for his descriptions of how the democratization and marketization of culture could combine in such a way as to impinge on the cultivation of differences so crucial to democratic life.

According to Tocqueville, the possibility of social mobility in democracies causes the production of culture to become interwoven with commercial interests. In democracies, many people are wealthier than their ancestors, which, in turn, usually means that they also have a disproportionately greater number of desires and thus long for goods they cannot afford (see Tocqueville 2010: 791). Although people in all societies desire to be more and different from what they are in reality, the social mobility characteristic of democratic societies adds a new facet to this problem: the “hypocrisy of luxury” (Ibid: 793). This is precisely the problem to which low-cost production is the answer, and, as Tocqueville points out, it solves this problem by developing “better, shorter and more skillful means of producing,” as well as the large-scale production of commodities of lesser value.

Tocqueville goes on to say that this same dynamic also takes hold of artistic production: while aristocrats, with their traditional penchant for the consummate products of the fine arts, become impoverished, the up-and-coming democrats, whose inclination for the arts is just awakening, have not yet become rich. Although there are more consumers of culture, the number of “very rich and very refined consumers” (Ibid: 793–794) dwindles. Therefore, Tocqueville surmises that in the long run the cultural sphere will also see a greater number of lower-quality works. Grand and unique works of art will come to be replaced by smaller, more easily reproducible forms: “In aristocracies you do a few great paintings, and, in democratic countries, a multitude of small pictures. In the first, you raise bronze statues, and, in the second, you cast plaster statues” (Ibid: 794). Whether this hierarchy of large versus small paintings and bronze versus plaster sculptures is convincing or not is a question we will have to put aside.

Despite, or perhaps precisely because of Tocqueville’s aristocratic blindness to the originality of the new, democratic arts, he develops a particularly strong sense for the reshaping of culture along market lines, which became ever more apparent in his day. Ignoring the democratic arts’ interest in the ordinary and the everyday, previously excluded from the aesthetic sphere, he notes, for instance, that the new dynamic of distinction with its monotonous expressions of difference does not revive the democratic spirit but restricts it. Not only do individuals remain attached to the value system characteristic of aristocratic culture, but distinction and the imitation of others’ successful distinctions also lead to the rapprochement of the various classes previously locked in an unchanging hierarchy, but only by making their remaining differences all the more apparent (Ibid: 773). Equality itself therefore not only “induces a desire for ever more equality” but also evokes that “even the smallest difference becomes the greatest annoyance” (Offe 2005: 20) – a dynamic that came to be known in the social sciences as the “Tocqueville paradox.” Finally, as Tocqueville shows with reference to literature, the commodification of the democratic lifeworld causes a fundamental shift in the function of art. Even for aristocrats, who in democracies no longer enjoy the privilege of unrestrictedly busying themselves with the arts, there is less and less time to read. Reading thus becomes a matter of instant gratification, a “temporary and necessary relaxation amid the serious work of life” (Tocqueville 2010: 808).

According to Tocqueville, the fact that writers must cope with the new economy of time and the accompanying need for rapid consumption points to a much more fundamental dependence. He argues that because democrats disregard tradition and refuse to be bound by its rules, the sole basis for the legitimacy of a literary work is the recognition of the “incoherent and agitated multitude” from which the authors emerge and to which they succumb (Ibid: 808). For Tocqueville, this is one of the major symptoms of what he calls the “tyranny of the majority”: “No writer, no matter how famous, can escape this obligation to heap praise upon his fellow citizens” (Ibid: 419). Although Tocqueville fails to mention literary critique, which struggles to find criteria for distinguishing democratic culture from aristocratic standards of artistic quality, his aristocratic blindness to the innovations of democratic culture corresponds to his particularly sharp eye for the crucial role played by consumption and sale in the cultural productions within a democratic society. “Democracy not only makes the taste for letters penetrate the industrial classes, it introduces the industrial spirit into literature.” Writers have become “sellers of ideas” (Ibid) who have subjected themselves to the mass market and, driven by the desire for economic success, pander to the desires of the reading masses. Yet the fact that those who give impulses to the masses are themselves dependent on the masses, at least partially conforming to their ordinary tastes in order to maintain their own extraordinary position, gives rise to the danger – emphasized by Adorno and Horkheimer in the Tocquevillian tradition – that anything incompatible with the taste of the masses will end up being marginalized.

Tocqueville’s critique of early mass culture conveys a radically democratic concern for the life of the democracies in which this culture thrives, but from an aesthetic perspective, it remains largely bound to aristocratic standards. Adorno and Horkheimer, who further develop the theory of the culture industry, transform Tocqueville’s contrast between aristocratic art and democratic mass culture into a contrast between art that emancipates and a culture industry that merely affirms existing social relations.

### Art and the Culture Industry

In order to understand the idea of the culture industry, especially as it appears in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, it must be contrasted to the concept of art. Such a contrast, which is also crucial to Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, is particularly important given that art and the products of the culture industry share a certain detachment from the so-called “seriousness of life.” The difference between the two therefore depends on how we articulate this detachment. As Adorno notes in his essay “Is Art Lighthearted?” there is a “measure of truth” in Schiller’s “platitude about art’s lightheartedness” (Adorno 1992: 248). According to Adorno, however, the inkling of truth in Schiller’s famous verse, “life is serious, art is cheerful” – to be found at the end of the prologue to his play *Wallenstein* – lies in the structure of art as art. Art embodies something like “freedom in the midst of unfreedom” (Ibid) for its existence does not immediately serve the aim of self-preservation. Herein lies for Adorno art’s promise of happiness, as it points beyond the existing society. Furthermore, art always deals with appearances, with an “as if,” with the playfulness that elevates art above social reality with all its consequences and its seriousness.

Nevertheless, there is no question that art, like the products of the culture industry, is a part of the late-capitalist society from which it emerges. Where cultural production imagines itself as the playful counterpart to serious society, it in fact becomes a compensatory “shot in the arm” (Ibid). It thus distorts our perspective on the real political transformation of society. The normative consequence in Adorno’s eyes is that the products of the culture industry cease to be art in the true sense of the term and instead become cultural commodities. He believes that as long as art does not take up a critical stance

on the unreconciled state of society, it will merely serve the compensatory need of the already-existing society rather than pointing to possibilities beyond its horizon; it thus “betrays” the truth content of art (Ibid: 249). Thoroughly lighthearted works congeal into cultural commodities, whereas art in the full sense of the term must address and reflect on the form and content of the contradiction between its own playful structure and the seriousness of the unreconciled society in which it is embedded. In his famous essay on Beckett, Adorno thus writes, “Today the dignity of art is measured not according to whether or not it evades this antinomy through lack or skill, but in terms of how it bears it” (Adorno 1992: 250).

This argument can also be found in the critique of the enlightenment found in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. According to the rough history the book sketches, subjectivity arises once individuals emerge from their subjection to the forces of nature and their common fate, that is, once they come to understand themselves as autonomous subjects. The playful character of art, its structural autonomy, does not arise until the historical moment in which art detaches itself from ritual. Art and subjectivity thus appear as linked elements in the same process of enlightenment. The enlightenment itself, however, this being the most well-known claim in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, has failed to redeem its promise of subjective freedom and reconciliation with nature. Subjective freedom has instead taken on the perverted form of a domination of nature that set in motion the logic of reification that also encompasses the relations between individuals and their own self-relations. Although the playfulness of art and the laughter of subjects are, on the one hand, signs of successful enlightenment, they also ruin this laughter “the more profoundly society fails to deliver the reconciliation that the bourgeois spirit promised as the enlightenment of myth” (Ibid: 251). According to Adorno, in an unreconciled society, laughter is less an expression of a deep humanity than a relapse into inhumanity. This emphasis, as well as the resoluteness of his opposition to the culture industry and its organized amusement, can only be sufficiently understood against the backdrop of the holocaust. After Auschwitz, Adorno feels that lighthearted art threatens to ideologically conceal bourgeois society’s potential for destruction by distracting us from that potential and thereby supporting its corresponding structures. From this perspective, laughter appears to defraud us of our own happiness – this is the context for one of the most famous phrases in the chapter on the culture industry: “Fun is a medicinal bath” (Adorno/Horkheimer 1997: 140).

This rejection of pleasure and lightheartedness in art is not, however, intended as a rejection of pleasure and lightheartedness as such. Rather Adorno sees art in alliance with both the happiness of sexuality and the childish and lighthearted pleasures offered by the circus, clowns and child’s play. According to Adorno, therefore, art proves its loyalty to the somatic happiness of sexuality precisely by refusing to fulfill and sublimate it. This is what distinguishes art from the culture industry, which betrays this happiness by merely pretending to fulfill it. “Works of art are ascetic and unashamed; the culture industry is pornographic and prudish” (Ibid). The degree to which the crucial passages in Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* revolve around sexuality and its true aesthetic sublimation or false fulfillment by the culture industry is indeed remarkable. For Adorno, however, the alliance between art and sexuality only comes about across an unbridgeable gap; bridging this gap would mean defrauding both art’s promise of happiness and the bodily joy of sexuality. Adorno presents a similar line of argumentation when he forges an alliance between art and “base” pleasures – once again by pointing out that the culture industry commits fraud on both. The point of contact between these extremes “in opposition to a middling domain” (Adorno 1997: 146) is only possible if art rejects any association with either childish pleasures or sexuality: “If it [the sphere of art] remains on the level of the childish and is taken for such, it merges with the calculated *fun* of the culture industry” (Ibid 164).

This argumentation has often been criticized – because of its obvious rigidity, which excludes significant portions of artistic production since the 1960s dealing with desublimated sexuality as explicitly as with the childish and silly, or with mass culture itself. The historical-philosophical construction that underlies this rigidity and marks the entirety of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* has also been contradicted. Following Jürgen Habermas's critique of the totalizing features of the critique of rationality found in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, aesthetic theory in the tradition of Adorno has also distanced itself from the dialectic he constructs between art and mass culture. Albrecht Wellmer, for instance, writes that “the fundamental theses of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [...] do reserve a certain degree of ambivalence in their treatment of ‘great art’, but none for mass culture – which appears as fitting perfectly into the universal system of delusion” (Wellmer 1991: 41). As a consequence, the Frankfurt School in the wake of Adorno redefined aesthetic autonomy (as a theory of experience), liberating it from the restrictive dichotomy between traditional works of art and commercialized mass culture. Insofar as we can now think of mass-cultural art, the distinction between art and the culture industry has now been introduced into the sphere of mass culture itself, which now appears much more aesthetically and politically heterogeneous and ambivalent. From this perspective, the works of other authors of the first generation of the Frankfurt School – especially Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer – appear more fruitful; they demonstrate a more exploratory and open approach to mass culture by questioning the media, forms and formats of mass culture, its forms of distribution and consumption, its emancipatory potential just as well as its role in sustaining the status quo.

### Mass Culture and Distraction

Between the wars, Benjamin and Kracauer play a primary role in developing a perspective that reveals the many ambivalences of the phenomena of mass culture, thus also allowing us to uncover its emancipatory potential. They view mass culture as an integral part of a form of life thriving in modern metropolises and dominated by the mass media, such as photography, magazines, radio, and cinema. But not only do we get sight of the media of mass culture, but also and especially the new ways of receiving these media, which form the perception of the masses and the various publics (see Cray 1999).

Benjamin and Kracauer show that the function of mass culture is not merely to distract us from and compensate for the demands of the thoroughly rationalized world of labor – after all, the bourgeois discussion of art is likewise a way of diverting the attention from everyday life (see also Bloch 1991). By reassessing the concept of distraction [*Zerstreuung*] itself, they intervene in the cultural criticism of their time in which the concept represented a mere synonym for mass-cultural amusement and for the opposite of contemplation and other forms of attentiveness. Both authors reject this use of the term, turning instead to the specific form of attention that distraction represents, both its sociopolitical aspects and those linked to a theory of media and perception, focusing less on the compensatory effect of distraction rejected by most theories of mass culture – long before modern capitalism has fully evolved – as merely working to stabilize existing social structures (see Lowenthal 1983). Both authors, however, are aware that mass culture still may degenerate into mere entertainment and pleasure, and that the constant craving for new stimuli and distractions offers little room for experiences of a more demanding sort. But instead of searching for an antidote to this effect beyond mass culture, both seek to find the positive potential within mass culture itself.

As a both fascinated and skeptical observer, Kracauer addresses the cinema as well as several other phenomena of mass culture generally disregarded one-sidedly as expressions of cultural decay. In his study of the “salaried masses,” written just before the beginning

of the world economic crisis in 1929, he undertakes an empirical exploration of the role of distraction by studying individual concrete phenomena, while at the same time interpreting them in a larger contemporary context. According to Kracauer, the “pleasure barracks” (Kracauer 1998: 91) and dance halls where white-collar workers meet in the evening to dream of a different reality point to an ambivalence within mass culture as a whole. Beyond the role of these establishments in numbing the masses and justifying existing social relations, Kracauer recognizes the salaried masses’ strong desire to take part in the false appearance of culture and to gain from the social advancement associated with culture. He sees them doubly captivated by distraction, which stimulates their emotions while at the same time assigning them a fixed place in the social hierarchy. To want to appear to be more than one is – a desire that, according to Tocqueville, is what motivated the rise of the culture industry in the first place – and to breathe the air of the big world outside on the cheap is for Kracauer the motive for the emergence of a culture-industrial magic show. Although this contributes to the acceptance of the social order, the glamour of mass-cultural pleasure cannot manage to conceal completely and permanently the dreary world of labor. Even though pleasure turns “glamour” into “substance” and “distraction” into “stupor,” the masses know they cannot flee the dullness of everyday working life (Ibid: 93). When the waiter turns off the light, “the eight-hour day shines in again” (Ibid). Although Kracauer also knows that “true” culture would amount to a critique of existing social relations, he argues that people prefer mass-cultural distraction to a critique of existing social relations not because of manipulation or false contentment, as distraction cannot completely hide away social contradictions, especially not from the distracted themselves. Like Kracauer, Adorno in his later work on “free time” emphasizes that the culture industry does not, as he himself had suggested earlier, operate as a totalized means of manipulation in the hands of rulers and that it does not merely operate as a technique for putting people in a state of psychic dependence, but rather that free time can be seen as a “chance of maturity,” which gives us reason to hope that free time might be turned “into freedom proper” (Adorno 1991: 197).

As Kracauer also shows in his many articles throughout the 1920s, a look at mass culture reveals the unreconciled society in a way that privileges distraction as a mode of perception over that of contemplation. With reference to Berlin’s “picture palaces,” he even hopes that distraction could be intensified enough to prepare the ground for the critique and the overthrow of existing social relations. The theater programs could – or rather, they must – “aim radically towards a kind of distraction which exposes disintegration instead of masking it” (Kracauer 2005: 328). Kracauer thereby develops a normative perspective for a critique based on his sociological observations. He hopes that the contradiction of glamour and reality in mass culture can be criticized by using its own means against it. However, instead of making the “reflection of the uncontrolled anarchy of our world” (Ibid: 327) apparent, thus also revealing the social decay in the mode of distraction, the world becomes “festooned with drapes and forced back into a unity that no longer exists” (Ibid). This is revealed not only by the subjects of these films but also by the specific sequence of the images and the rapid alteration of impulses. “The stimulations of the senses succeed one another with such rapidity that there is no room left between them for even the slightest contemplation” (Ibid: 326). Among the cinema audience, especially among the new class of the salaried masses, Kracauer sees in middle-class culture the longing to assimilate to the bourgeoisie. Yet he regards their attempt to escape their place in the social order as futile for their desires for social advancement will tend to die off in the “shrines to the cultivation of pleasure” if they are not given an explicit political expression. Adapting to bourgeois culture is, according to Kracauer, no way to oppose a form of society that brought forth their social position in the first place.

Kracauer’s critique of the culture of distraction also applies to the operators of the “picture palaces” and the production companies for the “elegant surface splendor” (Ibid: 323) and

the “optical fairylands,” which reveal how much they are modeled on the aesthetic ideal of upper bourgeois culture, and therefore undermine cinema’s critical potential. Even those film topics that “might excite us” and “inform the masses about their conditions of existence” (Kracauer 2004: 520–521) are neglected in favor of conforming to the public’s supposed “taste.” The “cult of distraction” thus undermines the potential for radicalization found within distraction itself; it instead manifests itself as a mere culture of entertainment, seducing the pleasure-seeking masses with its promises. Distraction can only unfold a critical and emancipatory effect if it does not become an end in itself, but rather remains the aesthetic accompaniment of real social relations with all of their contradictions. Kracauer’s later film analyses of the 1930s, however, show that this belief in the emancipatory potential of film may also dwindle as stereotypical narratives dominate cinema culture (see Kracauer 2004).

A much more optimistic concept of distraction can be found in the work of Benjamin. Contrary to the conservative truism that the masses are merely out to please themselves, his understanding of distraction accords it a much higher value vis-à-vis contemplation or “concentration” (Benjamin 1969: 239). In his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin develops this understanding with reference to the perception of architectural objects; contrary to the primacy of the optical in the mode of contemplation, architectural perception also entails both a tactile dimension and one of motion. He describes film, which picks up on this tactile mode of reception, as the major medium of his day, as being “symptomatic of profound changes in apperception” (Ibid: 240). In stark contrast to contemplation, “reception in a state of distraction” (Ibid) is characterized by a lack of detachment, which, according to Benjamin, represents a new *collective* mode of apperception. Film’s revolutionary potential thus lies in the fact that it can establish a connection between the masses and art in a way that, as Benjamin hopes, is neither supported by the capitalist form of entertainment nor can be used for the purpose of fascist mobilization. Unlike Kracauer, Benjamin sees the rapid sequence of images characteristic of film as a means of increasing the apperceptive awareness of the viewers and equipping them not only for the “shock effect” of film but also for the “increased threat” to their lives (Ibid: Note 19).

At the same time, and in a certain contrast to his own position, Benjamin emphasizes the emancipatory potential of a distanced stance of examination also characteristic for the art of film. However, it remains unclear how Benjamin’s praise of a state of distraction, characterized by the tactile immersion of the masses, is supposed to go together with his more Brechtian perspective, according to which distraction stands for a distanced position toward what is happening on the screen. In Benjamin’s perspective, film is not a training camp for the apperceptive awareness of the masses but something to be discussed and judged by a collective of distanced critics (see Ibid: 242). However, much more than Kracauer, he believes that reception in the state of distraction holds emancipatory potential. From this perspective, it is easier to understand Benjamin’s hope that film might not only transform our apparatus of perception but also go hand in hand with a democratization of culture in general. Nonetheless, Benjamin was just as aware that film can also be used for propaganda and that the critical potential of distracted perception depends to a large degree on the substance of the given film.

Although Benjamin’s revaluation of distraction vis-à-vis contemplation and Kracauer’s sociological investigation of the effects of film are certainly crucial for a critical theory of mass culture, they thereby gradually move away from the idea of the culture industry, which focuses on an analysis of the marketization of culture and its effects on society. The idea of the culture industry gains contours within the Frankfurt School once it turns to the threats to freedom and equality, with regard to the economic dynamics that have transformed both cultural products and their modes of reception for the worse by assimilating them to the logic of the market. Here, the critique focuses not on the ambivalences of

mass culture but on the unambiguous logic of economic valorization, which contributes to the conformity of the masses and the homogenization of cultural products. These are the aspects which, ever since Tocqueville, have been at the foundation of the critique of the cultural industry. We will now turn to an examination of these aspects with an eye to their current relevance.

### Culture as Industry

The term “culture industry” was, as Adorno would later recall, carefully chosen in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The authors wanted to avoid the interpretation suggested by the concept of “mass culture,” that of a “culture that arises spontaneously from the masses themselves” (Adorno 1991: 98). To speak of culture as an industry initially suggests that industrial production processes are applied to the sphere of culture. Yet Adorno and Horkheimer do not use the term in the strict sense to indicate a mode of production; rather, they understand the production and the consumption of culture as a comprehensive and self-enclosed “system”: “Films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part,” there is “enthusiastic obedience to the rhythm of the iron system,” and “everywhere are outward signs of the ingenious planning of international concerns” (Adorno/Horkheimer 1997: 120). The term “industry” refers to Hollywood film productions – in line with the phrase “working for the industry” – and primarily accentuates processes of rationalization that by this time had become apparent in culture. As Adorno writes in *Culture Industry Reconsidered*, the investigation aimed to capture the “standardization of the thing itself” and “the rationalization of distribution techniques” rather than the “production process” alone (Adorno 1991: 100).

Adorno thus concludes that a “content analysis,” and the investigation of the outward appearance of cultural commodities and their aesthetic reception, could never be carried out independently of an analysis of the rationalized and standardized means of production and distribution. The logic of sale, the relation of supply and demand, and the public’s taste, determined by market research, completely shape cultural commodities. If we investigate the latter from an aesthetic perspective as “autonomous intellectual shapes,” then we ignore the much more important fact that they have been “calculated” and “designed in market categories” (Adorno 1972: 483). In their analysis of this calculation and this rationality, Adorno and Horkheimer assume that the economic standardization, serialization, and market compatibility of commodity production fundamentally change their products’ cultural substance. This is demonstrated most clearly by forms of consumption and distribution. The systemic character Adorno and Horkheimer ascribe to the culture industry is supported by a “circle of manipulation and retroactive need” (Adorno/Horkheimer 1997: 121), and is not merely an expression of the technical nature of their production. In order to understand this character, Adorno and Horkheimer do not merely examine entrepreneurial strategies in terms of business administration, but as a form of domination that genuinely manipulates individuals and their needs in the culture industry. Their critique of commodified culture is thus always also a political critique, uncovering social relations of dependence in the production and reception of cultural commodities as well as a kind of rationality that serves domination.

While radio and film stand at the forefront of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno in particular seeks to update the critique formulated in the book along with the constant changes of culture-industrial products and formats. This can be seen in the case of television: in light of so-called “home cinema,” whose development Adorno had already anticipated (see Adorno 1999), Adorno investigates how the culture industry employs novel forms of presentation and program planning to penetrate into individuals’ private lives. Within this

transformation, Adorno still sees power resting exclusively in the hands of the producers and general directors of the media companies who completely control their consumers. Nevertheless, Adorno is interested less in the subjection of the viewers than in the critique of the illusion that the variety of products on offer reflects the consumer's freedom of choice. With regard to television as well, Adorno views the culture industry primarily as an instance of the rule of the market: "In all its branches, products which are tailored for consumption by masses, and which to a great extent determine the nature of that consumption, are manufactured more or less according to plan" (Adorno 1991: 98). This systemic character of cultural commodities revealed by the competing offers made by the cultural market and by the market-oriented dynamic of consumer behavior becomes the focus of Adorno's critique of culture.

His critique was carried on in the Frankfurt School primarily by Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt, whose works in the 1970s were dedicated to new modes of production and culture-industrial formats as well as the decentralized and manifold forms of program planning (see Kluge and Negt 2016: Chapters 3 and 4). However, they revise the old idea that the culture industry consists in the one-sided production of "ready-made clichés" (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997: 142), while, at the same time, their analysis of the major private media corporations in Germany (e.g., Springer and Bertelsmann, which in 1970 even negotiated to merge) confirms the tendency of the media landscape toward oligopoly (Ibid: 159). Although at this time, numerous alternative media would develop, and the culture would come to be accompanied by a counterculture and an oppositional public, they never managed to break the market power of the major media corporations, as Kluge and Negt show (see Hansen 2016). Private media corporations are characterized by a new organizational form in which individual enterprises operate within a single major corporation without losing their independent structure. In this way, corporations manage to provide a diversity of offerings and forms, while at the same time preserving the latter's systemic and planned character. Furthermore, the market position of the major corporations is reinforced by the constantly progressing integration of new technological advances (e.g., satellite reception, audio and video cassettes) and by the expansion of distribution channels.

The merging of media corporations with the electronics industry was, in fact, already observed by Adorno with regard to radio (Adorno 1976). According to Kluge and Negt, these new and, especially important, private media corporations not only operate a "media cartel" (Kluge and Negt 2016: 313) but also employ various forms of demographic analysis and market research to actively involve their viewers in a way that, by emphasizing entertainment value, gives the viewers the impression that these corporations are acting in their interest. The increasing dominance of private media corporations is also reflected by the decline of public television programs that still conform to the idea of a civil society and have the general educational task of offering a program that is as balanced and diverse as possible. Just as was true of earlier protagonists of the Frankfurt School, Kluge and Negt do not intend to defend the ideals of bourgeois culture; as they show with respect to the concepts of public sphere and communication, these ideals do not suffice to lend critical expression to contemporary social experience (Ibid: 102, 106).

The enormous predominance of a few globally active major corporations in the culture industry, which, as today the examples of Amazon or Sony clearly demonstrate, offer much more than cultural goods for sale, is made clear by the success of these corporations in getting through to consumers and meeting their preferences and desire for entertainment in spite of the enormous power differential between the sellers and the users. Both the goods on offer and the distribution of cultural commodities are individualized and personalized, not least through the use of social networks. The circle of manipulation and need described by Adorno and Horkheimer can thus also be applied today, in the tradition of Kluge and Negt,



to the modern data-driven economy that marks the contemporary culture industry. The systemic character of the culture industry is made most apparent today by the media cartels operated by Facebook or Google, which make use of the horizontal communicative networking between users in order to sell new consumer goods and commercial applications (see Lovink 2012). In a time of generalized custom-made products, commercialized share-economies and the infinite consumer options of TV-on-demand, the question of the systemic character and the economic calculations of the culture industry remains as relevant as ever. It would be wrong, however, to view the countercultures investigated by Kluge and Negt, and the many diverse noncommercial cultural productions in the internet solely in terms of potential processes of marketization. Nevertheless, the critical assessment of this development in the culture industry into a highly diverse and dynamic market already points to a number of questions concerning conformity as an effect of the culture industry.

### Conformity in and through Culture

Adorno and Horkheimer criticize not only the systemic character of the culture industry but also the negative effects of mass consumption on social freedom; they claim that the culture industry produces not only mass-cultural commodities but also conformist masses. As they formulate the matter prominently in the subtitle of the chapter in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* on the culture industry, it represents a form of “mass deception.” Moreover, if this “mass deception” takes on the form of “enlightenment,” then the “deceived masses” will be much more socially integrated and trained for obedience all the more effectively. As the authors point out, “capitalist production so confines [the masses], body and soul, that they fall helpless victims to what is offered to them” (Adorno/Horkheimer 1997: 133). As Adorno suggests, however, we must recognize that the masses are not simply the source of the functioning of the culture industry; on the contrary, they are an “appendage of the machinery” (Adorno 1991: 99). Therefore, Adorno’s investigation of the culture industry focuses primarily on determining how this machinery works, which “speculates on the conscious and unconscious state of the millions towards which it is directed” (Ibid). This speculation turns enlightenment into “a means for fettering consciousness” (Ibid: 106), which is anti-enlightenment in that it “impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves” (Ibid).

Adorno and Horkheimer conceive of this connection as a logic of *total* integration, writing that “any trace of spontaneity from the public in official broadcasting is controlled and absorbed by talent scouts” (Adorno/Horkheimer 1997: 122). The standardization and the serial nature of culture-industrial commodities correspond in their eyes to the conformist spirit of the public. In “sales talk[s]” (Ibid: 144), which aim to bind consumers to the commodities on offer, the logic of conformism is revealed in practice. The orientation of the masses toward the law of large numbers manifests itself both in the practices of sale and consumption, and in the cultural commodities on offer. The resolutely market character and “the influence of business” (Adorno/Horkheimer 1997: 144) are apparent with regard to both the appearance and the substance of cultural commodities. Therefore, according to Adorno, culture-industrial consumption is accompanied by the pressure to conform. Adorno here sees an imperative at work, one characteristic of the culture industry and consisting in the authoritarian demand: “You shall conform, without instruction as to what; conform to that which exists anyway” (Adorno 1991: 104).

Already in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, it is in this very dynamic that we find the smooth transition between conformist cultural consumption and political dependence and obedience. Adorno and Horkheimer thus conceive of the culture industry as a form of totalitarian domination. It not only robs the masses of their autonomy but also pits them against

themselves by means of the power of the majority over the individual. The culture industry thereby *makes* the masses a-political, forcing them to obey “the power of monotony” (Adorno/Horkheimer 1997: 148) at work in cultural commodities and training them to “continue and continue joining in” (Ibid). In this sense, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* sees in the culture-industrial consumer a further analogy to those workers, who, like the oarsmen in Homer’s *Odyssey*, are trapped in a mechanized process they cannot escape.

This image of a self-enclosed logic of integration often seems overly strong and, given the various different possibilities of action and interpretation within a given culture, exaggerated. In view of the further development of the culture industry, as well as new forms of distributing and marketing cultural commodities, we could further differentiate and expand the critique of the conformism encouraged by the culture industry. The idea of the culture industry can be refined in light of the dynamics that characterize the current offering of cultural commodities and whose effectiveness is based on much more expansive knowledge about trends and the various individual preferences of consumers. When it comes to making offers to the consumer, the probability calculations and the algorithms employed by major media corporations operate with criteria such as affinity, current popularity, and relevance; commodities are no longer distributed in an authoritarian fashion and selected by experts; rather, they are presented as being in accordance with one’s individual taste distinguished from the majority. Deviations and preferences are therefore modulated in many ways by the cultural commodities themselves. The ever more sophisticated individual distinctions in terms of consumer goods are paradoxically an effect of consumers’ similarities uncovered by algorithms. Not only do consumers’ search histories and previous purchases get formed into personal profiles, but they are also compared with those of others. This informational evaluation of individual user data therefore indeed represents a continuation of the speculation about the masses diagnosed by Adorno. The masses remain, though in a more subtle and dynamic way, “appendages” of an algorithmic and thus much more subtle machinery. The more data this machinery gathers, the more significant even the smallest changes in terms of frequency and correlation of searches and purchase decisions become, making the possibilities of capitalizing on these correlations nearly unlimited on the market for culture-industrial goods.

The imperative of the culture industry thereby seems to have taken a new turn, for the offers it makes to consumers suggest that it knows our individual preferences better than we do ourselves. Due to the sophisticated capacity to predict our purchase behavior and consumer trends, culture-industrial conformism does not express itself as the imperative to obey, but is generated much more subtly by anticipating the potential actions of its subjects. In the integration of individualized consumer options, as well as alternative and noncommercial forms of production, such as commons-based peer production, the control over and the planning of goods on offer no longer seem to be determined one-sidedly.

This development is also significant in terms of the changes in the relation between work and leisure. The normal working day instituted by the welfare state in industrial societies has undergone fundamental changes as a result of the transformations of late and finance capitalism. Current social diagnoses thus present a much different picture of social reality than those of the 1950s and 1960s, of which Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of the culture industry was so paradigmatic. Earlier cultural critique emphasized the internal connection between the process of indoctrinating consumers of culture and making them passive, on the one hand, and disciplining them in their work lives, on the other. Only those who allow their leisure-time to be overwhelmed by schematic interpretations of themselves and the world, and thus to be socially impoverished, will be capable of meeting the demands of working life.

In those sectors of Western societies in which we can speak of a transition from a disciplinary society to a society of control, we see that originality, creativity, initiative, and

connectivity have become crucial necessities (see Deleuze 1992). Under these social conditions, individuals can only take part in the social reproduction process if they are permanently connected, active, and autonomous. Within this social formation, we can no longer identify activation, participation, experimentation, and transgression as immediate forms of resistance. On the contrary, given this situation, complaints about the schematizing, deactivating, and isolating effects of the culture industry seem to come to nothing. Yet the negative effects of the culture industry as they were already determined by Adorno and Horkheimer now consist precisely in the imperatives of individualization and activation. These effects have been intensified partly as a result of transformed technological means and media formats, while the access to individual consumers has become more sophisticated. Given these changes, we could also pick up on the interpretation in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and demonstrate how, in spite of the individualistic and participatory appearance, new forms of standardization are emerging in the realm of culture.

### Conclusion

What remains then of the claim of the critique of the culture industry to be the thorn in the side of mass-cultural production? Where are the potentials and the possibilities of criticizing commodified culture? How do the effects of conformism manifest themselves in contemporary culture production? The idea of the culture industry as developed by the Frankfurt School is still relevant, not so much because of its concrete analysis, but because of the way it problematizes culture. What the protagonists of the Frankfurt School have in common is their search for approaches to the critique of culture which do not remove themselves from this culture. They share with Tocqueville the conviction that cultural critique is primarily political, dealing with both production and consumption. Even if the masses appear totally integrated or seduced by pleasure, they never criticize them as the expression of a cultural decline. Building on the various different positions described here, we could summarize our point by saying that the critique of the culture industry does not accuse the masses themselves of being the source of the problem; rather, it takes aim at the way a culture works which has produced mass culture, without enabling critical reflection on the experiences of the masses themselves. Although they differ in terms of the degree of their optimism, Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin, Kracauer, Löwenthal and Bloch all share the belief that we can find possibilities of criticizing the distraction caused by the culture industry within this distraction itself. At the same time, however, the idea of the culture industry can be understood in the tradition running from Tocqueville to today as a fundamental critique of a commodified culture. What these various approaches have in common is their awareness of the mechanisms that prevent the redeeming of the potential of culture as a critique of existing social relations. In this sense the idea of the culture industry is as relevant as ever.

*Translation by Joseph Ganahl*

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## Further Reading

For further reading with regard to Adorno’s theory of mass and popular culture, see Deborah Cook, *The Culture Industry Revisited. Theodor W. Adorno on Mass Culture* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield 1996) as well as Robert W. Witkin, *Adorno on Popular Culture* (London: Routledge 2003). An overview of the different theoretical approaches to culture and media within the Frankfurt School is offered by the critical assessments in David Berry (ed.), *Revisiting the Frankfurt School. Essays on Culture, Media and Theory* (London: Routledge, 2012). For a systematic interpretation of the idea of the culture industry, see Heinz Steinert, *Culture Industry* (Cambridge: Polity 2003).

# 3

## PSYCHOANALYSIS AND CRITICAL THEORY

*Joel Whitebook*

### Introduction

In the 1930s, the philosophers and social scientists of the Institute for Social Research were the first members of the conservative German academy to not only treat the disreputable *avant-garde* new discipline of psychoanalysis—whose membership was almost entirely Jewish—seriously, but also to accord Freud the same stature as the titans of the philosophical tradition. The radicalism of psychoanalysis fit with the radicalism of the position they were attempting to develop, and the appropriation of psychoanalysis provided one of the pillars on which Critical Theory was constructed (Jay 1973: 86–112).

In addition to the theoretical affinity between the Frankfurt School and psychoanalysis, the relationship between the two intellectual movements was also practical. The Institute for Social Research and the Frankfurt Psychoanalytic Institute shared a building, in which they held their classes in the same rooms, and jointly sponsored public lectures by such eminent analysts as Anna Freud, Paul Federn, Hans Sachs, and Siegfried Bernfeld. Indeed, the connection between the two organizations went even further. Max Horkheimer, the director of the Institute for Social Research, sat on the board of the analytic Institute, while Eric Fromm—a trained analyst and member of both groups—helped the Critical Theorists educate themselves about the workings of psychoanalysis.

A major concern that led the Critical Theorists to turn to psychoanalysis was a deficit in Marxian theory: it lacked a so-called subjective dimension and tended to treat subjectivity simply as an epiphenomenon, that is, as a reflection of the material base. With the economic crisis of the 1930s, this concern became especially pressing. Objective conditions obtained that Marxian theory predicted should have produced the radicalization of the working class. But just the opposite was happening: a large portion of the European proletariat was turning to fascism instead. Max Horkheimer, Eric Fromm, and Herbert Marcuse, among others, undertook *Studies in Authority and the Family* to account for this supposedly anomalous fact (Horkheimer 1936; Jay 1973: 113–142; Wiggershaus 1994: 149–156).

In one sense, the study was groundbreaking for, along with Wilhelm Reich's work, it represented the first attempt to incorporate psychoanalysis into Marxian theory. But in another sense, its innovations remained limited. *Studies on Authority and the Family* still remained Marxist—albeit, of highly heterodox sort—insofar as it retained the general framework of political economy. Furthermore, the work drew on the less radical theories in the Freudian corpus, for example, those pertaining to character formation, rather than Freud's late, more scandalous cultural texts, which Horkheimer and Adorno turned to in conjunction with their reconstitution of Critical Theory in the 1940s.

After immigrating to California, Adorno joined with colleagues outside of the Institute to conduct another psychoanalytically oriented interdisciplinary research project that returned to many of the same themes contained in *Studies on Authority and the Family*. Their findings were published in *The Authoritarian Personality: Studies in Prejudice* (Adorno et al. 1982). Despite its initial influence, the work was later criticized on methodological grounds and fell out of fashion. But, as Peter Gordon has recently suggested, with the election of Donald Trump and the rise of authoritarian leaders around the world, revisiting *The Authoritarian Personality* might be in order (Gordon 2017).

### Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno

“Beneath the known history of Europe,” Horkheimer and Adorno observe, “there runs a subterranean one [that] consists of the fate of the human instincts and passions repressed and distorted by civilization” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 192). It can be argued that for these two philosophers, the sustained excavation of this subterranean history, as well as a focus on the body in general, constitutes a condition *sine qua non* of their position—as distinguished from what Horkheimer referred to as Traditional Theory (Horkheimer 1972). This orientation, moreover, comprised an essential aspect of the materialist perspective – of the “preponderance of the object,” as Adorno called it – that they sought to maintain (Adorno 1973: 183).

When Horkheimer and Adorno received news that the Nazis had set the final solution into motion and that their colleague Walter Benjamin had committed suicide while trying to escape the Gestapo on the Spanish frontier, they concluded that it was necessary to radicalize their theory in order to do justice to the enormity of the catastrophe that was unfolding in Europe (Rabinbach 1997). That catastrophe, as they saw it, involved more than the failure of the proletariat to fulfill its historical task. It resulted from the self-destruction of the project of enlightenment itself. “Why,” they asked, was “humanity... sinking into a new kind of barbarism” precisely at the point where, according to the (Baconian) Enlightenment, the material conditions had been created that could produce a “truly human state” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: xiv)?

The radicalization of Critical Theory consisted in a move from the critique of political economy to the philosophy of history centering on the domination of nature (Jay 1973: 253–280). In addition to Freud, the two philosophers drew on Nietzsche, Weber, Mauss, as well as others to write a depth-psychological and depth-anthropological *Urgeschichte* or primal history of civilization. The new position was articulated in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which became the defining text of the Frankfurt School during its classical phase. Where the domination of nature in general—as opposed to economic exploitation and class struggle—became the overarching theme of the new philosophy of history, the idea of the domination of inner nature provided the specific link through which Horkheimer and Adorno incorporated Freud into their new theory.

For the mature Freud, the reality principle, understood as *Ananke* or *Atropos* (necessity or the ineluctable), defined the human condition (Whitebook 2017: Chapter 10). It designated the price that nature inevitably exacted from us finite transient beings, in the form of physical suffering and decay, loss, and ultimately death. By reading Marx’s theory of exchange back into prehistory, Horkheimer and Adorno sought to integrate his economic theory with Freudian anthropology. They maintained that the law of equivalence—the principle that everything that happens must pay for having happened—governed mythical thought, and they saw the capitalist principle of exchange as the latest and most complete instantiation of the law of equivalence. The practice of sacrifice, which aims at mitigating the law’s effects, follows from it. For example, the sacrifice that our so-called primitive ancestors performed

to placate the gods after a successful hunting expedition constituted an attempt to control the price they would have to pay for their good fortune by offering an advanced propitiatory payment.

According to Horkheimer and Adorno, enlightenment consists in the attempt to escape mythic fate and sacrifice. Deploying his cunning, which was the precursor of instrumental reason, Odysseus, who is the prototype of the enlightened individual, sought to outsmart the law of equivalence through “the introversion of sacrifice.” Rather than sacrificing a piece of external nature, for example, the hind quarter of an ox, Odysseus sacrificed a piece of his inner nature, which is to say, renounced a piece of his unconscious-instinctual life. By repressing his inner nature in order to form a purposeful, autocratic, virile, and rational (qua calculating) ego, Odysseus believed he could dominate external nature, thereby escaping its dangers, outsmart mythical fate, and evade the law of equivalence. Horkheimer and Adorno argue, however, that the strategy was flawed. Their thesis is that “the denial of nature in human beings,” which constitutes “the core of all civilizing rationality,” contains “the germ cell of proliferating mythic irrationality” out of which the dialectic of enlightenment ineluctably unfolds (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 42).

An erroneous Baconian assumption, which was taken over by Marx, underlies the program of the domination of nature: namely, its demand for renunciation is justified for, in the long run, the domination of nature will create the material conditions that are the prerequisite for what Bacon called “the relief of man’s estate”—or the emancipation of the humanity, to put it in Marxian terms (Bacon 2008: 148). But there is a hitch in this program, and it generates the self-defeating logic of the dialectic of enlightenment. Because it represents “the introversion of sacrifice,” the renunciation of inner nature, which seeks to escape sacrifice, remains a form of sacrifice, albeit a displaced one. And as such, it is still subject to the law of equivalence. The math, Adorno and Horkheimer maintain, does not work: “All who renounce give away more of their life than is given back to them, more than the life they preserve” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 43).

More concretely, the faulty math produces a calamitous result. In order to carry out the domination of nature, the subject must form a purposive calculating self by repressing its unconscious-instinctual life. It thereby reifies itself at the same time and to the same degree that it reifies external nature. It follows that at the point that nature has been thoroughly reified and dominated in order to produce the presumptive material preconditions for emancipation—which Horkheimer and Adorno assume had been approximated by the first half of the twentieth century—the self will have been thoroughly reified as well. In the process of creating the preconditions for its emancipation, the subject has, in short, so deformed itself—has so “annihilated” itself—that it is in no condition to appropriate those preconditions and create a better form of life. Hence, the self-defeating logic of the dialectic of enlightenment: “[W]ith the denial of nature in humans, not only the *telos* of the external mastery of nature, but also the *telos* of one’s one life becomes opaque and confused.” Instead of emancipation, barbarism results. It should be noted that, for Horkheimer and Adorno, “nature in the human being” constitutes that which is sacrificed in the process of dominating nature, as well as (in some unspecified fashion) that for the sake of which the entire process is pursued (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 42).

Because of their anti-Hegelian opposition to all modes of final reconciliation and their thesis of a totally administered world, Horkheimer and Adorno opposed all utopian solutions, indeed, positive solutions as such. Nevertheless, logically there is an unthematized utopian implication of their hyperbolic analysis—which they would surely have rejected had it been explicitly presented to them: that only the cessation of renunciation *in toto*, only the emancipation of inner nature and unfettered fulfillment, could prevent the dialectic of enlightenment from unfolding. Short of this implicit utopian solution, the most that

Horkheimer and Adorno do is hint at one other possible way out of the dialectic's fateful logic, namely, "the remembrance of nature within the subject" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 32). But they do not provide the idea with much content.

After the war, however, there was one place where Adorno might have speculated on non-reified forms of subjectivity. But his prohibition against speculating on positive conceptions of the self prevented him from pursuing this path (Adorno 1968; Jay 1984: Chapter 5; Whitebook 1996: 152–164). Despite his reservations about false reconciliation, in his aesthetic theory, Adorno allows himself to speculate about non-reified forms of synthesis—different relations between part and whole, particular and universal. Borrowing an idea from Kant, he argues that the truly advanced work of avant-garde art exhibits "a non-violent togetherness of the manifold," that provides a glimpse of what a non-reified world might be like. But Adorno stopped there, refusing to extrapolate from his aesthetic theory in order to envision less violent and more desirable forms of the togetherness of the self, that is, of ego-integration.

### Herbert Marcuse

But, in an effort to break out of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Herbert Marcuse did play the utopian card, first as a theoretical exercise, then as a concrete theoretical program. In the midst of the seemingly closed world of the 1950s, which appeared to confirm Horkheimer and Adorno's prognosis, Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* attempted to provide a philosophical demonstration that a "nonrepressive civilization"—that is, a civilization in which the sacrifice-repression of inner nature was no longer necessary so that it could be liberated—was possible. But it was just that, philosophical. At the time, Marcuse did not advocate an attempt to realize that society (Marcuse 1955: 5; Whitebook 1996: 26–41, 2004: 82–89).

In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse undertakes an immanent critique of Freud, whose "own theory," he argues, "provides reasons for rejecting the identification of civilization with repression" (Marcuse 1955: 4). Marcuse's strategy is to historicize Freud's basic framework. Where Freud presented the fundamental opposition between the Reality Principle and Pleasure Principle as transhistorical and therefore immutable, Marcuse, with the aid of Marx, attempts to "de-ontologize" it by historicizing the Reality Principle. His entire argument rests on this central move.

As mentioned earlier, the mature Freud understood the Reality Principle as *Ananke* (necessity) or *Atropos* (the ineluctable). But in what amounts to a Marxifying sleight of hand, Marcuse alters the meaning of that principle and reconceptualizes it in economic terms. Instead of transhistorical necessity, *Ananke* is recast as historically variable *Lebensnot* (scarcity) and is defined in terms of "struggle for existence" (Marcuse 1955: 132). The term now refers to the metabolism between humanity and nature that will exist in any conceivable society, and to the amount of toil that, to one degree or another, will be necessary to extract the means of existence from the natural environment at a particular level of economic development. Toil requires unpleasure, that is, frustration, delayed gratification, and the repression of the Pleasure Principle. Thus, insofar as the Reality Principle refers to the quantum of toil that is necessary in a given society, it also refers to the degree of repression of the Pleasure Principle—of inner nature—that is required to carry it out.

The redefinition of *Ananke* allows Marcuse to introduce another distinction that is obviously modeled on Marx's distinction between necessary and surplus labor, that is, between basic or necessary repression, on the one hand, and surplus repression, on the other. Necessary repression denotes the ineliminable quantum of repression that will be required in any conceivable society in virtue of the fact that we are embodied beings who will, to one degree or another, always have to extract the means of existence from nature. Surplus repression, as



the name suggests, refers to the excess repression beyond the basic repression that could be eliminated in a given society on the basis of the development of its scientific and technological means of production. Marcuse's thesis is that surplus repression is largely exploitative and is enforced in the interests of the dominant class. Indeed, the difference between necessary and surplus repression can be taken as a measure of the degree of exploitation in a given society.

Marcuse maintains that surplus repression comprises the largest portion of repression in advanced capitalist societies, and he refers to the particular historical instantiation of it that obtains in them as the Performance Principle. His claim is that the Performance Principle—which is maintained in the economic interest of the capitalist ruling class—is perpetuated by the endless creation of false consumerist needs in the population and through capitalism's perpetual production of (often useless) commodities that can fulfill them.

There is, however, if not an outright contradiction, at least a serious tension lurking in this configuration. The advanced state of the means of production, according to Marcuse, generates the potential and therefore the pressure for a qualitatively different socioeconomic order in which surplus repression could in principle be eliminated. And this potential is at odds with an arrangement where the Performance Principle is artificially enforced. Given a differently constituted system of needs—one not based on the incessant multiplication of false needs—advanced science and technology could be employed to vastly reduce the amount of toil necessary to produce the material requirements not only for existence but also for the satisfaction of true needs that were not artificially inflated. The tension between the existing state of affairs and the potential of advanced science and technology might, Marcuse suggests, contribute to the motivation for a radical transformation of society.

Reinterpreting Marx's notion of the transition from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom in psychoanalytic terms, Marcuse attempts to envisage a utopian transformation of society. If the highly developed means of production in the advanced world were to be properly appropriated, a social transformation could be effected that would drastically reduce the amount of toil necessary for securing the necessities of life. With the elimination of scarcity, surplus repression could also be eliminated. This, in turn, would make it possible to establish a nonrepressive society—that is, one in which only the minimal amount of basic repression remained—and to emancipate inner nature.

Marcuse draws on the psychoanalytic theory of perverse sexuality to provide content for the vision of a utopian society beyond "the established reality principle" (Marcuse 1955: 129). His rather questionable reasoning is this: because the sexual perversions have somehow eluded, indeed, rebelled against the Oedipally structured historical Reality Principle, they can offer an indication of what form a different arrangement of human sexuality might assume. Marcuse goes so far as to claim that primary narcissism constitutes not only a stage of preoedipal psychosexual development but also that the concept contains "ontological implications" that point "at another mode of being"—one that would be reconciled with external nature (Marcuse 1955: 107 and 109). What Marcuse fails to appreciate is that perverse sexuality, whatever that may mean in today's context, does not constitute an unalloyed expression of the Pleasure Principle, but is, like all psychological productions, multiply determined. (In a similar romantic vein, the young Foucault made a related mistake when he maintained that madness contained a privileged form of truth that had escaped contamination by normalizing rationality [Whitebook 2002, 2005].)

Freud never denied that the Reality Principle contained an economic component. This is especially true in *The Future of an Illusion*, his most Marxist book, which progressives regularly cite. But to reduce the concept to economic scarcity is to substantially diminish its philosophical depth. Paul Ricoeur has argued that the mature Freud's introduction of the term *Ananke* to denote the Reality Principle indicated a transformation of the concept from

a “principle of ‘mental regulation’” into “a cypher of possible wisdom... beyond illusion and consolation” (Ricoeur 1970: 262 and 325). Freud was staunchly anti-utopian, and his tragic wisdom consisted in the resignation to *Ananke*, that is, the disconsolate acceptance of the fact that human reality is constituted by transience and inevitably permeated with loss and death (Whitebook 2017: 329).

But Marxists typically dismiss Freud’s tragic vision as the ideological prejudice of a *fin-de-siècle bourgeois* patriarch whose world and worldview were crumbling. And it cannot be denied that a number of the questionable anthropological assumptions upon which Freud’s political pessimism is based must be criticized. Nevertheless, even in an emancipated society—however one conceives of it—this tragic dimension should not be eliminated. On the contrary, whereas the tragic register is systematically denied in the infantilism of mass consumerist society and the culture industry, in an emancipated society, it would be actively engaged as it was in most pre-capitalist societies. To accept *Ananke* is to accept our finitude, and the acceptance of our finitude is not reactionary hogwash, but an essential component of a truly human society. These themes are not entirely lost on Marcuse, and he attempts to confront them (as well as the theme of destructiveness). But his discussion of “the defeat of time,” while interesting, remains unconvincing (Marcuse 1955: 232–237).

Whereas in the 1950s Marcuse treated the idea of a nonrepressive society merely as a philosophical possibility, in the 1960s, it not only became a plausible political program but also a necessary one. He argued that the creation of a post-scarcity society, in which the species’ relationship to its inner and outer nature had been radically transformed, was necessary to prevent the world from slipping into a new form of barbarism and to avoid the destruction of the earth’s ecosystem.

During the heady days of the 1960s, Marcuse published two provocatively entitled articles. One, “The End of Utopia,” maintained that insofar as the concept of utopia literally meant “no place”—a *topos* that could never be occupied—it had become obsolete (Marcuse 1970b: 62–83). Far from constituting an unrealistic fantasy, the establishment of an emancipated nonrepressive society, based on “the achievements of the existing societies, especially their scientific and technical achievements,” had not only become realistic but historically necessary. The argument of the other paper, “The Obsolescence of the Freudian Concept of Man,” was in line with his thesis in *Eros and Civilization* (Marcuse 1970a: 44–61). Because Freud’s anthropology was predicated on the false ontologization of the opposition between the Pleasure Principle and the Reality Principle, and because it was now possible to transcend the historical Performance Principle, Freud’s concept of man, Marcuse argued, had also become obsolete (Marcuse 1969: 22).

Like Horkheimer and Adorno, Marcuse subscribed to a version of the totally administered society (Marcuse 1964: xxxvi). As we saw, he argued that through the uninterrupted generation and fulfillment of false (consumerist) needs, the system could integrate all opposition and perpetuate itself indefinitely. A break in this fateful process—which meant a Great Refusal that rejected the false system of needs and the creation of a “new sensibility” embodying an alternative to them—was a necessary condition for the transformation of the established order and the creation of new form of life (Marcuse 1969: 23–48). As opposed to Adorno, Marcuse guilelessly and enthusiastically celebrated the countercultural and radical political movements of the 1960s as an expression of that new sensibility, at least in an incipient form (Adorno and Marcuse, “Correspondence” 1999: *New Left Review* 1/233, January–February).

But as those movements receded further and further into the past, his position increasingly appeared hopelessly and perhaps even embarrassingly naïve. Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher’s Counter-Revolution successfully quashed the 1960’s vision of the good life and succeeded in reinstating the pursuit of wealth as the *summum bonum*. The entrepreneur

in a pinstriped suit replaced the civil rights worker in overalls as the new culture hero. Moreover, with the collapse of communism and the triumphant ascendance of liberal political theory, the discussion of the good as opposed to the right was often condemned as illicit. Indeed, it was sometimes suggested that to countenance the distinction between true and false needs, as Marcuse emphatically did, was to begin down the slippery slope to totalitarianism. The liberal turn in political theory, in short, appeared to exclude the notion of a new sensibility from legitimate discourse and to limit its parameters to a consideration of rights.

But “after the brief interlude of liberalism,” which, one can argue, lasted from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the economic crisis of 2008, the idea of a new sensibility may not seem so daft (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 68). It might be the case that a rights-oriented politics cannot adequately address the rapacious dynamics of the globalized capitalism—the system’s incessant and methodical “colonization of the lifeworld” and the environment—and its lethal effects on the global ecosystem (Habermas 1989: 332–372). Furthermore, where liberal and postmodern critics tend to dismiss Adorno and Horkheimer’s theory of the cultural industry as elitist, the two Critical Theorists were, in fact, diagnosing embryonic tendencies that have now developed beyond their wildest imagination. The capacity of today’s social media and celebrity culture to deflect, disarm, and confuse critical thinking, while simultaneously creating a simulacrum of popular debate, has surpassed their worst fears. As unlikely as the emergence of a new sensibility might seem given our current conditions, it is difficult to imagine how, from a purely logical point of view, a social and political movement that can address the problems that are confronting us can be formed without one. On this point, Marcuse may not have been that naïve after all.

### Jürgen Habermas

Because it occurred at the beginning of his career, Habermas’s only sustained *Auseinandersetzung* with Freud is conflicted and difficult to sort out. At the time, Habermas had one foot planted in the psychoanalytically informed materialism of the first generation of the Frankfurt School. But with the other, he was stepping into the world of linguistified Kantianism that came to define him. Although the early Habermas tried on the mantle of the first generation of Critical Theorists for size, because he possessed substantially different pre-theoretical intuitions, he was never entirely at home in it and therefore moved beyond it relatively quickly (Rabinbach 1997: 168–170).

The first generation’s experience, which was shaped by Weimar, emigration, the War, Nazism, Stalinism, and the Holocaust, resulted in the choice between hyper-radical utopianism and quietist resignation. Habermas’s experience was different. As someone who, as adolescent, had been glued to the radio listening to the broadcasts of the Nuremberg Trials, and who entered adulthood as the Federal Republic was being established, the either/or of quietism versus revolution was unacceptable. Possessing the instincts of a radical reformer, Habermas placed the solidification, cultivation, and defense of German democracy at the top of his political agenda. And he cannot be commended enough for his exemplary career as a public intellectual and for the many courageous political stances he has taken. At the same time, however, it must also be admitted that his resolute defense of democracy has often been coupled with excessive progressivist Whiggishness. This has not only led him to deny the darker antisocial forces in human nature documented by Freud, but it has also prevented him from effectively addressing the irrational forces that are so evident in today’s politics around the globe. For example, while progressive Protestants or reformed Jews might find his position on religion congenial, he sidesteps the really hard problem: how to address fundamentalism. For someone with a fundamentalist mindset would find the position he is advocating well-nigh

unfathomable. How does one enter into a rational dialogue with someone who has not cathected the idea of rational dialogue?

In the 1960s, Freud was required reading for a budding Critical Theorist, and it is clear from *Knowledge and Human Interests* that Habermas's *Auseinandersetzung* with the psychoanalyst's work was comprehensive and deep (Habermas 1971). But he did not share the first generation's elective affinity with the founder of psychoanalysis. As Thomas McCarthy observes, Habermas's "orientation to Freud's work" was less substantive and "more methodological than was theirs" (McCarthy 1978: 195). Furthermore, this methodological orientation was one aspect of a larger point of difference separating their younger colleague from the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Horkheimer and Adorno were prepared to resign themselves to the self-referential implication that followed from their analysis: namely, that they could not elucidate that own theoretical standpoint. They therefore abstained in principle from any attempt to clarify the methodological foundations of Critical Theory. At best, they dialectically circled them.

For Habermas, this abstention was unacceptable on theoretical as well as political grounds. Still situating himself within a Marxist vein, he drew on the new working-class theory current at the time and argued that after the Second World War, science and technology had come to occupy a new strategically decisive position in the productive apparatus of the capitalist economy. Therefore, if Critical Theory hoped to influence a progressive transformation of advanced capitalist society, it would have to engage members of scientific and academic communities. To do so, it would be necessary for Critical Theorists to clarify and defend the methodological foundations of their position in a way that was acceptable to those communities of investigators. If the representatives of the first generation of the Frankfurt School sometimes (and somewhat disingenuously) made a fetish of being outsiders, Habermas wanted to challenge the academic community on its own terms, forcing its members to reflect on the dogmatic assumptions underlying their positions.

Where Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse were attracted to psychoanalysis because of its scandalousness, Habermas wanted to use it to make the project academically legitimate and critical at the same time. Strange as it may sound today when the field is in such disrepute, in the 1960s, he believed that psychoanalysis provided a model of a social science that was not simply successful but successful qua reflective and critical. "Psychoanalysis is relevant to us," he wrote, because it is "the only tangible example of science incorporating methodological self-reflection" (Habermas 1971: 124). He believed that the discipline provided a model case from which general methodological (and normative) principles for a Critical Theory of society could be extrapolated. To accomplish this task—and to rectify what he, like Lacan, mistakenly saw as Freud's biologism—Habermas sought to apply the findings of the linguistic turn, which was in full force at the middle of the twentieth century, to psychoanalysis. He reinterpreted neurosis and ideology as two structurally homologous forms of false consciousness and conceptualized them as forms of systematically distorted communication.

It is at this point that the serious tensions emerge in Habermas's position. (A) On the one hand, he continues to not only use the language of the first generation's materialistically inflected interpretation of Freud but also to gesture towards the substance of that interpretation. (B) On the other hand, however, this strain of his argument is at odds with the linguistifying and transcendentalizing dynamic that he introduces with the notion of systematically distorted communication.

Regarding (A): When, for example, Habermas set out to refute Nietzsche's Darwinian reductionism, he deployed Freud's instinct theory (*Triebtheorie*)—a theory which, if he did not totally repudiate, he radically altered and diluted under the linguistifying pressures of his program. Habermas responds to Nietzsche's claim that reason is nothing but "an organ of adaptation for men just as claws and teeth are for animals" in the following way. He grants

Nietzsche's claim that reason is a natural organ of self-preservation, but over the course of evolution, he argues, it also develops into something more than nature. And Habermas uses the concept of libido to explain that something more, that is to say, the "cultural break with nature." Human drives are excessive—superabundant—in that they overshoot the requirements of self-preservation, of mere life. "Along with the tendency to realize natural drives," Habermas claims that the cultural formations that have *emerged* over the course of evolution "have incorporated the tendency toward release from the constraint of nature," latent in the excessiveness of the drives (Habermas 1973: 312).

At this point, Habermas bursts into a downright Marcusean panegyric to the utopian significance of *Eros*:

An enticing natural force, present in the individual as libido, has detached itself from the behavioral system of self-preservation and urges toward utopian fulfillment.  
(Habermas 1973: 312)

Habermas also enlists Marcuse's distinction between necessary repression and surplus repression as a means for elucidating the critique of ideology and as a device for measuring the amount of exploitation in a given society (Whitebook 1996: 27–29). He argues, moreover, that the degree of repression obtaining in a given society determines the extent to which it restricts the public expression of libidinally based wishes. According to him, the wishes that are excluded and repressed at a given level of economic development tend to find alternative modes of fulfillment in pathological symptoms, fantasies, illusions, and ideologies, which are structurally homologous formations. And insofar as these phenomena constitute disguised forms of wish fulfillment they "harbor Utopia" (Habermas 1971: 280).

Also in keeping with the vocabulary and sensibility of the first generation of Critical Theorists, Habermas borrows Adorno's notion of "exact fantasy" to formulate a normative theory in psychoanalytic terms. (It should be noted that, as opposed to his later normative theory, this earlier iteration of it is primarily concerned with the substantive question of the good rather than with the procedural question of justification.) "The 'good,'" he writes, "is neither a convention nor an essence, but rather the result of fantasy." It must, however, be "fantasized so exactly that it corresponds to and articulates a fundamental interest... in that measure of emancipation that is objectively historically possible" (Habermas 1971: 228).

Regarding (B): The linguistic turn, however, took hold of Habermas's argument and led to a radical alteration of Freudian theory that is most apparent in his account of repression and of the unconscious. Though Freud's approach contains an important interpretative dimension, it does not comprise a pure hermeneutics. At its core, it is psychodynamic, which means it combines the language of meaning with the language of force (Ricoeur 1970: 65–67). Every psychoanalytically pertinent idea (*Vorstellung*) has an affective charge attached to it and a pressure (*Drang*) behind it. To be clinically effective, a psychoanalytic intervention requires more than interpretation—the explication of meaning through meaning. As Ricoeur insisted, it requires technique: that is, the ability to assess the psychodynamic forces at work in a given situation and to successfully intervene in them (Ricoeur 1974). For Freud, moreover, the source of psychical forces is somatic. They emanate from the drives which he describes

- as a "frontier" concept lying "between the mental and the somatic"
- as "the psychical representative [*psychischer Repräsentant*] of the stimuli originating within the organism" that reaches "the mind"
- "as a measure of the demand made upon the mind for work in consequence of its connection with the body" (Freud 1915: 121–122).

To be sure, Habermas registers the right points in his discussion of Freud's clinical practice. He acknowledges the necessity of the dynamic point of view and even cites the relevant *aperçu* from Freud. To simply present patients with accurate information about the content of their unconscious without addressing the psychodynamics of their resistances, Freud wryly observes, would "have as much influence on the symptoms of nervous illness as a distribution of menu-cards in a time of famine has upon hunger" (Freud 1910: 225). Habermas also recognizes that the force of the defenses and resistances encountered in the clinical setting requires that one posit a force-like, which is to say, a nature-like (*naturwüchsig*), phenomenon at work in the human psyche. As a result, to apprehend these phenomena theoretically, psychoanalysis must, in addition to hermeneutical concepts, employ causal-explanatory ones similar to those used in the natural sciences. Indeed, these considerations lead the anti-positivist Habermas to observe that Freud's scientific self-understanding is not "entirely unfounded" (Habermas 1971:214).

But the linguistifying imperatives of his program cause Habermas to undo his correct observations concerning Freud's clinical practice. In his theoretical reflections on those practices—in his metapsychology, as it were—Habermas equates repression with excommunication. Developmentally, he argues, repression arises in situations where children feel it is too dangerous to express certain wishes publicly, that is, in the intersubjective grammar of ordinary language (secondary processes). Because of the weakness of their egos and the superior power of the parental figures populating their environment, children are compelled to repress those wishes. They do this by excommunicating them from the public domain—including the internal public domain of consciousness—and banishing them to the private realm that, for Habermas, comprises the unconscious. The excommunication is accomplished by de-grammaticizing those dangerous wishes. Their representations are thereby expelled from the grammar of ordinary language and relocated in the de-grammaticized realm of the unconscious. (The alogical mentation of the unconscious is the way that Habermas understands primary processes.)

Habermas's argument for the claim that repression is an entirely intralinguistic affair, consisting in the excommunication of forbidden ideas from the intersubjective realm of ordinary language, borders on a tautology. From the fact that repression can be reversed through the talking cure, he wants to infer that it was a purely linguistic process to begin with. But as we have seen in his discussion of clinical practice, he acknowledges that the undoing of repression is more than an interpretative enterprise. It also involves the force-like phenomena of resistance that must be opposed with the counterforce deployed by clinical technique.

Habermas denies a canonical distinction of Freudian psychoanalysis: "The distinction between word-presentations and symbolic ideas," he declares *ex cathedra*, "is problematic," and "the assumption of a nonlinguistic substratum, in which these ideas severed from language are 'carried out,' is unsatisfactory" (Habermas 1971: 241; Whitebook 1996: 179–196). The distinction between word-presentations and thing-presentations, however, is a linchpin for Freud's entire construction. It is intended to mark the difference between conscious, rational, and what one may call diurnal thought and a radically different form of archaic mental functioning—the language of the night.

And it is also meant to mark the essential division of the self. To deny the existence of a "nonlinguistic" unconscious and to redefine it as merely protolingualistic—which means it can be translated into consciousness without the special effort described required by psychoanalysis—is to deny the radical alterity of the ego's "internal foreign territory" and to substantially soften the essentially divided and conflicted nature of the self (Freud 1933: 57). It is also to substantially domesticate the Freudian project. Furthermore, this is one symptom of the general difficulty Habermas has accommodating the "nonlinguistic"—the "nonconceptual," as Adorno calls it—in his theory.

Habermas's compulsion to think everything in terms of language is so strong that his own position ends up as a variant of linguistic monism that is difficult to distinguish from the Gadamerian hermeneutics he claimed to oppose (Habermas 1980; Lafont: 55–124). The thesis that repression is a purely linguistic affair *ipso facto* excludes the extralinguistic, that is, the extralinguistic forces that act on language and distort it. And it also leaves out the body, for, as we have seen, the body is the source of the forces that impinge on the psyche and “mutilate” its symbolic texts. Indeed, for Freud, the thing-representations of the unconscious are the mental representations of somatic forces that lie just on the other side of the frontier separating soma and psyche.

A political motive also leads Habermas to reject the distinction between word-representations and thing-representations. It is based on a mistaken presupposition that he shares with many thinkers on the left: namely, that to defend a progressive position one must maintain it is society or language all the way down—that “the self is socially constituted through and through” (Habermas 1992: 183). Given the reactionary uses for which biology has often been employed in discussions of race and gender—epitomized in the slogan “biology is destiny”—one can understand the skepticism towards it among progressives. Nevertheless, as Jean Laplanche has pointed out, sociologism is every bit as much in error as biologism, and both forms of one-sidedness must be avoided (Laplanche 1989: 17ff.).

The linguistic strain and the transcendental strain converged in Habermas's theory and steadily moved him away from the psychoanalytic materialism he had flirted with in *Knowledge and Human Interests*. The idea of systematically distorted communication that Habermas introduced to elucidate Freud's theory of neurosis funneled his thinking into the increasingly transcendental channel that he followed for the remainder of his career. The concept of systematically distorted communication can be compared to Descartes's notion of totalized delusion, resulting from the machinations of a malevolent genius, that the founder of modern philosophy employed in his philosophical construction. And just as Descartes required an Archimedean point outside the totalized delusionary cosmos, so Habermas must locate a standpoint outside the structure of systematically distorted communication. On purely logical grounds, systematically distorted communication requires a concept of undistorted communication from which its distortions can be recognized as distortions and corrected. As Habermas observes,

If the interpretation I have suggested is true, the psychoanalyst must have a ‘pre-notion’, or rough (sic) understanding, of the structure of undistorted ordinary-language communication in order to be able at all to trace systematic distortions of language back to a confusion of two developmentally distinct stages of prelinguistic and linguistic organization.

(Habermas 1975: 184)

To elucidate the notion of systematically distorted communication, Habermas, in the wake of *Knowledge and Human Interests*, posited the notion of an ideal speech situation. It consisted in a counterfactual, distortion-free location from which the systematic distortions of actual communication can be illuminated as distorted.

The postulation of an ideal speech situation represented the first of many attempts in which Habermas sought to delineate a (quasi-)transcendental standpoint to ground his position while avoiding the pitfalls of a full-blown transcendental theory. It is often said that Aristotle is the philosopher of the equivocal, of the “in some sense,” and what one makes of Aristotle often depends on what one makes of his notion of the equivocal. Something similar can be said of Habermas. At different points in the development of his theory, he has employed prefixes like “quasi-,” “soft-,” or “post-” to characterize his brand of modified

transcendental theorizing. How the success of Habermas's philosophical program as a whole is evaluated depends in no small part on what one makes of his use of these prefixes. Are they question-begging devices, or do they do the conceptual work he claims they do?

Habermas maintains that he has de-transcendentalized his position by formulating it in terms of the philosophy of language rather than of the philosophy of consciousness. But he fails to recognize a fundamental point: his linguistically formulated "quasi"-transcendental position remains every bit as much an instance of what Adorno calls "constitutive subjectivity" as Kant's paradigmatic rendering of transcendental philosophy that was formulated in terms of the philosophy of consciousness (Adorno 1973: xx). Transcendental intersubjectivity is still transcendental subjectivity. *The only difference is that the subject is plural rather than singular. One might say that Habermas's position is one of "constitutive intersubjectivity,"* and as such, it not only retains some of the fundamental difficulties with transcendental philosophy but also hypostatizes the "primacy of language" over the "primacy of the object," which, as we saw, was Adorno's way of referring to materialism.

In the same vein, Habermas's transcendental quest not only led him away from Freud in general but also resulted in one particular consequence: all references to the body virtually disappeared from his thinking. Because Habermas's "investigation of the basic structures of intersubjectivity is directed exclusively to an analysis of rules of speech," Axel Honneth observes, "the bodily dimension of social action no longer comes into view." Consequently, "the human body, whose historical fate Adorno [and Horkheimer] had drawn into the center of their investigation... loses all value within critical social theory" (Honneth 1991: 281).

### Axel Honneth and Joel Whitebook

In the third generation of the Frankfurt School, Axel Honneth and I have continued the attempt to integrate psychoanalysis and Critical Theory (Honneth 1996: 92–237, 2012: 101–231; Honneth and Whitebook 2016; Whitebook 1996, 2004, 2017). However, despite the fact that we have both drawn on the preoedipal turn in psychoanalysis, our positions differ in substantial ways. For Honneth, psychoanalysis plays a subsidiary role and is only one element of his larger theory of recognition. Moreover, he has moved in the direction of relational psychoanalysis, which, he believes, avoids the putative biologism and anthropological pessimism of Freudian drive theory and provides support for his intersubjectivist position. For me, on the other hand, psychoanalysis does not only retain a central role in my thinking, but I have also remained closer to the classical Freudian position and the way in which the first generation appropriated it.

Perhaps the major difference in our positions is this. Honneth, like many other progressives who have taken up psychoanalysis, has turned to infant research and the relational school to elucidate the pro-social forces in psychic life and combat Freud's postulation of "primary mutual hostility [between] human beings" (Freud 1927: 112). I too want to do justice to the pro-social aspects of our psychological inheritance, which, to be sure, were often overlooked in the Freudian tradition. I do not want to accomplish this, however, by minimizing the antisocial forces—most notably, destructiveness and omnipotence—that are also part of that same inheritance. In my opinion, Honneth, no less than Habermas, is guilty of that mistake. The task of accurately elucidating the relation between the pro-social and antisocial forces inherent in the human psyche, as I see it, is located high on the contemporary psychoanalytic agenda.

Hegel, the philosopher of the World Spirit and Donald Winnicott, the theorist of the teddy bear, may strike one as an unlikely twosome. Nevertheless, as Jessica Benjamin had done before him, Honneth brings the two thinkers together in an attempt to develop his version of Critical Theory (Benjamin 1988). He sees their convergence as consisting in the



fact that both thinkers wanted to overcome a monadic starting point and maintained that the self is a product of interaction. Thus, Hegel's way of exiting the philosophy of consciousness was to introduce the struggle for recognition. And Winnicott—who famously stated that “there is no such thing as baby without a mother”—attempted to overcome Freud's one-person psychology, which began with primary narcissism, by introducing the notion of transitional phenomena (Winnicott 1960: 587, n. 1).

In turning to the relational analysts, however, Honneth inherited three difficulties that are characteristic of their position. First, he tends to share their implicit and erroneous assumption that to demonstrate that the self is a product of interaction—a claim that nobody would deny today—is to demonstrate that the self is *ipso facto* sociable (Whitebook 2008: 382). Second, like the Freud Left tradition in general, he tends to assume that antisocial phenomena like destructiveness and omnipotence are not intrinsic features of psychic life but are reactive, that is, the result of environmental failure. The implication is that they could be avoided through better familial arrangements and child-rearing practices. And third, like the relational analysts, he tends to make selective use of Winnicott. It is true that Winnicott is a preeminent two-person psychologist and that with his theory of transitional phenomena, he has made an essential contribution to the field. But it is also true that the British analyst posits a state of omnipotence—of complete “illusionment”—at the beginning of life and argues the mother's task is to disillusion the infant. *Indeed, the whole purpose of the transitional object is to make that disillusionment possible.* The notion of transitional phenomena would not make sense without the assumption of an original state of omnipotence. By minimizing or denying the role of omnipotence in psychic life, Honneth provides us with an overly socialized account of the human animal, and, despite his differences with Habermas, also, domesticates psychoanalytic theory (Honneth and Whitebook 2016: 176).

In my estimate, in order to advance the integration of psychoanalysis and Critical Theory, three difficulties have to be avoided: Adorno and Horkheimer's impasse and political quietism, Marcuse's utopianism, and Habermas's domestication of psychoanalysis, which excluded the body and denied the radical alterity of the unconscious. My program has been to draw on the work of the psychoanalyst Hans Loewald and the philosopher, psychoanalyst, and social theorist Cornelius Castoriadis, to return to Horkheimer and Adorno's notion of “the remembrance of nature within the subject” in an attempt to provide it with content (Castoriadis 1984: 3–118, 1987: 101–114 and 273–339; Loewald 2000).

Before pursuing that program, however, a preliminary task was in order: Horkheimer and Adorno's (as well as Marcuse's) notion of a totally administered world has to be contested. I agree with Habermas that the claim of totalized untruth is not only theoretically untenable but that it also denies the very real empirical advances in individual freedom, morality, legality, and democracy that have been achieved in modernity.

Once the concept of a totally administered world has become cleared away, it becomes possible to return to another of Adorno's concepts: the nonviolent togetherness of the manifold. As we saw, because of his claim that “the whole is the false,” Adorno prohibited himself from advancing any positive formulations concerning the individual or society (Adorno 2006: 50). He maintained that, in an untrue world, any such formulation necessarily constitutes false reconciliation. But as we also saw, there was one place where Adorno allowed himself to relax this prohibition: that is, with regard to truly advanced works of art. In works of Arnold Schoenberg or Samuel Beckett, for example, Adorno maintained that a new form of the non-reified synthesis of the manifold could be observed, and that it constituted an alternative to the forced integration that characterizes instrumental reason.

Where Adorno stopped at this point, Albrecht Wellmer did not. He extended Adorno's analysis, speculating that the form of non-reifying integration observable in the advanced work of art might provide a glimpse into the mode of social integration that would obtain in

an emancipated society (Wellmer 1985: 48, 2001a: 63, 2001b: 14; Whitebook 2004: 57–80). This, however, was the point at which Wellmer brought his investigation to a halt. He did not attempt to extend his analysis to a consideration of the modes of psychological synthesis—of the integration the self—that might obtain in a free society.

And this became my point of departure. (It should be pointed out that the new formations of post-conventional identity and the “neosexualities” that emerged from the movements of the 1960s provided the sociocultural context for his analysis [McDougall 2103: Chapter 11]). I drew on the preoedipal turn in psychoanalysis, the feminist critique of the field, infant research, and attachment theory to contest the official Freudian, patricentric, and Oedipal conception of maturity—which was seen as connected with the classical bourgeois individual and its supposed counterpart the classical neurotic.

To be sure, there are “unofficial” countervailing tendencies in Freud’s thinking. But his “official” Oedipal notion of “maturity,” that is to say, of optimal development, consists in what Castoriadis has called a “power grab,” in which the more “advanced” strata of the psyche dominate the more “primitive”—the ego dominates the id, consciousness dominates the unconscious, realistic thinking dominates fantasy thinking, cognition dominates affect, activity dominates passivity, and the civilized part of the personality dominates unconscious-instinctual life (Castoriadis 1987: 104; Whitebook 2017). Indeed, Freud’s official notion of maturity led to one of his more objectionable formulations where he likened the work of analysis (and the work of civilization) to “the draining of the Zuider Zee.” On this view, maturity consists in a state where all the “primitive” sludge of inner nature had been dredged out of mental life (Freud 1933: 80).

Like Loewald and Castoriadis, I reject Freud’s “official” conception of maturity and attempt to provide an alternative conception of a desirable integration of the psyche, that is, of the felicitous togetherness of the psychic manifold. Maturity must no longer to be understood as the domination of the supposedly more advanced strata of the psyche over the supposedly more archaic. Rather, it must be reconceptualized, as Castoriadis observes, as involving “another relation between” them (Castoriadis 1987: 104). Likewise, Loewald maintains that “the so-called fully developed, mature ego is not one that has become fixated at the presumably highest or latest stages of development, having left the other behind it.” Instead, it is one that “integrates its reality in such a way that the earlier and deeper levels of ego-reality integration remain alive as dynamic sources of higher organization” (Loewald 2000: 20).

What is more, this form of psychic integration is not, Castoriadis argues, “an attained state” but, an ongoing “active situation,” in which the individual is “unceasingly involved in the movement of taking up again” the contents of inner nature and reworking them into richer and more differentiated synthetic configurations. In other words, it does not comprise a state of “awareness’ achieved once and for all,” in which the ego has established its dominance over unconscious-instinctual life. The goal, rather, is to institute

another relation between the conscious and the unconscious, between lucidity and the function of the imaginary... another attitude of the subject with respect to himself or herself, in a profound modification of the activity-passivity mix, of the sign under which this takes place, of the respective place of the two elements that compose it.  
(Castoriadis 1987: 104)

Far from constituting the “dictatorship of reason” that Freud unfortunately advocated at one point, what is being suggested is a less violent organization of the psyche, that is, a more propitious integration the psychic manifold (Freud 1933: 215). And this active form of integrating the self can be understood as a living and ongoing remembrance of “nature within the subject.”

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## Further Reading

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# 4

## THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY<sup>1</sup>

*Martin Shuster*

### Introduction

German philosophy of history has many threads (Zammito, 2012), and the Frankfurt School is certainly a descendant of earlier German philosophical trends. Given the School's diverse membership, it's difficult to present an overview of 'the' Frankfurt School's philosophy of history without either exceeding the space limitations of this chapter or succumbing to triviality. For this reason, my discussion—after an engagement with Hegel and Marx—revolves chiefly around Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno. Benjamin is a focus because he is the most obscure but likely also the most significant influence on the Frankfurt School's most prominent thinkers (Buck-Morss, 1977; Gur-Ze'ev, 1998; Löwy, 1980). Adorno is a focus because his philosophy of history—inspired by Benjamin's—is the most ambitious and comprehensive, and responds forcefully to German philosophy of history. My approach in what follows will be (1) to discuss conceptions of and objections to constructions of 'universal history,' chiefly in Hegel and Marx, in order (2) to propose Adorno's alternative conception of history, a conception that fundamentally incorporates universal history but melds to it discontinuity, thereby producing a dialectical conception of history driven by an ethical imperative.

Three themes are central to my discussion. First, this tradition, starting especially with Hegel (Franco, 2002; Neuhouser, 2003; Patten, 1999; Yeomans, 2011), but continuing through Marx (O'Rourke, 2012: 11–50) and Adorno (Shuster, 2014), is intimately concerned with human freedom; the construction of history thereby is part of the project of conceptualizing and actualizing human freedom. Second, and intimately related to the first theme, is the importance of elucidating the exact relationship between nature and history. For much of this tradition, the former is fundamentally conceived as the antithesis to the latter (Pippin, 1999, 2000), which is properly the only site of human freedom. Putting things in this way may seem peculiar, since many see the issue of freedom as a metaphysical issue: we either are free or we are not (Ekstrom, 1999; Kane, 1996; O'Connor, 2002). The important issues then fall out around freedom of choice. Beginning with Kant (Brandom, 1979, 2002: 21ff; Korsgaard, 2009), and reaching its fullest culmination in Hegel, the German philosophical tradition sees freedom as a normative achievement (Pippin, 2009), where central to being free is not merely actualizing some natural fact about ourselves (Sellars, 1997: 76), but rather revolves around achieving a sort of self-relation, one that is historically constructed and mediated, and that intimately involves questions of recognition and sociality (Honneth and Joas, 1988; Pippin, 2008). This raises the third theme that animates much of this tradition and my discussion, namely the idea of 'alienation' (*Entfremdung*). If themes like self-relation and mutual

recognition are crucial to a conception of human freedom, then alienation becomes central to the extent that it serves both to prohibit the achievement of freedom and to make conspicuous its absence. Finally, in recent years, Hegel scholarship has produced readings of Hegel (Pinkard, 1996a, 1996b, 2012, 2017; Pippin, 1989, 2008) that likely would have been foreign to Adorno due to their conception of Hegel in largely non-metaphysical terms; it is nonetheless worthwhile to engage with these readings in detail in order to present the most forceful version of Adorno's critique of Hegel's conception of history (which also applies to Marx).

Let me situate the discussion that follows by briefly giving a sense of how philosophy of history is approached in German philosophy from Kant onwards. The term "philosophy of history" was coined by Voltaire to apply to what Voltaire hoped to accomplish in his mammoth *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* (Löwith, 2011: 1; Rosenthal, 1955), which was twofold: an examination of the facts of history and an assessment of the ways in which those facts (and others) had been valued by prior generations of humans. In this way, Voltaire's procedure was related to but distinct from the way in which Rousseau tackled history in the Second Discourse (Rousseau, 1987). According to Rousseau, when one looks at how history has unfolded, both from a systematic perspective (i.e., what is it that *drives* history to unfold in the way that it does?) and from a moral one (i.e., how do we assess the way in which history has unfolded?), one must conclude that human civilization has been responsible for the general ruination of humanity. Rousseau's procedure—albeit not formally labeled philosophy of history—is, in fact, more influential than Voltaire's within the German philosophical tradition. Furthermore, Rousseau's answer to the Academy of Dijon's competition on the origins of inequality is one that continued to resonate in this tradition (Jarvis, 1998: 41ff): namely that the origins of human inequality are to be found exactly *in* human society—although, importantly, for Rousseau, as well as for these later traditions, the emergence of such society is entirely natural (Rousseau, 1987).

### **Alienation, Freedom, and Universal History: Hegel and Marx**

With Rousseau's suggestion, the distinction between nature and history already looms large. If human society is both the origin of human misery *and* is also entirely natural, then there is here a question about the proper moral assessment of this fact—indeed, is it a moral fact at all, since it appears unavoidable? The same issue arises with Kant's notion of an "unsocial sociability" (*ungesellige Geselligkeit*), where the idea is that every individual is naturally driven to be an egoist, while pursuing interests that can only be actualized in society. For any individual, such a tension "awakens all his [sic] powers, brings him to conquer his inclination to laziness, and propelled by vainglory, lust for power, and avarice, to achieve a rank among his fellows whom he cannot tolerate but from whom he cannot withdraw" (Kant, 1963a: 15). While for Kant, this picture still implied certain theological commitments (Shuster, 2014: 42–71), the basic idea might be entirely divorced of such requirements and understood simply, as Adam Smith presents it, as an "invisible hand" at work (A. Smith, 1937: 485; C. Smith, 2006), or, later, in Hegel's words, as the "cunning of history" (Hegel, 1975: 89; S. B. Smith, 2016: 145). With such views, we might speak of "a history with a definite natural plan for creatures who have no plan of their own" (Kant, 1963b: 12).

Hegel's philosophy of history depends on a conception that equally trades on a relationship between the social and the natural (Pippin, 2011; Rand, 2007). As Hegel stresses in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the relevant idea of freedom as an achievement—captured by his notion of spirit—makes its first appearance exactly at the point in his account where two distinct self-consciousnesses confront each other amidst an otherwise ordinary existence in the natural world (Hegel, 1977: 100). Human freedom appears as a concept and

possible achievement with a struggle in the natural world that emerges between these two self-consciousnesses (Pippin, 2011), an account itself importantly influenced by history, in the form of the Haitian revolution (Buck-Morss, 2009); there is here a distinct dialectical intertwinement between nature and history. According to Hegel, with the emergence of self-consciousness and the encounter—and struggle—between two self-consciousnesses, recognition emerges as the locus around which human freedom is understood and actualized. Hegel describes how through the struggle between the two, one self-consciousness looms as master—enslaver—and the other as a slave, and how the struggle between them engenders concrete historical actualizations and failures of recognition, all dependent initially on the slave and his investment in work and the sort of avenues for recognition that such work opens up (Stewart, 1995: 138ff). These shapes eventually give way to more and more complex historical shapes and configurations, ones that require particular, and oftentimes large and complex institutional structures—from families to courts to police to nation states—for the possibility and actualization of recognition between subjects, and thereby of human freedom (Hegel, 1991a; Neuhouser, 2003). Involved in this process is also the eventual historical emergence of the claim that *all* humans—because self-conscious—possess a standing within what might be termed a “space of reasons” (Sellars, 1997), and who might thereby appeal to such a standing in cases where they are otherwise denied their freedom and standing as a self-consciousness (Pinkard, 2017: 29).

In Hegel’s words, though, such a “new world is no more a complete actuality than is a newborn child” (Hegel, 1977: 7). Essential to any such normative claim about the universality of human self-consciousness and freedom is also a procedure whereby one must achieve this freedom in what might be termed a ‘thick’ sense, understood chiefly by means of several tasks. First, one must grasp how one came to possess such a notion of freedom; for Hegel, this amounts to being able to construct a history (as he does in the *Phenomenology* and in his lectures on history) that reveals how self-consciousness has passed “through a series of shapes [in order to] attain to a knowledge of itself” (Hegel, 1977: 265). These shapes might be understood as particular shapes of *spirit*, i.e., shapes of human society, whether Greek or Roman or whatever, where each is “more basic than an intersubjective unity among different agents,” but rather “includes such intersubjective agreements” in addition to “a conception of the world as something to which those agreements are in tune or not” (Pinkard, 2008: 114–115). They may be understood as ‘forms of life’ (Hegel, 2011: 287; Pinkard, 2008), where that signifies all of the various ‘attunements’ that individuals within a particular form of life share, both by upbringing (*Bildung*), personal reflection, explicit and implicit normative commitments and saliences, and by the ways in which they share, interpret, and habitually actualize particular basic biological facts (Cavell, 1989: 40–52). Second, and falling directly out of the first general procedure, Hegel takes a particular conception and construction of history to be essential: one must understand and be able to tell a historical story about how one’s present shape of spirit—and thereby one’s present conception of freedom—rests on earlier actualizations *and* failures of self-conscious activity. It is only out of the failures that there emerge the successes, and it is essential to Hegel’s aims to grasp both, since, as is famously denoted by his use of ‘aufheben,’ each subsequent shape both annuls *and* maintains elements of the prior shape (Birchall, 1981; Hegel, 2015: 81–82). It is not too much, then, to speak here of alienation, as Hegel himself does in the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, where he describes how consciousness “becomes alienated (*entfremdet*) from itself and then returns to itself from this alienation” (Hegel, 1977: 21). Furthermore, it is only through the construction of such an account that one might truly be able to feel at home inside of a particular shape (Hegel, 1991a: 42), achieving thereby the sort of self-relation to oneself and to one’s society—and thereby to one’s possibilities and actions—that is required for human freedom. At the conclusion of one of his lectures on the history of philosophy, with a story about the

historical movements from one shape to another, Hegel notes, “I have tried to exhibit their necessary procession out of one another, so that each philosophy necessarily presupposes the one preceding it” (Hegel, 1995: 212). Hegel’s invocation of “necessity” here raises all of the chief issues for his account, namely what *sort* of necessity is implied here, and especially whether it commits him to some sort of problematic fatalism or teleology (Heidegger, 1994), or theodicy (Adorno, 1973: 300–361), or even totalitarianism (Kiesewetter, 1974; Popper, 2006). Implied in these tasks is also a third procedure, one that puts stress on the transitions from one shape to another (Hoffmeister, 1952: 1:328–331), asking us to acknowledge how in each of the aforementioned procedures, one’s self-conscious activity is implicated (Bristow, 2007), both in the understanding of one’s past (how prior historical shapes fit together) and in the understanding of one’s present (to what extent one’s *current* shape reflects its own ideals, i.e., makes sense to one, allows for freedom).

Essential to Hegel’s account is thereby a sort of ‘two-stage’ process, where the first stage denotes the (self-)movement of the shapes of consciousness—their breakdown and subsequent reformation—and then a subsequent reconstruction of all this at the second stage, where the various breakdowns are arranged and understood through a unified narrative (Förster, 2012: 306–373). The former reveals the process by which a particular historical notion of human freedom was achieved, while the latter actualizes it by means of a distinct historical justification, one that reveals a process of periodization and thereby constructs history as having moved toward such a notion of human freedom (Shuster, 2014: 134–168). Practically, then, in the realm of history,

the failure of a way of life is expressed in the way in which it fails to sustain allegiance to itself, and in the dissolution of such a way of life, those living during its dissolution have to pick up the pieces that still seem to work, discard what is no longer of use or value, and fashion some new whole out of what remains, almost always without any overall plan for what they are doing.

(Pinkard, 2017: 79–80)

Many of the aforementioned controversies surrounding Hegel’s philosophy of history emerge from this process. What is the nature of the whole or totality that emerges here? Does it stand in a problematic relation to the past (the problem of theodicy), and does it suggest a problematic sort of totalization (the problems of teleology, fatalism, or even totalitarianism)? One recent suggestion (Pinkard, 2017: 40–44) is to see this task as a sort of “infinite end” (Rödl, 2010: 147–149), where no one action or even set of actions—in other words, no single or even single set of rational reflections on or construction of history—exhaust the task. Instead, such an assessment of history is rather a “principle” or “generality” (Anscombe, 1981: 48) by means of which one consistently—if one aims to be free—parses one’s situation and its relationship to the past. On such a view, with the emergence of a particular notion of human freedom as based on self-conscious mutual recognition, including importantly *self*-recognition (feeling “at home with oneself”—“*bei sich selbst*”), “the conception of what it ultimately means to lead a human life is an infinite end” (Pinkard, 2017: 42), i.e., not something that is accomplished once and for all but that must be performed time and time again, in perpetuity (a similar suggestion is arrived at, albeit quite differently, in Comay, 2011).

It is in this context, in acknowledging that Hegel’s procedure is fundamentally retrograde, that one should take the early Marx’s statement that “philosophers have only *interpreted* the world ... the point, however, is to *change it*” (Marx, 1978d: 145). Implied in the statement is a sort of political-ethical sentiment—which becomes quite important to Adorno and the Frankfurt School—that any such reconstruction rests on a historical account that suggests that the world ought to be different. Marx thereby accepts elements of Hegel’s procedure.



He agrees with Hegel that a consistent *self-alienation* of self-consciousness from a particular shape of spirit drives human history (Forst, 2017; Hyppolite, 1969b: 130–137): it just is the case that particular shapes break down, stop making sense to subjects, and thereby invite reflection on their breakdown (Marx, 1978a). What's at stake between them, though, is the nature of the alienation: is it the case that it arises from the living and concrete norms (Hegel, 1991b: 115) that animate a particular form of life (Hegel)? Or does it have to do with the material (economic) conditions that allegedly actually give rise to those norms (Marx)? (Later, yet another basis for alienation emerges in Adorno's work.)

According to Marx (Marx, 1978b: 155), it is exactly because material conditions—modes of production (denoting both the actual forces and the relations of production)—drive conceptual activity (superstructure) that, in Marx's famous claim, Hegel's entire account must be stood 'upon its head' (Marx, 1978c: xxi). Marx's inheritance of Hegel's stress on alienation pushes him to leverage Hegel's basic procedure—of an inherent, diagnosable crisis within a form of life—to specify four forms of alienation whose origins lie in material conditions: alienation from the products of one's labor, alienation from the processes of one's labor, and alienation from one's own natural and social existence as a human being (Marx, 1978a; Wildt, 1987). And it is these forms of alienation and the ills connected to them—notably the production of a wide range of ideologies, whether religious, social, or political—that prohibit the achievement of human freedom (Ng, 2015; Wolff, 2003). If this is true, and if one can tell a seemingly causal story about the various ways in which material conditions can be arranged and the sorts of forms of alienation they will produce, then Marx, in distinction to Hegel, has allegedly produced a “theory of history”—dialectical materialism—as opposed to a mere “philosophy of history,” where the former implies a scientific account distinct from the allegedly merely “reflective construal” of the latter (Cohen, 2000: 27). There is a lot more that might be said here about both (1) the relationship between Hegel and Marx (Chitty, 2011), and (2) the best formulation of Marx's theory as well as how and what best to assess when it comes to material conditions—a debate that rages on (Piketty, 2014). What is most conspicuous for the present discussion, however, is the extent to which both Marx and Hegel leverage an experience and understanding of alienation in order to present a “universal history,” i.e., an account that conceives of history as a whole that admits of periods that can be revealed on the world stage, thereby presenting a fundamental continuity to history. The distinctions between them ultimately materialize in what each conceives as the most salient *feature* of history (idealism vs. materialism), not in what is the proper overarching method for doing so or the proper form of the historical account in question.

Furthermore, note also the extent to which Marx's account conceives of human labor and its organization as that which—and here the details will surely be important—can prohibit individuals from being free of alienation, i.e., of being free. At an eagle's eye view of things, the central question, then, is how to conceive of labor altogether (Arendt, 1958; Postone, 1993; Weisman, 2013), both conceptually (as in what role does *and* ought it play human life?) as well as materially (what is the corresponding arrangement of actual society that corresponds to what role labor ought to play in human life?). These questions extend far beyond the scope of this chapter, but they do reveal an important point: namely that whatever story one tells about the evolution of human labor and the modes of production, and thereby of human alienation, it is *also* a story about the production and possibility of human freedom for it just is the case that “there comes a time when this alienation becomes a living contradiction” (Hyppolite, 1969a: 103).

One way to understand the trajectory of Marxist thought as well as elements of the Frankfurt School is to see them as concerned with the conditions that allow for such critical consciousness, concerned with exactly *when* such a time materializes when alienation becomes unlivable, practically unsustainable (Jaeggi, 2014). While it did not turn out to be

the proletariat that bore or induced the revolution—indeed, the status or necessity of the revolution out of the history of capitalism is itself a topic of debate (Cohen, 2000: 202ff)—it nonetheless remains true that any critical consciousness “cannot emancipate itself without transcending the conditions of its own life” and “cannot transcend the conditions of its own life without transcending *all* the inhuman conditions of present society” (Marx, 1997: 368). And Marx’s talk of “transcendence” here brings to the fore all of the issues that opened this chapter: the relationship between nature and history (*what* is being transcended possibly?), the importance and status of alienation (what potentially *moves* one toward such transcendence?), and the very construction of history itself (how exactly do we account for the conditions of present society, and especially in what sort of—genealogical or phenomenological—depth?).

The fundamental issue with universal history is not simply that it tells a progressive story about history, but rather that it presents history (and thereby temporality) as the sort of thing that can be divvied up into distinct periods and thereby conjoined into a whole, a totality. This whole is then leveraged to provide a justification for the present. And this is true even if such a history aims to critique it, i.e., all of this is equally true of any regressive universal history. Universal history is essentially linear; of course, it is not linear in a *strict* sense (Clarke, 1993; Pinkard, 2017): with non-metaphysical readings of Hegel, there may, in fact, be no predetermined telos, and the movement from one shape to another may admit of regressions and failures. Nonetheless, history *is* linear in the deep sense that the construction of the overall picture of its movement is one where the various pieces are *able* to fit together into a broader whole. Notably, this whole need not be presupposed in the beginning, as many critics allege, rather it may arise out of the *self*-movement of the shapes in question, exactly in the way that Hegel suggests in the *Phenomenology*, where it runs along the “pathway of despair” according to an internal logic, and where it ends only when it arrives “at a point at which it gets rid of its semblance of being burdened with something alien” (Hegel, 1977: 49, 56). But nonetheless, in such a procedure, the construction of such history is not *itself* made a problem.

What would it mean to make the construction of history itself a problem? It would not be sufficient merely to highlight the fact that, say, Hegel was Eurocentric (Bernasconi, 1998, 2000, 2003), which while true (and equally true of Marx), is irrelevant to the broader point. Even were Hegel “properly” (without racial bias and ignorance) to incorporate all of the elements of world history that he overlooks or gets wrong (Pinkard, 2017), his historical account (and Marx’s) would still see history as a *continuous* whole, a totality (Jay, 1986; Lukács, 1972).

### Suffering and Dialectical History: Benjamin and Adorno

Adorno’s alternative, following Benjamin, is that any such construction of history ought to be rejected. On what grounds? Before answering, let me make clearer what Adorno has in mind. In lectures from 1964 to 1965, Adorno puts the significance of Benjamin’s view of history as follows: “His idea is that, contrary to what traditional philosophy believed, facts do not simply disperse in the course of time, unlike immutable, eternal ideas” (Adorno, 2006: 91). Instead, according to Adorno,

while the traditional view inserts facts into the flow of time, they really possess a nucleus of time in themselves, they crystallize time in themselves [...] in accordance with this, we might say that history is *discontinuous* in the sense that it represents life perennially disrupted.

(Adorno, 2006: 91)

What Adorno aims to develop, then, is a dialectical account of history wherein “discontinuity is posited as a *feature* of history, not as an alternative theory of history” (O'Connor, 2008: 182). Adorno's point might be broached as follows, flowing from two main insights. First, any construction of history leaves out something. The history in question may be ambitious, and it may even be written from the perspective of the vanquished as opposed to the victors, the low opposed to the high, the ordinary opposed to the extraordinary, but *all* constructions of history fundamentally—always, irreducibly—leave out something. Yet, and this is the second point, the things left out happened, and thereby “possess a nucleus of time in themselves,” where that means essentially that they each have a self-standing and concrete determinacy that does not exclusively rely on being placed into a context. Nonetheless, particular pieces of history *do* only appear to and for us in particular contexts; this is what Adorno means when he notes that “what we can legitimately call ideas is this nucleus of time within the individual crystallized phenomena, which can only be decoded (*erschließen*) by interpretation” (Adorno, 2006: 91). The use of “decode” is important here since it stresses the fact that while these events are perpetually available, in order for them to be something for us, they must be decoded—interpreted. We must do something to and with them, and that is always true, even as they have their own freestanding, concrete existence that makes available and invites such procedures. Benjamin captures this idea in a characteristically natty metaphor when he notes that eternal truth, if such a thing might be said to exist, is more like “the ruffle on a dress than some idea” (Benjamin, 1999: 463). A ruffle on a dress is oddly both everything and nothing: on the one hand, it is inessential to what a dress is (a dress just is something that is worn as such); on the other hand, a ruffle *makes* the dress, both for better and for worse: it is what makes the dress all the rage at a particular moment, gives it unique standing amidst other fashion, and also what dates it, what makes it ultimately unwearable—because no longer stylish—from the perspective of a later moment. What's eternal then just is the fact of the radical and freestanding uniqueness of every moment, which possesses a concrete, monadic existence that can nonetheless only be revealed to us by means of the intervention of human subjectivity. Any placement of an event into a particular history ultimately destroys its unique nucleus of time.

One way we might understand the conception of history emerging here is to see history as imbued with a quasi-religious significance. Adorno will sometimes call it ‘metaphysical,’ where for him that always implies ‘more than what is’ (Shuster, 2015a: 107ff), denoting the thought that with any historical account, there appear lines of suggestiveness that point beyond that account, by means of both what has been forgotten or overlooked, and also by what wasn't actualized or failed to appear but was nonetheless available or suggested. As Adorno notes, in the construction of history, we always detect “something hopeful that stands in precise opposition to what the totality appears to show” (Adorno, 2006: 91). It is for this reason that Adorno speaks of metaphysics arising “at the point where the empirical world is taken seriously” (Adorno, 2000: 18; Shuster, 2015a: 107). Here, an analogy might be drawn to the way in which the concept of a “saturated phenomenon” has emerged in contemporary phenomenology of religion (Marion, 2002a: 202ff, 2002b). One way to think about this notion, especially in this context, is that any particular part of history—any point—might be seen as a sort of “saturated phenomenon,” where its concrete existence (and thereby its possibilities via interpretation) always overflows or exceeds whatever account it is placed into. In this way, the necessity of human intervention in the interpretation of history *and* the unique “nucleus of time”—the deep materiality—of any particular historical point (node, event, whatever—the proper term itself importantly is open to interpretation) are both affirmed. As Adorno puts it, “what would be beyond, appears only in the materials and categories inside” (Adorno, 1973: 140). The analogy with a ‘saturated phenomenon’ might alternatively be made with reference to Kant's faculties

(Marion, 2002a), especially as Kant develops the notion of reflective judgment in the *Third Critique*. Natural beauty reveals “a technique of nature, which makes it possible to represent nature as a system in accordance with laws *the principle of which we do not encounter anywhere in our entire faculty of understanding*” (Kant, 2000: 129–130). Note that it is natural beauty itself—not merely our subjective faculties—that suggests such a system to us. Natural beauty—any experience of beauty—exceeds our capacities for understanding; in Kantian parlance, the understanding is unable to supply one proper concept for the particular manifold and enters into a free play with our imagination, multiplying the range and possibilities of applicable concepts; our faculties are so vivified that no particular concept exhausts the manifold in question. Our standing with respect to history is analogous: we construct histories, but they do not exhaust the historical record, which always exceeds any of our constructions. Analogous to the way in which natural beauty reveals something about our subjectivity in Kant, we also see the interpenetration of the historical and the natural here: it is a natural fact about history—not about our subjectivity—that history exceeds our constructions, even as such a surplus is only possible or diagnosable in virtue of our subjective capacities.

There is a robust ethical commitment behind such a conception of history, and it is important to bring that to the fore in order to complete this dialectical conception of history. To do that, it is worthwhile to attend to the ways in which similar themes appear in Benjamin. Let me quote a few passages from his paralingua (notes) to “On the Concept of History”:

The notion of a universal history is bound up with the notion of progress and the notion of civilization (*Kultur*). In order for all the moments in the history of humanity to be incorporated in the chain of history, they must be reduced to a common denominator—“civilization,” “enlightenment,” “the objective spirit,” or whatever one wishes to call it.

(Benjamin, 1977a: 1:1233, 2002b: 4:403, translation modified)

Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is wholly otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train—namely, humankind—to activate the emergency brake.

(Benjamin, 1977a: 1:1232, 2002b: 4:402, translation modified)

In the idea of a classless society, Marx secularized the idea of messianic time. And that was good. The disaster began when the Social Democrats elevated this idea to an “ideal.” The ideal was defined ... as an “infinite [*unendlich*] task.” [...] Once the classless society had been defined as an infinite task, the empty and homogeneous time was transformed into an anteroom, so to speak, in which one could wait for the emergence of the revolutionary situation with more or less placidity.

(Benjamin, 1977a: 1:1231, 2002b: 4:401–402, translation modified)

Immediately, note the extent to which Benjamin also attacks any version of universal history, whether progressive or regressive. According to Benjamin, the problem with such history is twofold. First, Benjamin takes it that such a conception, by conceptualizing temporality as homogeneous time, gets the history fundamentally wrong (a point that animates Benjamin’s thinking from his earliest days—see Fenves, 2011). Second, such a conception of history serves the practical function of pacifying subjects and obfuscating the origins and nature of their suffering, all while suggesting that the ideal toward which history moves is something measurable, and merely currently absent (Dobbs-Weinstein, 2015: 129ff). Either of these points is a book-length topic in its own right, but a focus on

the motive or impulse that animates Benjamin's thinking is a manageable topic that I address in the remainder of this chapter, since an analogous motive animates Adorno and the Frankfurt School.

One can see this ethical stance already in Adorno's 1932 lecture, "The Idea of Natural-History" (Hullot-Kentor, 2006b), a lecture that he presented to the Frankfurt Kant society, and which continued to influence Adorno's thinking until his death (Buck-Morss, 1977: 52). While a general consensus around the text has not yet emerged (Whyman, 2016: 452), and while there are many issues and interlocutors for Adorno in the text (Hullot-Kentor, 2006a), a convincing reconstruction has recently been proposed (Whyman, 2016). Historically, Adorno was likely responding to a debate over historicism, spurned by the work of Ernst Troeltsch (Buck-Morss, 1977: 53), specifically Troeltsch's 1922 book (Buck-Morss, 1977: 53, Note 70), *Der Historismus und seine Probleme*—Historicism and Its Problems (Troeltsch, 1922). One of Troeltsch's chief claims is that the periodization of history can be viewed from the perspective of an ideal—here also fundamentally religious—integration of the periods from the perspective of the present. In response, Adorno agrees with a historicist rejection of such an idealization. Thus, he notes that Heidegger's ontological project *does* arrive at a plausible rejoinder to such a philosophy of history, by "eliminating the pure antithesis of history and being," since "history itself ... has become the basic ontological structure" (Hullot-Kentor, 1984: 256). For Heidegger, humans are fundamentally "historical" in their "own existence," where their "possibilities of access and modes of interpretation" are always "diverse, varying in different historical circumstances" (Heidegger, 1988: 21–22). The term Heidegger introduces to capture this is 'historicity' (*Geschichtlichkeit*), a fundamental existential structure common to all human beings. The fact that every human is thrown into a particular locus of concern, a particular horizon and world of interpretation and possibility, means that one's projects for and possibilities in history are set by such a *particular* being-in-the-world, a particular historical horizon. The fact *that* one's world is so constituted, however, is, according to Heidegger, itself an ontological fact of being human, a fact that thereby admits of authentic and inauthentic modes of relation, i.e., modes that do or do not acknowledge this fact (Heidegger, 1996: §12–18, §31–33, §35–42, §62, §64–65, §72–77). Adorno agrees with Heidegger that it just is the case that particular circumstances determine one's access to history and one's possibilities for historical conceptualization, and that there are serious issues with the sort of account Troeltsch offers. What Adorno alleges as a problem for Heidegger's account is the fact that with any view of history, we need to be able to understand elements of it as necessary and other elements as contingent. Yet exactly such a view is impossible on Heidegger's rubric (Gandesha, 2006: 148; Gordon, 2016: 49–54; O'Connor, 1998: 58), since all of history is of a kind: contingent. We might ask at this point whether this is a convincing reading of Heidegger (Macdonald, 2008), since what Heidegger is driving at is that there just are ontological, formal qualities inherent to being human, i.e., to being a creature who possesses a past, present, and future, and who thereby (potentially) relates to them in affective and value-laden ways that ultimately disclose temporal possibilities and realities in particular, nonhomogeneous experiences of time. It just is the case that such a creature is confronted with the possibility of nothingness, of death (Heidegger, 1996: §58). On one hand, this certainly seems to undermine Adorno's charge that Heidegger's ontology somehow prohibits us from understanding history in its specificity, that it makes mysterious actual history, with its necessities and contingencies. On the other hand, Adorno's critique appears to diagnose a real problem when we realize that Adorno is really stressing the conception of history presented earlier, as modeled on a sort of 'saturated phenomenon.' The point might be developed as follows. Adorno's charge is not merely or solely, say, the historical-critical point that breakdowns of agency are just fundamentally not understandable by means of formal qualities about being and nonbeing—i.e., an attack on the Heideggerian claim that

such breakdowns are really variations in the fact that at the core of every human existence, there is the nullity of death (Pippin, 1997: 385; 2005: 77).

Instead, Adorno's point, without denying the aforementioned historical-critical point, is the *ethical* charge that such a view of history—with its formalism—minimizes concrete sources of human suffering. The suffering undergone by others throughout history can never be located fundamentally in any formal ontology (Pensky, 2017), or in my experience of death, rather only in *someone else's* death. Adorno's point is that to locate an explanation of concrete cases of suffering where Heidegger aims to locate it is to miss an important dimension of what it means to be human, of what it means to value other humans. Emmanuel Levinas puts this same point as the idea that being truly human “consists precisely in opening oneself to the death of the other, in being preoccupied with his or her death” (Levinas, 1999: 157–158). Although more detail is needed here (Cohen, 2006), a shared sense of such a critique of Heidegger brings Adorno close to someone like Levinas (Alford, 2002; de Vries, 2005; Horowitz, 2002; Sachs, 2011), and the overall critique is plausibly bolstered by Heidegger's own stunning suggestion, after the Nazi genocide, that “agriculture” as “a mechanized food industry” is “in essence the same as the production of corpses in the gas chambers and extermination camps” (Heidegger, 2012: 27).

A rejection of the sort of conception of history present in Heidegger's ontology requires one to propose a philosophy of history that acknowledges the deeply historical nature of human agency, while rejecting Heidegger's recourse to ontology. Adorno finds such a conception of history in Lukács's notion of second nature, and quotes him extensively in his lecture (Hullot-Kentor, 1984: 261ff). Lukács writes that such second nature is “a petrified estranged complex of meaning that is no longer able to awaken inwardness; it is a charnel house of rotted interiorities” (Hullot-Kentor, 1984: 262; Lukács, 1971: 64). Lukács's suggestion throughout *Theory of the Novel* is the by now familiar claim that capitalism forms individuals whose natural comportment toward and within the world—indeed whose world, in a deep phenomenological sense—is always already shot through with conventions that reify people and things, alienate humans from each other and their activities, and that fundamentally fail to offer a meaningful human existence. The reference to a “charnel house” should thereby not be minimized—on this point, Adorno and Lukács share a common ethical sensibility. Where Adorno parts company with Lukács is in how meaning might be actualized in response to such a state of affairs. For Lukács, meaning can only reappear by means of a “theological resurrection ... an eschatological context” (Hullot-Kentor, 1984: 262). Adorno's suggestion is that, in thinking that history can only be vivified by something *beyond* history, Lukács is in fact betraying his own ethical estimation of history as a sort of charnel house, instead of understanding that history only symbolically, and seeing “death and destruction ... [as] idealized” (Benjamin, 1977b: 166; Hullot-Kentor, 1984: 263, translation modified). In other words, Lukács somehow fails to acknowledge the concrete nature of historical suffering. How? Here, Adorno invokes Benjamin's conception of allegory, which while exceedingly complex (Caygill, 2010; Cowan, 1981), allegedly aims above all to present history as a site where “the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history, a petrified primordial landscape” (Benjamin, 1977b: 166; Hullot-Kentor, 1984: 262). And here, Benjamin means ‘Hippocratic face’ quite literally and clinically: it is the face that is produced by impending death. For Benjamin, nature can only be understood as perpetually bound up with its destruction; thus, the fundamental category for any construction of history is “transience” or “decay” (Adorno, 1973: 360; Hullot-Kentor, 1984: 262). What I take Benjamin to be after with this claim, and Adorno as well, is the idea that while we perpetually write history—that is, place its unique and individual points into a context, even though the most fundamental truth about all such points is that they are all entirely unique, all possessed of “a nucleus of time in themselves”—the only historical truth is that “history is *discontinuous*

in the sense that it represents life perennially disrupted” (Adorno, 2006: 91). Every moment, even when placed into a historical account that makes it into some sense-making context, also fundamentally carries its own opposition to that context, potentially resists it: every moment is unique and equally presents its uniqueness potentially in opposition to every context. The only truth about history is that it “constantly repeats this process of disruption” (Adorno, 2006: 91). For this reason, the fundamental category of history is transience or decay. Or as Adorno puts it, we ought to say, “history is highly continuous *in* discontinuity” (Adorno, 2006: 92). And the reason Benjamin’s notion of allegory is central to this point is the simple fact that allegory—unlike symbolism, which merely invokes one thing to *really* mean something else—affirms the historical uniqueness and concreteness of (1) the things that it allegorizes and (2) the moment that allows any such allegory to work. This is why Benjamin calls for a “Copernican revolution in historical perception” (Benjamin, 1999: 388; Hanssen, 1998). Benjamin notes that

formerly it was thought that a fixed point had been in ‘what had been,’ and one saw the present engaged in tentatively concentrating the forces of knowledge on this ground. Now this relation is to be overturned, and what has been is to become the dialectical reversal—the flash of awakened consciousness ... the facts become something that *just now first happened to us, first struck us; to establish them is the affair of memory.*

(Benjamin, 1999: 388–389, emphasis added)

All constructions of history—like allegories—always fail to exhaust the present context, always pointing beyond it, *even as* they also depend on that context, requiring it for any construction of history and meaning. Here again the process of decay emerges as an entirely *natural* fact about history—it just is the case that every historical event carries with it possibilities unrealized and that every historical view ignores or overlooks or hides them. Any such natural fact of decay, however, can only be revealed through human intervention, through an understanding of exactly what is decaying and how, or what failed to be actualized and how. This is the context in which we ought to read Adorno’s pronouncement in *Negative Dialectics* that “where Hegelian metaphysics transfigures the absolute by equating it with the total passing of all finite things, it simultaneously looks a little beyond the mythical spell it captures and reinforces” (Adorno, 1973: 360). It looks “a little beyond” it because Hegel’s avowed impulse—to capture “the total passing of *all* finite things”—is, in fact, exactly right, but Hegel fails—turns into mythology—exactly when he thinks that he can do it, even in a text as ambitious and powerful as the *Phenomenology*. True progress in this realm would bring to a halt all constructions of history that stress continuity and progress, and instead apply the “emergency brake” that Benjamin suggests, re-orienting our view of the entire historical record and its relationship to us—something that remains a possibility at every moment (Adorno, 2005b, 2006).

## Conclusion

Finally, we can give greater weight to Adorno’s entire conception of history by marshaling more of its basis in Benjamin’s thought. In “On the Concept of History,” Benjamin notes that it is a truth that “nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history” (Benjamin, 2002a: 4:390). Benjamin continues, noting that only for a “redeemed mankind [sic] has its past become citable in all its moments” (Benjamin, 2002a: 4:390). I take this just to be the point about history as a sort of ‘saturated phenomenon.’ On one hand, Benjamin’s point is then the now relatively common point that history must be *de-colonialized* (Mignolo,

2011); on the other hand, Benjamin is making an even deeper point: every history, of whatever sort, will leave something out—indeed, more accurately—will leave *someone* out, a great deal many ‘someones.’ The impetus to seeing history as a sort of ‘saturated phenomenon’ is not merely, say, ontological, about the qualitative nature of history, but rather also ethical. This is the context in which we should read Benjamin’s claim that “the only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious” (Benjamin, 2002a: 4:391). And, as Benjamin points out, “this enemy has never ceased to be victorious” (Benjamin, 2002a: 4:391).

What might it mean to write history from this different perspective? In part, we have to be honest: there is a reason that Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* was never finished—it is an almost impossible task that requires seeking out all of the refuse, everything that’s been discarded, avoided, and lost. Writing such history is impossible. Nonetheless, it must be noted that what’s at stake is not its completion, but an understanding of what it might mean to be inspired and animated by such a task. It would require rejecting all constructions of universal history. At the same time, it paradoxically also requires the construction of a limited sort of universal history: in order to acknowledge the suffering of prior generations—and here we must speak of generations upon generations—we must construct a minimal *regressive* universal history. As Adorno famously notes, “no universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb” (Adorno, 1973: 320). Such a history is constantly and increasingly more regressive (so, there is no nostalgia implied here). And Adorno implores us to acknowledge that history has largely been a series of catastrophes, and that one can trace this sequence from our earliest days mastering nature (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). We might say that

the unity that cements the discontinuous, chaotically splintered moments and phases of history—the unity of the control of nature, progressing to rule over men, and finally to that over men’s inner nature ... it ends in the total menace which organized mankind poses to organized men, in the epitome of discontinuity.

(Adorno, 1973: 320)

At the same time, because of the *same* aforementioned ethical impulse and the view of nature it stakes, even such a regressive universal history must be denied. As Adorno puts it, “universal history must be constructed and repudiated” (Adorno, 1973: 320, translation modified). ‘Constructed’ because to fail to do so is to fail to acknowledge the suffering of past generations, which rests on the quasi-religious understanding of every moment of history as unquantifiably full, and every unique human life as sacred; and ‘repudiated’ because to fail to do so is both (1) to fail to be ethically sensitive to the historical fact that history has reached a moment where its end “has become a real possibility” (Sommer, 2016: 325), and (2) to fail to acknowledge the irreducible singularity of every moment and every life. This is what Adorno suggests when he writes that “philosophy interprets such [historical] coding, the always new Mene Tekel, in that which is smallest, the fragments struck loose through decay, but which carry objective meaning” (Adorno, 1973: 360, translation modified; 1984: 6:353). The reference to “Mene Tekel” here invokes the Biblical *Book of Daniel* (Chapter 5), where these words appear as prophecy, signifying ‘mene’ (מנא) and ‘tekel’ (תקל). The former Near Eastern root signifies *measurement* (equally, discernment), while the latter signifies *weighing* (equally, finding insufficient, wanting). In *Daniel*, the idea is that God finds the days of the kingdom under discussion numbered and wanting; in Adorno’s invocation, the “always new Mene Tekel” denotes both the fundamental saturated nature of history (something that might only be grasped in the moment of complete redemption), and the fundamental



*inadequacy* of every moment, which perpetually disappears, and which is thereby transient, decaying.

One might argue that the aims of such a view are to offer us a bit of therapy (Whyman, 2016), to allow us to counter a particular view of the philosophy of history, one that imputes some sort of greater meaning to the whole beyond the present moment. That is not incorrect, but it seems to me to miss the manifestly *ethical*—and thereby political—import behind the project, an ethical import that animates all of the members of the Frankfurt School, and which fundamentally opposes any procedure that minimizes or overlooks *any* human life, with its particular experiences of suffering, as well as its particular expectations of happiness (Benjamin, 2002a: 4:389–390). The nature and scope of this impulse requires elaboration (Bernstein, 2001; Freyenhagen, 2013; Shuster, 2014, 2015b) but note that it shares structural features with certain non-metaphysical readings of Hegel (where the suggestion was that the construction of history is a sort of ‘infinite end’ bequeathed to us by our self-conscious natures). Adorno parts company from these Hegelians exactly in the way in which he, in virtue of this impulse, rejects the desire to ‘be at home,’ even as a general aim. To do so is to betray an ethical imperative imposed on us by contemporary experience; as Adorno puts it, “today [...] it is part of morality not to be home” (Adorno, 2005a: 39). The alienation that’s animated this tradition from Hegel onwards thereby appears again. Thus, we construct a universal history that reveals suffering, but we reject it because every moment—and especially every moment of suffering—always already shows its passing and thereby points to possibilities unrealized or ignored or missed—as Adorno puts it, “Woe speaks: ‘Go’” (Adorno, 1973: 203). And the recognition of suffering across these modalities is exactly the “objective meaning” that every moment carries.

## Note

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- 1 I am grateful to Henry Pickford for reading earlier versions of this chapter and for his generous and incisive comments—Brätwurst indeed!

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## Further Reading

- Buck-Morss, S. (1977). *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute*. New York: The Free Press. (Classic take on the relationship between Adorno and Benjamin.)
- Cohen, G. A. (2000). *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Classic elaboration of Marx's philosophy of history.)
- Hanssen, B. (1998). *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels*. Berkeley: University of Los Angeles Press. (Excellent overview of Benjamin's entire project, as well as his relationship to Adorno.)
- O'Connor, B. (2008). Philosophy of History. In D. Cook (Ed.), *Theodor Adorno: Key Concepts* (pp. 179–196). Stockfield: Acumen. (Excellent short take on Adorno's philosophy of history.)
- Pinkard, T. (2017). *Does History Make Sense?: Hegel on the Historical Shapes of Justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. (An excellent recent reconstruction of Hegel's philosophy of history from a non-teleological and nonreligious perspective.)

# 5

## DISCOURSE ETHICS

Maeve Cooke

Discourse ethics is a theory of moral validity, initiated in the early 1970s by Karl-Otto Apel as a contribution to moral philosophy and subsequently developed within the framework of Frankfurt School Critical Theory by Jürgen Habermas. It is both a moral theory in its own right and a core ingredient of Habermas's critical social theory. Discourse ethics offers answers to central questions of moral philosophy, such as whether claims for the validity of moral judgments can be vindicated rationally and, if so, whether their rationality is universal in reach or confined to a particular socio-cultural context. In the context of Frankfurt School Critical Theory, it addresses the central question of the rationality of critique of a social order. This is the focus of the present essay. I consider discourse ethics primarily from the point of view of the place it occupies in Habermas's critical social theory, which endeavors to elaborate a universalist conception of reason internal to the linguistic practices of modern social orders. By means of this concept of reason, called "communicative rationality," Habermas seeks to overcome problems that he sees as endemic to the mode of critique practiced by Horkheimer and Adorno in their jointly written *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002) and, more generally, within early Frankfurt School Critical Theory (Habermas 1984: 372–399).

### The Place of Discourse Ethics in Habermas's Critical Theory

*Dialectic of Enlightenment* tells the story of the development of human rationality from myth to enlightenment—from the earliest human societies characterized by mythical worldviews to modern societies governed by enlightened reason. The story culminates with reason's relapse into barbarism, exemplified in the first decades of the twentieth century by National Socialism in Germany, Stalinism in the Soviet Union, and consumerism and the "culture industry" in the USA. Horkheimer and Adorno present this barbarism as the result of the degeneration of enlightened reason into a socially pervasive, instrumental rationality. With the advance of capitalism alongside scientific and technological developments, modern social orders become all-encompassing systems of instrumentalizing relations: humans relate to other humans, to the material and natural world, and to their inner selves, primarily as objects to be used for their own ends.

Habermas does not dispute the authors' characterization of National Socialism, Stalinist communism, and capitalist consumerism as forms of barbarism. His dispute, rather, is with their apparent rejection of Western modernity's project of rational enlightenment. In his view, Horkheimer and Adorno are too pessimistic with regard to the potential for human emancipation

inherent in modern societies (Habermas 1981). Moreover, as a consequence of their pessimism, Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of society is aporetic. They criticize the barbaric nature of purportedly enlightened societies by appealing to an idea of reason that is no longer available to the inhabitants of such societies; for in their account the dominance of instrumental rationality has rendered an alternative idea of reason unthinkable and inexpressible, except, on occasion, through works of art.

In response Habermas insists that modernity is an unfinished project (Habermas 1981). To continue the project, critical theorists must keep open the horizons of modernity through a willingness and ability to learn from history and other cultures (Habermas 1992: 138, 2001: 38–57). He maintains, furthermore, that modernity must generate its own normativity—its own standards for rational critique (Habermas 1987b: 7). The challenge is to elaborate a conception of reason that is at once part of existing social life and reaches beyond it—reason must be conceived of as “immanent transcendence” or “transcendence from within” (Habermas 1996: 5, 17, 2003: 7). Since *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, one of his earliest published works, he has endeavored to show how capitalist modernity itself offers emancipatory modes of human communication (Habermas 1991). In other words, he holds that capitalist modernity contains within it the potential to enable human freedom and a genuinely rational society—one emancipated from authoritarian thinking and behavior and from hierarchical and exclusionary social structures. In the 1960s, his systematic theoretical reflections on this rational potential were formulated as a theory of knowledge and human interests (Habermas 1972). In the early 1970s, he took a different tack, favoring a language-theoretical approach.

This enabled him to move Frankfurt School Critical Theory—his own as well as that of his predecessors—in a new direction. Two aspects of his reorientation of Critical Theory are especially significant. First, his reflections on language led him to develop a formal-pragmatic account of the validity basis of everyday speech. This pragmatic version of the “linguistic turn,” inspired by the psychologist and linguist Karl Bühler, by Ludwig Wittgenstein's use-theory of language, and by the speech act theory of J. L. Austin and John Searle, allowed him to make a theoretically crucial paradigm shift from a subject-object model of action and cognition to an intersubjective one. In the intersubjective paradigm embraced by Habermas, the traditional focus on relations between subjects and their objects gives way to a triadic model of linguistic communication, in which subjects relate to other subjects intentionally by way of speech acts concerning objects or states of affairs (Cooke 1994; Habermas 1998a).

Second, this intersubjective model of linguistic communication laid the philosophical foundations for the concepts of communicative action and communicative rationality, on which the critical power of his social theory now rests. In both cases, foundations are understood in a non-foundationalist way. In this respect, Habermas embraces the idea of a critical theory of society set out by Horkheimer in “Traditional and Critical Theory” (Horkheimer 1972). A critical theory works in conjunction with both traditional philosophy and the empirical sciences and social sciences, drawing on them for support for its theses. Thus, methodologically, a critical theory is not freestanding but rather challenged or substantiated by “truths” established in other disciplines. In line with this, it does not make *a priori* claims to truth; instead, its validity depends on whether its theses prove their truth in the actual practice of human life. On Horkheimer's understanding, a critical theory makes claims to truth that are always fallible, open to challenge on the basis of actual human experience. Habermas adopts this methodological approach. In developing his discourse theory, he looks for support from theories of language (above all, Bühler, Wittgenstein, Austin, Searle, and Chomsky) as well as from the developmental psychology of Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg. Thus, for example, his initial reflections on moral validity were accompanied by essays on the stages of moral consciousness that were influenced by Kohlberg's work.

As part of his reorientation of Critical Theory, Habermas began to articulate a discourse theory of validity, in which “discourse” is the name for validity-oriented forms of argumentation. His concern initially was with truth and moral validity (Habermas 2009: 208–269). During this period, in tandem with discourse theory, he developed a theory of communicative action (TCA), published in two volumes in 1981 (Habermas 1984 & 1987a). This is a normatively motivated, sociological account of advanced capitalist societies, in which communicative rationality is threatened by the expansion of the functionalist rationality necessary for the operation of financial and administrative systems. Here, moral philosophy takes a back seat to social theory. His main concern in TCA is to elaborate a theoretical framework for the critique of modern societies. In contrast to Horkheimer and Adorno, as he reads them, his basis for critique is not an idea of rationality external to the operation of modern societies, but rather one that is an integral part of it. Nonetheless, Habermas is insistent that he has always regarded moral philosophy as part of his critical social theory, never as a freestanding enterprise. Indeed, he sees this as the fundamental difference between his and Apel’s discourse ethics: Apel develops his discourse theory of morality within the discipline of moral philosophy, whereas Habermas adopts an interdisciplinary approach (Habermas 2009: 15).

Habermas’s initial reflections on moral validity were prompted by the sociological observation, influenced by Émile Durkheim, that modern social orders are ultimately maintained and reproduced only through the force-free recognition by their inhabitants of the moral validity of their basic institutions and structures. This is the topic of *Legitimation Crisis* (Habermas 1976). It is also the conclusion he draws from his discussion of the “linguistification of the sacred,” a key component of his theory of modernity. It offers a genetic account of the modern worldview as a historical process in which “the sacred” comes to reside in everyday linguistic practices and is, in this sense, secularized (Habermas 1987: 77–111). In these works, Habermas uses the concept of morality in an undifferentiated way. In his subsequent writings on discourse ethics, as we shall see, he distinguishes morality first from ethics and then from political legitimacy. Moreover, the theory of moral validity he sketches in these earlier works is primarily a *sociological* account of the moral basis of social order. It is important to see that the sociological account is at once explanatory and normative: it both explains why social orders are threatened when their moral basis is eroded and offers a vantage point for critique of social orders that fail to supply their inhabitants with the moral motivation to obey structures of authority. This links it with his later program of discourse ethics, which is at once an explication of what it means to act morally and a justification of a universalist moral principle that defines the “moral point of view” (note, however, that in his discourse ethics Habermas insists that the moral point of view is not in itself motivating and relies on moral socialization processes).

In order to grasp the status of Habermas’s discourse ethics, therefore, it is crucial to recognize three things. First, it is not a stand-alone enterprise, but rather part of a broader discourse theory, itself part of a more encompassing theory of communicative action, which, in turn, is located within a theory of modernity (Habermas 1990a: 116). Second, its justification is not a task for philosophy alone but involves multiple lines of argument, from various disciplines, all of which are open to challenge on the basis of new empirical findings and theoretical advances. Third, explanation/explication and justification cannot be neatly separated in Habermas’s theory but are entwined in complex ways.

The dual explicative and justificatory character of Habermas’s discourse ethics is not readily discernible from the title of his seminal essay on the topic, which appeared in 1983 in the wake of TCA. In “Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification” (DE), he describes his project as a concern to address the philosophical question of what it means rationally to *justify* moral norms and principles (Habermas 1990a: 43–115). It should



be noted, however, that the answer he gives is congruent with his *explication* of moral validity in the earlier sociological writings. There he argued that

we cannot explain the validity claim of norms without recourse to rationally motivated agreement [...] The appropriate model is [...] the communication community [*Kommunikationsgemeinschaft*] of those affected, who as participants in a practical discourse test the validity claims of norms and, to the extent that they accept them with reasons, arrive at the conviction that in the given circumstances the proposed norms are ‘right’.

(Habermas 1976: 105)

Indeed, the main ingredients of discourse ethics were already in place in his earlier, more evidently explicative works. In writings prior to DE, Habermas explicates moral validity as a *cognitivist* ethics, in which moral norms are held to have a relation to truth; as a *dialogical* ethics, in which the validity of norms rests on the supposition that they could be vindicated discursively by an agreement reached among participants in real argumentations; and as a *procedural* ethics, in which a validly conducted argumentative procedure determines the validity of the outcome (Habermas 1976). Nonetheless, there is a crucial difference between the earlier account of moral validity and his subsequent formulations.

In the earlier account, he expressly omits a maxim of universalization from his explication of moral validity. In DE, by contrast, a principle of universalization (U) is specified as the distinctive principle, governing the search for the right answer by the participants in moral argumentation. In his earlier sociological writings, any such moral principle is dismissed as superfluous: “A cognitivist linguistic ethics [*Sprachethik*] has no need of principles. It is based only on fundamental norms of rational speech that we must always presuppose if we discourse at all” (Habermas 1976: 110).

### The Development of Habermas’s Discourse Ethics

From the beginning of his discourse ethics program, Habermas has described himself as following Kant in the attempt to answer the question of what it means to act rightly in a moral sense. Like Kant, he limits morality to the class of universally justifiable normative judgments, leaving aside matters of “the good life.” Thus, he demarcates ethics, as the doctrine of the good life, from moral theory as an account of the validity of universal norms and principles (Habermas 1990a: 196–197). Given his sharp distinction between ethics and morality, “discourse ethics” is a misleading name for his program, since what he proposes is, in his own terminology, a theory of moral validity. There is something to be said for preferring the name “discourse morality” (Baynes 2016: 99).

Like Kant’s moral philosophy, Habermas’s discourse ethics is deontological, cognitivist, universalist, and formalist. It is *deontological* in the sense that it attributes an imperative, binding force to moral norms analogous to the unconditional character of truth claims. It is *cognitivist* in the sense that it answers the question of how to rationally justify normative statements, whereby rationality has a context-transcending meaning and is construed in terms of universalizable interests, abstracting from particular needs, desires, and value orientations. It is *universalist* in the sense that norms and principles, when morally valid, do not merely reflect the intuitions of particular individuals, groups, cultures or epochs, but hold good universally. Thus, his moral principle “is not just a reflection of the prejudices of adult, white, well-educated, Western males of today” (Habermas 1990a: 197). Finally, it is *formalist* in the sense that the distinction between valid and invalid norms is not made on the basis of their particular content but is rather decided by a formal principle of universalization.

In DE, Habermas offers the following definition of his principle of universalization (U): “All affected can accept the consequences and side-effects its *general* observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of *everyone’s* interests (and these consequences are preferred to those of known alternative possibilities for regulation)” (Habermas 1990a: 65). There is an evident analogy here with the Kantian principle of universalization, the categorical imperative, especially with its first formulation: “Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law” (Kant 2002: 137).

While acknowledging the close affinities between Kantian moral philosophy and his own discourse ethics, Habermas insists on significant differences between the two approaches (Habermas 1990a: 203–204). First, discourse ethics is dialogical in the sense outlined earlier: norms are valid if they could be vindicated by an agreement reached among participants in real argumentations (guided by idealizing suppositions); by contrast Kant assumes that individuals can test the validity of their maxims of action “monologically,” in isolation from others. Second, it is a de-transcendentalized version of Kantian ethics in two respects. To begin with, it de-transcendentalizes reason. It gives up Kant’s dichotomy between an intelligible realm comprising duty and free will and a phenomenal realm comprising inclination, subjective motives, and political and social institutions. By contrast, discourse ethics posits a relation of productive tension between the intelligible and the phenomenal—between what Habermas refers to as “immanence and transcendence” or “facticity and validity.” More precisely, discourse ethics posits a tension between actual human behavior within social and political institutions, on the one side, and, on the other side, certain presuppositions, which participants unavoidably make when they engage in argumentation (discourse); these are idealizing in the sense that they reach beyond—transcend—actual human practices. Argumentation, in turn, is a form of communication embedded within—immanent to—the everyday communicative practices of the inhabitants of modern societies.

In addition, its *method* is de-transcendentalized. It replaces Kant’s transcendental deduction of the moral principle with a formal-pragmatic argument based on the rational reconstruction of necessary presuppositions of argumentation in general. It may be noted that this methodological difference constitutes a further significant point of disagreement between Apel and Habermas. Apel’s discourse ethics favors a *strong* form of transcendental analysis, making a claim to ultimate justification for the moral rules identified by the moral philosopher, thereby establishing a secure basis for unerring moral knowledge (Habermas, 1990a: 94–98; Apel 1980). By contrast, Habermas describes the status of his analysis as relatively *weak*, insisting on the hypothetical and fallible character of his theses, even though their substance is universalist and thus “very strong” (Habermas 1990: 116).

In DE, Habermas’s justification of moral validity proceeds in two steps. Step one introduces (D), the discourse principle. “Only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity as *participants in a practical discourse*” (Habermas 1990a: 66). (D) is based on a rational reconstruction of the presuppositions underpinning participation in argumentation. Presuppositions of this kind do not have regulative force even though they point beyond actually existing social conditions in an idealizing manner; they do not impose obligations to act rationally, but rather make possible the practice that participants understand as argumentation (Habermas 1993: 31). His thought here is that participants in argumentation cannot in good faith describe themselves as engaging in argumentation unless they make certain (usually counterfactual) assumptions. Put slightly differently, they must attribute to themselves and to others certain normative commitments. The—not exhaustive—list of unavoidable assumptions (normative commitments) includes the following: all relevant arguments and affected persons are included in the discussion, each participant is granted equal opportunity to contribute to the discussion,

each participant is truthful, the discussion is free from all force except that of the better argument, and all participants are concerned with reaching agreement through the exchange of arguments on the answer to the question under discussion (Habermas 1993: 31). These unavoidable suppositions amount to the projection of an ideal communicative situation, in which a perfect argumentative procedure would ensure the validity of the argumentation's outcome. Following widespread criticism of his idea of an "ideal speech situation," Habermas has warned against misunderstandings. It is not a condition that could ever actually be realized by human beings but rather a "methodological fiction" or "thought-experiment," which helps to explicate the meaning of validity in a context-transcending, universally valid sense (Habermas 1996: 323).

Step two of his justification of moral validity introduces (U), the principle of universalization. As we have seen, this expresses the Kantian intuition that moral agents can justify their decision only through appeal to generalizable interests. (U) is the "rule of argumentation" that determines what counts as a *rational* agreement in moral discourses. How does Habermas arrive at (U)?

In DE, Habermas contends that the unavoidable suppositions of argumentation, as summarized by (D), combined with the knowledge of what it means to justify an action norm, provide a transcendental-pragmatic derivation or induction of (U) (Habermas 1990a: 92–94). Inductive reasoning, by contrast with deductive logic, allows for the possibility that the conclusion is false, even if all the premises are correct. Thus, he describes (U) as a "bridging principle" analogous to principles of induction in the empirical sciences, which bridge the gap between particular observations and general hypotheses (Habermas 1990a: 63). In an essay published in the same volume as DE, he compares it to reflective equilibrium in John Rawls's *Theory of Justice*: "a reconstruction of the everyday intuitions underlying the impartial judgment of moral conflicts of action" (Rawls 1971; Habermas 1990a: 116).

### Criticisms of Habermas's Discourse Ethics

DE has been the subject of hard-hitting criticism from several angles. The most common criticisms are: Habermas's justification of (U) fails (Wellmer 1991; Finlayson 2000; Gunnarsson 2000; Lafont 2003); that he confuses moral validity and democratic legitimacy (McCarthy 1991; Wellmer 1991; Lafont 2003); that its formalist, proceduralist approach to moral validity is unable to accommodate important kinds of moral concerns, experiences, and intuitions (Taylor 1991; Benhabib 1992); and that it is a bad explication of moral validity because it fails to capture the sense of absolute necessity attached to moral validity on the cognitivist account proposed by Habermas (Wellmer 1991; Lafont 2003; Cooke 2013).

Habermas has made some modifications to his initial formulation of the theory and provided helpful clarifications; together, they address many of these criticisms. One important modification is his reconfiguration of discourse theory as a theory of interconnecting discourses—as a kind of network theory. He takes a first step in this direction in *Justification and Application* (Habermas 1993). Here he expands the category of discourse to include ethical discourses, which are concerned with questions of the "good life," and pragmatic discourses, which are concerned with prudential questions of how to act in a specific context (Habermas 1993: 1–18). Up to then, Habermas had reserved the term "discourse" for forms of argumentation in which participants necessarily suppose the approximate satisfaction of idealizing conditions relating to access, conduct, and the common search for the single right answer. Only discourses concerned with questions of truth ("theoretical discourses") and those concerned with moral validity ("moral-practical discourses") were discourses in the strict sense. Other argumentative forms, such as aesthetic deliberation, were characterized as "critique" (Habermas 1984: 42). He has now abandoned this terminological restriction,

referring to ethical-existential and pragmatic argumentations as *discourses* (Habermas 1993: 1–18). Shortly after this first expansion of the term “discourse,” he expanded his terminology yet again to include legal-political discourses, in which ethical, moral, and pragmatic questions are interconnected, and discourses of application, which seek to determine how abstract moral principles and norms should be applied in particular cases (Habermas 1996). It should be noted, however, that his original conceptual distinction persists within the broader category of discourses. On one side, there are discourses concerned with thematizing pragmatic, ethical-existential, ethical-political or legal-political matters, or with applying laws, ordinances, and policies appropriately through reference to context-specific norms. On the other side, there are discourses concerned with justifying the truth of propositions and of decontextualized moral principles or rules through reference to an idea of unconditional validity. Only discourses concerned with moral validity or with propositional truth are cognitivist in the sense that they make claims to universal rational validity in a context-transcending sense.

This expansion of the category of discourse helps to address the criticism that discourse theory has nothing to say about ethical questions, which are often experienced as more pressing and more difficult than questions of moral justification in the narrow sense, and seem at least equally in need of argumentative probing. In the modified version of discourse theory, ethical validity claims, too, may be the subject of discourses. Furthermore, Habermas clarifies that ethical questions, like moral questions, carry a sense of obligation and may have a context-transcending reference point (Habermas 1993: 5). The relevant distinction between moral and ethical questions, therefore, is one of universality, not of logical form (cf. Heath 2014: 845). More precisely, the relevant distinction is between argumentations that are tied conceptually to the idea of universal rational agreement (moral discourses) and those that are not (ethical discourses). According to Habermas, ethical discourses may be concerned with context-transcending ideas of the good for human beings, but they do not rest on the idealizing supposition that a rational consensus as to the single right answer is achievable; this is because the modern de-transcendentalization of reason, combined with the fact of value pluralism, excludes the possibility of a discursively reached agreement regarding the good for human beings.

Habermas builds on his expanded category of discourse to reconfigure discourse theory as a theory of interconnected discourses (Habermas 1996). This enables him to avoid the criticism that he conflates moral validity with political legitimacy. He now refers to an overarching discourse principle, which explains in a general way the point of view from which action norms can be justified impartially (Habermas 1996: 107). The discourse principle provides the basis for a differentiated account of types of practical argumentation, in which discourses are distinguished from bargaining procedures and in which various sub-types of discourses are specified. This permits a distinction between the principle of democracy and the strictly moral principle, enabling a corresponding distinction between democratic legitimacy and moral validity. As before, he defines moral validity in terms of a principle of universalization (U). Democratic legitimacy, by contrast, requires only that all citizens agree on the validity of the norms, principles, laws, ordinances, and policies that are at stake in a given process of deliberation. He formulates the principle of democracy as follows:

[O]nly those statutes may claim legitimacy that can meet with the assent of all citizens in a discursive process of legislation that in turn has been legally constituted.  
(Habermas 1996: 110)

The main differences between the principles of democracy and morality are that they have different reference groups and that they regulate different matters in a different way. The

moral universe is unlimited in space and historical time, encompassing all natural persons in their life-historical complexity; a democratic (legal-political) community, by contrast, protects the integrity of its members only insofar as they acquire the status of bearers of individual rights (Habermas 1996: 451–452). Furthermore, moral norms regulate interpersonal conflicts from the point of view of impartiality and are strictly bound by the principle of universalizability; democratic decisions and norms, by contrast, draw on moral, pragmatic, and ethical considerations in order to give binding force to collective goals and programs (Habermas 2008: 93). He rejects what he calls moralistic misunderstandings of the democratic principle of legitimacy on account of their subordination of law to morality (Habermas 1996: 229–232). He insists that “[t]he democratic lawmaking procedure must exploit the rational potential of deliberations across the full spectrum of possible aspects of validity, and by no means merely under the moral aspect of the universalizability of interests” (Habermas 2008: 93). A problem here is that Habermas does not make clear whether legal-political norms, despite their context-specificity, have the cognitive meaning he attributes to moral norms (Cooke 2013). On the one hand, he evidently sees democratic politics as oriented toward truth (Habermas 2008: 143–144). In line with this, he interprets the principle of majority rule in terms of a search for truth among citizens; he also criticizes Rawls for suspending the truth question and adopting, instead, the category of the “reasonable” (Habermas 1996: 179, 1998b: 49–73). On the other hand, consistency would require him to deny a cognitive meaning to legal-political norms. For, just like ethical discourses as he construes them, participants in legal-political discourses do not anticipate universal agreement. This is due to the context-specificity of the discussions. The agreement sought is not one among *all* humans but rather among a demarcated group (“citizens”). Furthermore, legal-political discourses appeal to ethical and pragmatic reasons as well as moral ones. As mentioned, Habermas holds that no universal agreement on ethical reasons is possible under conditions of modernity—such reasons are reasons only for particular groups in particular contexts. Pragmatic reasons, too, lack a reference to universal agreement for they answer the question of what a particular individual or group ought to do at a particular time in response to a particular challenge.

Habermas’s reconfiguration of discourse theory as a network theory of discourses also enables him to address objections to its formalism and proceduralism. Feminist writers in particular have expressed concern that discourse ethics leaves aside many kinds of questions that are morally relevant; furthermore, that it is insensitive to particular needs, aspirations, and life-experiences. Since moral discourses are now just one component in a network of interconnected discourses, neither their narrow focus nor their high level of abstraction is quite so troubling. Worries about their abstraction are further allayed by the inclusion within the discourse network of “discourses of application.” Habermas fully acknowledges the highly abstract character of moral norms and, drawing on the work of Klaus Günther, emphasizes that they must be applied in historically specific sociocultural contexts in response to actual disputes and conflicts (Habermas 1990b: 95–97, 2009: 21; Günther 1993). Furthermore, he points out that his account of moral validity is not a complete account of what it is to be a moral agent; nor is it a theory of moral motivation. It relies on the internalization, through socialization, of certain morally relevant competences, in particular, the willingness and ability to adopt the perspective of the other (“ideal role taking”) and, in general, a willingness to act morally, together with a basic knowledge of what this means (Habermas 2009: 17–19). He also draws attention to the link between morality and solidarity, since moral norms and principles, though highly abstract, speak to the vulnerability and neediness of human beings (Habermas 1990: 199–203, 2009: 17; cf. Rehg 1994).

Since DE, Habermas has modified and clarified the status of his moral principle (U). This helps him to deal with objections directed against discourse ethics as a program of

philosophical justification. Most of these objections relate to his claim in DE that (U) is justified by induction: His assertion that (U) can be justified inductively on the basis of a rational reconstruction of the general presuppositions of discourse (D), combined with the knowledge of what it means to justify an action norm. In line with the weak status he attributes to his strong theses, Habermas has made clear that he understands such knowledge in a weak sense: moral agents merely need to know that moral justifications consensually resolve disputes concerning the rightness of normative statements (Habermas 1993: 32–33). However, this justificatory strategy is less weak than he suggests. Closer consideration reveals that it relies on normative commitments that go beyond the commitments necessarily undertaken by participants in argumentation. To begin with, it relies on normative commitment to a particular view of moral conflict resolution: the view that moral disputes should be resolved consensually. This is a commitment that goes beyond knowing what it means to engage in argumentation. Habermas maintains, correctly, that the very concept of argumentation implies that the disputing parties, once they enter into argumentation, necessarily see themselves as engaged in the search for the right answer to the matter in dispute. But the claim that moral disputes should be resolved consensually makes more than this conceptual point. Without conceptual inconsistency, participants in moral argumentation could, for example, take the view that certain individuals or groups have privileged insight into what is morally right, which may not be recognized by everyone concerned, and that their insight should determine the outcome.

This worry is compounded by later formulations of (U), where the equality requirement, too, seems to go beyond normative commitments necessarily undertaken by participants in argumentation. In various publications following DE, Habermas writes that the foreseeable consequences and side effects of the general observance of a norm for the interests and value-orientations of *each* individual must be *jointly* acceptable to all concerned (e.g. Habermas 1998b: 42, cf. 2009: 16, emphasis in original); moreover, he holds that the corresponding practice must be in the equal interest of all (Habermas 1998b: 36). Indeed, these normative commitments soon become part of his account of knowing what it means to justify an action norm. In writings subsequent to DE he states that this is a matter of knowing that such norms “regulate problems of communal life in the common interest and thus are ‘equally good’ for all affected” (Habermas 1993: 33). Evidently, therefore, Habermas’s justification of (U) relies on commitments to historically and socioculturally specific, substantive values of equality and consensual moral conflict resolution. In other words, Habermas’s justification of (U) relies on ideas of equality and moral conflict resolution that are not universal, but rather the result of particular historical socialization processes; furthermore, within these socialization processes, they may compete with other socially established ideas of equality and moral conflict resolution. Or, put differently again, his justification of (U) presupposes the validity of his thesis of the linguistification of the sacred and, more generally, his theory of modernity.

There is some evidence that Habermas has conceded this point and modified his position accordingly. In an essay published in the mid-1990s, he acknowledged, at least implicitly, the dependency of discourse ethics on his linguistification thesis and the particular account of modernity to which it gives rise (Habermas 1998b: 45). Furthermore, in the same essay he described his justificatory strategy as abduction rather than induction (Habermas 1998b: 42). “Abduction” is Charles Saunders Peirce’s term for a kind of nondeductive inference that takes place at the initial stage of the process of inquiry, when inquirers arrive at their best guess about which hypotheses to select and subject to inductive testing. In another more recent essay, Habermas states explicitly that he sees (U) as just one of several available moral principles (Habermas 2009: 16). This raises the question of how to decide which principle is the best one. In his essay from the 1990s, Habermas proposes a *pragmatic* test, subject to the

condition that the chosen moral principle is able to select moral norms that could command universal agreement. He writes that “participants themselves will perhaps be satisfied with this (or a similar) rule of argumentation as long as it proves useful and does not lead to counterintuitive results. It must turn out that a practice of justification conducted in this manner selects norms that are capable of commanding universal agreement—for example, norms expressing human rights” (Habermas 1998b: 43). Notice that “usefulness” is a pragmatic standard of evaluation: a judgment or action is valid if it *works*—if it is deemed to be an effective solution to a problem in a given context. (Recall Habermas’s category of pragmatic discourses, which are concerned with prudential questions of how to act in a specific context.) However, given Habermas’s earlier insistence that moral validity claims are cognitive in the sense of having a relation to a universalist, context-transcending idea of truth, and given the importance of their truth-relation for his critical theory of society, a pragmatic standard of this kind could at best function merely as a preliminary step in choosing moral principles as candidates for further rational evaluation; it could not be used to *determine* the validity of moral principles such as (U). Moreover, in choosing certain moral principles and rejecting other ones, the moral theorist would have to be alert to possible ethnocentric and other biases. In fact, Habermas makes clear that in eventually deciding on one moral principle rather than another, “usefulness” is not the decisive factor, but rather its ability to generate norms capable of commanding universal agreement. The difficulty, as we have seen, is that he has not provided a satisfactory justification for this stipulation.

“Intuitive plausibility” fares no better as a standard for determining the validity of moral principles such as (U). While it too may have a place at the preliminary stage of selecting likely candidates, its limits become obvious when we consider its dependency on sociocultural interpretations of what it is to be human and what would constitute a good society. Habermas himself draws attention to this. He confronts the suspicion of possible ethnocentric biases, acknowledging that (U) may reflect a socioculturally specific conception of the good (Habermas 1998b: 43, 2009: 16). He claims to be able to dispel the suspicion through appeal to knowledge of what it means to engage in the practice of argumentation as such, together with knowledge of what it means to justify an action norm (Habermas 1998b: 43). But, to repeat: Habermas’s explications of what this entails involve normative commitments to particular conceptions of equality and moral conflict resolution that go beyond those necessarily made by participants in any argumentative practice. It is unsurprising, therefore, that some commentators find this response to the ethnocentric objection unsatisfactory, for it seems simply to reiterate the justificatory steps that have bothered them from the outset (Gunnarsson 2000: 120–123).

Other commentators see Habermas’s modifications and clarifications of the status of (U) as evidence of a significant departure from his original justificatory program (Finlayson 2000). However, our earlier discussion of the status of discourse ethics allows us to see them as in line with it. We will recall that discourse ethics was never conceived as a stand-alone enterprise but as part of a more general discourse theory within a broader theory of communicative action, in turn located within a theory of modernity. As a result, justification and explanation/explication were never neatly separable in Habermas’s theory, but entwined in complex ways. We will recall, too, that he never regarded his justification of moral validity as a task for philosophy alone, but as involving multiple lines of argument, from various disciplines, whose claims to validity are understood as inherently open to rational challenge. It could be argued, therefore, that a proper grasp of the *status* of Habermas’s discourse ethics deflects the criticism that his argument in DE fails to prove the universal validity of (U), since the argument in DE is not intended as a stand-alone justification of morality. Certainly, Habermas’s claims that (U) can be justified inductively or even abductively are not helpful in this regard. They distract from his point that the status he claims for his strong theses is

weak; they also close off avenues for an explicitly self-reflective discourse theory of morality, which would make no final claims as to what determines the validity of moral norms and allow room for rational contestation of the substantive values that (U) incorporates.

### Moral Validity Revisited

I have suggested that with the help of certain modifications and clarifications Habermas has been able to deflect many of the criticisms that have been directed against his discourse ethics; furthermore, that certain criticisms of his justification of (U) may be due to a failure to grasp the manner in which philosophical justification and social theory are interconnected in Habermas's project and, in particular, the ways in which justification and explanation/explication are, and have always been, entwined. But discourse ethics remains vulnerable to the accusation that, in its formulations to date, it invites a strong reading of its justificatory claims, despite Habermas's assertion that the status claimed for his strong theses is weak. Furthermore, it smuggles substantive normative commitments into "knowing what it means to justify an action norm", discouraging critical reflection on the validity of these commitments. In this concluding section, I revisit the objection that he has not provided a satisfactory account of the validity of the principle (U), which determines the validity of moral norms. However, rather than insist that he provide some inductive, abductive or other kind of justification of it, I take seriously his assertion that the status claimed for his argument is weak, together with his remark that (U) is just one of several available moral principles. Accordingly, I emphasize the importance of critical reflection on the very constructivist terms in which his discourse theory of morality is formulated: on its guiding idea that moral validity is defined in terms of discursively achieved universalizability. On a strong reading of the status of its justificatory claims, Habermas's discourse theory of morality closes rather than opens the horizons of modernity, for it disallows critical reflection on the validity of its own constructivist approach. The strong reading leaves no conceptual space for critical theory to learn from religious and ethical beliefs, practices, and traditions that do not affirm Habermas's particular view of secular normativity, but embrace conceptions of truth or the good that are not discursively generated. The strong reading is not just invited by Habermas's apparent concern to justify (U) inductively or abductively; it is also invited by his theory of modernity. For this reason, I advocate a weaker reading of the status of both his discourse theory of morality and of his theory of modernity.

We will recall that his theory of modernity offers a genetic account of human history as a gradual process of linguistification. In this account, in the passage from mythical to modern worldviews the authority of the sacred is gradually replaced by that of secular moral norms. For Habermas, moral norms are secular in the sense that they appeal only to ideas of normativity that are humanly constituted in processes of communicative action. In other words, the authority of norms and principles is entirely constructed by their subjects through the exchange of reasons in argumentation. This is why he holds that modernity must generate its own normativity. However, the thesis is stronger than his linguistification thesis warrants and is not entailed by the core elements of his account of modernity. The salient features of modernity, in his account, are a belief in the power of reason to question all established authorities (non-authoritarianism), together with a widespread commitment to the values of inclusion and equality. Non-authoritarianism does not depend on a belief that the normative basis of the authority of morality (or religion or political leaders or the law) is entirely a human construction. Nor does commitment to values of inclusion and equality depend on this belief.

Habermas's conception of moral validity is constructivist in the specific sense that its cognitive power is produced through the exchange of reasons in argumentation. In this



conception, moral norms and principles are not just *tested* in discourse; they are *generated* by discourse. The concept of moral validity is entirely discursive: moral validity is *defined* as an agreement reached argumentatively under idealized communicative conditions, in which conditions such as inclusion, fairness, truthfulness, absence of all force except that of the better argument, and concern for the single right answer have been met. It does not matter that such a condition is a “methodological fiction”: as we have seen, Habermas himself emphasizes that the “ideal speech situation” is not a condition that could ever actually be achieved. What matters is that the very concept of moral validity is defined in terms of this idealizing projection. The “ideal speech situation” is a *conceptual* thought-experiment. For the purposes of conceptualizing moral validity, it calls on us to imagine a social condition in which disputing parties arrive at norms and principles that are morally valid in an unconditional—absolute—sense.

In Habermas’s original formulation of discourse theory, both the concepts of propositional truth and of moral validity were defined in terms of a discursively reached agreement (Habermas 2009: 208–269). However, for a long time the constructivist character of these concepts did not play a significant role in his theory. He did not draw attention to it and many of his texts are ambiguous in this regard. For instance, nothing in DE appears to turn on the question of whether the normativity of (U) is produced in discourse: it seems immaterial whether (U) is an argumentative rule for testing the validity of moral norms or an engine for generating moral validity. Similarly, in the passage cited in the previous section, where Habermas makes the justification of (U) subject to a pragmatic test of usefulness and intuitive plausibility, he requires merely that the valid outcomes of moral discourses *command* agreement; he does not say that their very validity is *constituted* by the discursive process. Put differently, the passage leaves open whether discursive agreement is merely a necessary condition of the validity of human rights or a necessary and sufficient condition. While for many years Habermas seemed content to leave this question open, he now explicitly affirms the constructivist character of moral normativity. He contrasts the concept of moral validity with the concept of truth, which on his revised understanding lacks precisely this constructivist character (Habermas 2003: 237–275).

From the 1980s onwards, in response to critics of his discourse theory in general, Habermas began to revise his theory of propositional truth. He gradually distanced himself from his definition of truth as the outcome of discursive procedure. He replaced it with an idea of truth that is justification-transcendent, in the sense that it cannot be made to coincide even with the concept of ideal justification or “warranted assertibility” (Habermas 2003: 247–248). He now conceives of truth as a circular process in which argumentation fulfills the role of trouble-shooter with regard to everyday behavioral certainties that have become problematic. In such cases, the propositions in question become the subject of specialized discourses, in which experts probe the evidence-based arguments supporting or challenging them. The results of these argumentations are fed back as “truths” into everyday life. Strictly speaking, however, they constitute not truth, but judgments as to warranted assertibility, for they are inherently fallible, vulnerable to challenge when they no longer serve their pragmatic function in everyday behavior and practice. In his revised account of propositional truth, therefore, argumentatively reached agreement merely *points toward* truth in an unconditional sense (Habermas 2003: 252–256). At the same time, truth and justification remain internally connected: a discursively reached agreement *authorizes* truth (Habermas 2003: 258). Moral validity, by contrast, lacks the justification-transcendent character of the concept of truth (Habermas 2003: 256–261). A discursively reached agreement *warrants* the rightness of moral norms and principles; it does not merely authorize their rightness: “[i]dealized warranted assertibility is what we *mean* by moral rightness...it exhausts the meaning of normative rightness itself” (Habermas 2003: 258, emphasis in original). In this conception,

the moral world is “made by us”: the realm of morality is itself generated in discourse. By contrast with truth, which relates to an objective world deemed to have some independence of human agency, the very domain of moral validity is humanly, indeed argumentatively produced (Habermas 2003: 262).

Critics see this as a bad explication of moral validity, questioning whether Habermas’s account of moral validity captures the sense of absolute necessity he attaches to morality (Wellmer 1991; Lafont 2003). They contend that a non-constructivist conception of moral validity would enable him to provide a more satisfactory account of the unconditionally binding character of moral norms and principles. I share their view (Cooke 2013). However, my present focus is somewhat different. My objection here is that Habermas presents his constructivist account as though it were entailed by his linguistification thesis, impeding critical reflection on its validity. A theory closed in this way is unable to learn from its encounters with rival conceptions of context-transcending validity; similarly, it is unable to allow for mutual learning between “postmetaphysical” thinkers, who share Habermas’s constructivist account of validity, at least in the domain of practical reason (Habermas 1992, 2017), and those for whom the ultimate source of moral or ethical validity is non-linguistic, even non-human.

Habermas recognizes the multiple kinds of normativity that are operative in the communicative practices of modern societies (rules of grammar, rules of etiquette, rules of style, religious prescriptions, legal ordinances, moral commands, aesthetic principles, ethical guidelines, and so on). However, he holds that only moral norms and principles have a cognitive meaning, in the sense of having a relation to truth. We have seen that he grants a possible context-transcending reference point to ethical validity claims (a reference to some subject-transcending idea of the good). We have also seen, however, that he denies the possibility of a universal, discursively reached rational consensus as to the validity of ethical claims. The same holds for religious validity claims: he acknowledges their context-transcending reference point, but does not see them as open to discursive vindication (or even thorough-going discursive examination) (Habermas 2008: 129; Cooke 2013). From the point of view of Habermas’s critical theory, therefore, ethical and religious utterances have no cognitive meaning for they lack a relation to truth. This has worrying implications for the ability of his theory, and those who share its constructivist interpretation of context-transcending validity, to learn from ethical and religious beliefs, practices, and traditions (Cooke 2016).

In Habermas’ critical social theory, learning means socio-cultural learning and has a strong cognitive sense. It is a movement in the direction of truth or moral rightness. Participants in processes of socio-cultural learning are required to engage with their interlocutors as partners in the search for answers to questions that are true or morally valid. In other words, learning is conceived as *mutual* learning, which has the strong cognitive meaning he attaches to claims to propositional truth and to moral validity. If we probe this conception of learning, we can see that it calls for a shared understanding of the meaning of learning and hence, a shared conception of truth or moral validity. If participants in argumentation have fundamentally different conceptions of context-transcending validity, and by extension learning, they will not be able to see the outcome of their deliberations as *mutual* learning; at best, they will be able to say that they have learnt something of value for themselves. Think of an argumentative exchange between two parties who disagree on the question of whether freedom of religion is a universally valid moral principle. One party’s view of moral validity is utilitarian: she holds that a moral norm is valid only if it maximizes happiness. The other party’s view is Kantian: he holds that a moral norm is valid only if he could will that it becomes a universal law. In their argumentative exchange, perhaps over time, both parties might change their views with regard to the universal moral validity of the principle

of freedom of religion; they might even change their views on the validity of a certain understanding of utilitarianism or of Kantian morality. Indeed, the substance of their views might converge in the end—for example, they might end up agreeing that freedom of religion is a universally valid moral principle. However, none of this is sufficient for the result to count as *mutual* learning in the strong cognitive sense in which Habermas understands learning. In order for it to count as mutual learning in this strong cognitive sense, the two parties, by way of their argumentative exchange, would also have to learn something *together* with respect to the very concept of moral validity. The same holds for argumentative exchanges between those who share Habermas's constructivist understanding of moral validity and those who think of moral validity as having some independence of discursively reached agreement. It holds even when all parties are committed to modern norms of non-authoritarianism, inclusion, and equality. Indeed, it holds even when all parties share Habermas's view that discursive justification is a necessary condition of moral validity. What divides participants in our imagined argumentative exchange is that some of them think of discursive justification as indicating or authorizing moral validity rather than as constituting it. This may be due to their religious beliefs, but it could also be due to a non-religious "metaphysical" understanding of the goods orienting our lives as human beings, together with a view of ethics and morality as interconnected (Taylor 1989). For the parties in the argumentative exchange to regard the outcome as *mutual* learning in Habermas's strong cognitive sense, they would also have to engage reflectively with the arguments for a constructivist understanding of moral validity vis-à-vis a non-constructivist understanding, and hold that they had learnt something about the strengths and weaknesses of the respective arguments. In other words, in order for the participants in an argumentative exchange to conceive of the outcome as mutual learning in the strong cognitive sense in which Habermas understands learning, they must also seek a common understanding of what moral validity means. But this implies a readiness on the part of those who share Habermas's constructivist view of moral validity to learn from those who do not, for example, from religious believers who hold that the ultimate source of the validity of moral norms is not human, but divine. Habermas's account of modern normativity, as generated from within human practices, seems to rule this out by *fiat*.

Not surprisingly, therefore, learning from religion, as he understands it, is a matter of appropriating the propositional content of religious teachings within a staunchly secular (though not "secularist") framework. In his recent writings on law and democracy, he speaks of "critical appropriation" of the contents of religious beliefs, practices, and traditions, of a methodological atheism/ agnosticism with regard to the contents of religious traditions and of "salvaging" these contents. (Habermas 1991, 136–139, 1992: 14–15, 2008: 209–248).

In line with this, he calls for *secular translations* of religious utterances. He views the major world-religions as semantic reservoirs, which secular modern societies may draw on productively to enrich their moral vocabularies; however, the religious content in question must first be translated into a secular language in order to make it accessible to all members of society, irrespective of religious belief. His concern is not just accessibility: the underlying point is that only secular translations of religious utterances are open to thorough-going discursive examination and validation, since only secular translations have a relation to truth in the postmetaphysical sense embraced by Habermas. This makes learning from religion an exercise in which the postmetaphysical framework he deems appropriate for contemporary critical social theorists (and secular citizens) is immunized against rational challenge and revision.

Habermas seems committed to the view that only a constructivist understanding of normativity is appropriate for the inhabitants of modernity. Modernity must generate its own normativity—otherwise it will undo the historical learning process, which has enabled the rational contestation of established authorities and led to a widespread commitment to universalist values of inclusion and equality. I see this as a closing of the horizons of modernity.

Since he insists, against Horkheimer and Adorno, that modernity is an unfinished project, he cannot disregard this objection. If critical social theory is to keep open the horizons of modernity, it must be open to learning from religious traditions (and ethical worldviews), not just on the level of moral content, narrowly understood, but also with respect to its own post-metaphysical orientation. For this, it will have to adopt a critically reflective attitude to its particular constructivist conceptualization of context-transcending validity in the domain of practical reason (Cooke 2016).

There is a further reason, also internal to Habermas's project, to urge the need for a critically reflective attitude to the constructivist terms in which he formulates his conception of moral validity: doing so would reopen the path for the more extensive critical task he gave to discourse ethics in his earlier writings. In these writings, we will recall, the social order as a whole was deemed to have a moral basis; in consequence, every aspect of social life was open to challenge on moral grounds. From DE onwards, the scope of morality became much more limited; it was no longer viewed as a critical tool for evaluating judgments and actions relating to the good life for humans, and the kind of society that would enable such a life. Questions of the good life and good society became the domain of ethical reasoning. But this, lacking the robustly cognitive conception of context-transcending validity that Habermas attributes to moral reasoning, is not suitable for the purposes of thoroughgoing critique of a given social order. What kind of reasoning is appropriate? Habermas's answer is not clear. Certainly, he is clear that a critical theory of society in the Frankfurt School Tradition cannot lightly dispense with a cognitively construed, context-transcending conception of reason: his theory of communicative rationality is intended to meet exactly this challenge. What remains unclear is how he understands the kind of validity claim raised by critical social theory for its utopian projections of a social order that would instantiate the emancipatory promise of modernity and avoid its pathologies. Since these are projections of the good for humans, it would make sense to characterize them as ethical validity claims. As things stand, however, this path is not available to Habermas unless he gives up his commitment to a cognitively construed, context-transcending conception of critique. The alternative is to give up his thesis that a discursively achieved, universally binding, rational agreement defines the concept of context-transcending validity in the domain of practical reason, together with the sharp distinction between morality and ethics that follows from this thesis. For if Habermas is correct that the validity of ethical claims cannot be construed as a universally binding, rational agreement reached in a discursive procedure, the required conception of moral/ethical validity could not be formulated in the constructivist terms in which he formulates his idea of moral validity. A non-constructivist account, or different kind of constructivist account, could allow for a conception of moral/ethical validity with cognitively construed, context-transcending power, but one in which agreement reached in an idealized argumentative procedure is not a definition of moral/ethical truth. Thus, the key question, as I see it, is not whether Habermas succeeds in demonstrating the universal validity of his moral principle (U); rather it is whether his discourse theory of morality provides the basis for a conception of rational critique of an existing social order that claims validity in a context-transcending sense, while avoiding ethnocentric, cultural, gender, and other biases.

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## Further Reading

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# 6

## THE THEORY OF RECOGNITION IN THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

*Timo Jütten*

### Introduction

The theory of recognition marks a paradigm shift in Frankfurt School critical theory. It builds on Habermas's earlier shift from what he called a "philosophy of consciousness" to an intersubjective grounding of social criticism, but it departs from Habermas's theories of communicative action and discourse ethics. Instead, it focuses on recognition relations that go beyond linguistically mediated communication to encompass affective attitudes and on a dynamic conception of social struggles for recognition that makes sense of historical social struggles for equal rights and the recognition of marginalized contributions to socially shared goals. Looking forward, the theory of recognition helps critical theorists to evaluate "recognition orders" and to criticize social developments that fail to institutionalize recognitive relations that enable individual self-realization.

Needless to say, this is an ambitious project that depends on philosophical and empirical premises, which can be contested, and on the articulation and defense of a complex philosophical vocabulary, which is in need of clarification and extension. In this chapter, I aim to offer an initial overview of the theory of recognition in the Frankfurt School tradition. I also discuss its sources and some conceptual questions that have been raised in the secondary literature. Then I turn to the aspect of Honneth's theory that has received most attention, his account of the emergence of modern capitalism as a recognition order. I close with some remarks about future directions of research.

The theory of recognition first appears in Axel Honneth's book, *The Struggle for Recognition* (1996 [1992]). Since then, Honneth has clarified his intentions and extended the scope of his theory in many publications, including his exchange with Nancy Fraser, *Redistribution or Recognition?* (Fraser and Honneth 2003), in which he introduces a number of important new concepts that extend the explanatory power of recognition. Most recently, Honneth has reconceived his project as a theory of social freedom. However, his extensive analysis of the development of social freedom in *Freedom's Right* (2014 [2011]) still relies on the concept of recognition developed in his earlier work. Thus, the basic structure of recognition has remained unchanged.

### Honneth's Theory of Recognition: A Bird's-Eye View

Honneth defends a "formal conception of ethical life" and derives the normative standards for social criticism from it (Honneth 1996: Chapter 9, 2003b: Sec. III). He arrives at his

conception of ethical life through a phenomenology of historical struggles for recognition and against disrespect and humiliation. This phenomenology is informed by the social-theoretical conviction that “the reproduction of social life is governed by the imperative of mutual recognition” (Honneth 1996: 92). According to this phenomenology, the negative experience of disrespect and humiliation motivates struggles for recognition in which social groups stake their claims for the recognition of hitherto unrecognized or undervalued aspects of their members’ personalities, rights, or contributions to social reproduction.

This phenomenological analysis gives rise to a complex typology of recognition, which can be organized according to the *dimension* of personhood to which a particular mode of recognition is addressed, to the *forms* of recognition that are adequate to the particular dimension of personhood, and to the *social spheres* in which the particular forms of recognition have been historically institutionalized (Honneth 1996: 129, 2003a: 138–144). Thus, according to Honneth, subjects must be recognized in their singularity as possessors of needs and emotions, as autonomous agents with moral responsibility, and as possessors of particular traits and abilities that enable them to contribute to social cooperation (Ikäheimo 2002). The forms of recognition adequate to these dimensions of personhood are love (or friendship), respect, and social esteem. And, historically speaking, modern capitalist societies have institutionalized these forms of recognition in the bourgeois family, the various legal and political institutions guaranteeing equality before the law, and in the industrially organized division of labor.

To be sure, the historical institutionalization of these forms of recognition has been imperfect. In particular, the “achievement principle” (Honneth 2003a: 143) that provides the normative standard for the distribution of social esteem in modern capitalist societies embodies the ideological self-understanding of the “independent, middle-class, male bourgeois” (Honneth 2003a: 141), whose economic activity as an entrepreneur or professional becomes identified with individual achievement *per se*, while the specific achievements of dependent working-class laborers and women performing household work or raising children have only come to be recognized “with many class- and gender-specific delays” (Honneth 2003a: 142). But the decisive claim of the recognition-theoretical view is that in modern capitalist societies the principles of affective care, equal treatment, and individual achievement provide the normative framework against which subjects judge the legitimacy of their social and political institutions as well as any existing social inequality (Honneth 2003a: 148–149).

At this stage in the argument, Honneth shifts perspective from a social theory of recognition relations to a normative theory of social justice. He argues that

[b]ecause we live in a social order in which individuals owe the possibility of an intact identity to affective care, equality and social esteem, it seems...appropriate, in the name of individual autonomy, to make the three corresponding recognition principles the normative core of a conception of social justice.

(Honneth 2003a: 181–182)

In other words, mutual recognition in the three dimensions of personhood is a condition of possibility for individual autonomy, and, therefore, for self-realization, because the development of a positive self-relationship, including the development of self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem, depends upon this recognition (Honneth 1996: 173–174). Taken together, these requirements specify Honneth’s formal conception of the good life, because mutual recognition “provide[s] the intersubjective protection that safeguards the conditions for external and internal freedom, upon which the process of articulating and realizing individual life-goals without coercion depends” (Honneth 1996: 174).



Moreover, the application of these principles of justice is future-directed: the social justice obtaining in a society is proportionate to the moral quality of the social relations of recognition. Here, Honneth offers two criteria for progress in the relations of recognition. Social recognition increases through *individualization* and *inclusion*, where individualization means that individuals gain social recognition for more aspects of their personalities, and inclusion means that more individuals are fully recognized in society (Honneth 2003a: 184–186). Underlying this conception of moral progress is the idea that the principles of recognition possess a “surplus of validity” (Honneth 2003a: 186) that transcends their current employment and that can be appealed to in struggles for recognition. This is particularly clear in the sphere of modern law, where the scope of equality has broadened significantly over the last few decades, but it is less clear where the spheres of love and social esteem are concerned. However, Honneth suggests that the overcoming of stereotypes and the extension of the category of esteemed activity beyond the traditional conception of “gainful employment” may be examples of moral progress in these spheres (Honneth 2003a: 188).

Taken together, Honneth’s critical theory of recognition offers two normative criteria for the evaluation of social institutions and practices. On the one hand, his *formal conception of ethical life* specifies the intersubjective preconditions of individual autonomy and self-realization that must be protected in any modern democratic state. On the other hand, his *conception of moral progress through increasing individualization and inclusion* enables Honneth to reconstruct the rationality of historical struggles for recognition, and to diagnose social potentials for further individualization and inclusion, which will afford more individuals the opportunity to live flourishing ethical lives, as well as remove the structural impediments that prevent them from happening.

In *Freedom’s Right*, Honneth offers a third criterion of evaluation: social institutions and practices will be legitimate in the eyes of modern subjects to the extent that they enable them to realize their social freedom, that is, a form of freedom in which individuals complement and complete each other. Social freedom requires that the social institutions in which people act are free in the sense that they enable people to realize their freedom in cooperation with others who share their aims. Rather than a departure from recognition, it is a form of it. As Honneth puts it, social freedom can be understood as “the reciprocal experience of seeing ourselves confirmed in the desires and aims of the other, because the other’s existence represents a condition for fulfilling our own desires and aims” (Honneth 2014: 44–45), and that is a relationship of mutual recognition.

### Sources of the Theory of Recognition

The theory of recognition has its *philosophical* roots in Hegel. In *The Struggle for Recognition* Honneth argues that Hegel’s original idea in his earliest work combines an intersubjectivist conception of human identity with the distinction of various media of recognition (love, law, solidarity), and a historically productive role for moral struggles for intersubjective recognition (Honneth 1996: 63). While Honneth had argued originally that these insights are occluded in Hegel’s work from the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) onwards and never occupy a systematic role in his philosophy again, in his more recent work Honneth finds a systematic place for recognition even in Hegel’s later work (Honneth 2010a). This motivates his re-actualization of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* (1821) in *Freedom’s Right*, where Honneth explicitly defends Hegel’s distinction of three spheres of social recognition, although he specifies these spheres differently, giving much greater weight than Hegel to deliberative will formation in a democratic public sphere.

In addition to these philosophical roots, Honneth’s theory of recognition also is based on insights from social psychology, psychoanalysis, and developmental psychology. Like

Habermas in *The Struggle for Recognition*, Honneth draws on George Herbert Mead in order to show that individuation occurs through socialization, but he focuses on the mutual attribution of recognitive status. Likewise, he draws on the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott in order to demonstrate that the strong affective relationship between young infants and their carers is best understood as a relationship of mutual recognition, which enables the infant to develop a sense of itself and its needs. More recently, Honneth also has drawn on the developmental psychology of Michael Tomasello in order to bolster his argument about the primacy of intersubjectivity (Honneth 2005).

Finally, since *The Struggle for Recognition* aims to elucidate “the moral grammar of social conflicts” (so its subtitle), Honneth also uses historical studies that explicate the moral self-understanding of individuals and collectives that engaged in various social struggles. For example, he finds support for his arguments in the works of the English social historian E.P. Thompson and the American political scientist Barrington Moore. Thompson had shown that social resistance to capitalist modernization often is the response to the disappointment of moral expectations based on a tacit social contract between classes, rather than a spontaneous reaction to deprivation or hardship. Moore had built on these insights and demonstrated that the moral injury experienced by members of activist groups in social uprisings often was one of disrespect, based on the breakdown of a traditional system of mutual recognition and a consequent loss of self-worth (Honneth 1996: 166–167). These historical studies have remained central to Honneth’s understanding of recognition struggles throughout his work, as he has generalized their conclusions and used them to illustrate more recent struggles (Honneth 2003a: 131; see also Honneth 2014: 208–210).

### Conceptual Questions

Clearly, a critical theory as ambitious and eclectic as this is open to a number of critical questions. Here are three common ones. To begin with, one may ask whether Honneth’s reliance on a conception of ethical life, albeit a formal one, commits him to a philosophical anthropology that will open him up to criticism from those who eschew such commitments (Zurn 2000: 115–124). In response, Honneth clearly remains committed to philosophical anthropology as a foundation for critical theory (Honneth 2007a, 2008). However, his formal conception of ethical life is grounded in a weak philosophical anthropology. While the need for mutual recognition is an “anthropological constant” (Honneth 2003a: 174), the concrete forms of recognition that are necessary for the achievement of self-realization change over time and are therefore historically specific (Honneth 2003a: 181).

As we have seen, the theory of recognition is based on insights from social psychology, psychoanalysis, and developmental psychology. This may allay some worries about Honneth’s commitments to philosophical anthropology, but the use of these empirical insights does raise difficulties of its own. In particular, critics have suggested that Honneth’s use of Winnicott’s object-relations account of infant development, which enables him to conceptualize the relationship between the infant and its primary caregiver as a form of mutual recognition based on unconditional love, downplays the conflictual elements of this relationship in favor of a mutualistic one (for an excellent discussion of these issues see Petherbridge 2013: Chapter 9).

Another important question is whether recognition should be understood on the model of attribution or perception (Ikäheimo 2002; Laitinen 2002). Thus, according to Honneth, the second form of recognition is respect for autonomous agency and moral responsibility. But it is not immediately clear whether a recognitive attitude of respect toward a person attributes autonomous agency and moral responsibility to the person, or whether it perceives that the person is an autonomous agent with moral responsibility and responds accordingly.

On the face of it, both of these alternatives have their problems. If recognition attributes moral status to people, we lack an internal criterion for the attribution of positive qualities to a subject. Recognition may seem arbitrary, rather than responsive to the person recognized. What makes people autonomous and responsible seems to be more than the fact that we see them so. Does a person lack human dignity, if they are not recognized as possessing it? But if recognition perceives moral status, we must presuppose a conception of value realism that Honneth finds problematic, and it is not clear how much work the recognitive attitude does. Why is recognition of a person's dignity necessary, if they possess it regardless of it being recognized? In the end, Honneth opts for a version of the perception model:

In our recognitional attitudes, we respond appropriately to evaluative qualities that, by the standards of our lifeworld, human subjects already possess but are actually available to them only once they can identify with them as a result of experiencing the recognition of these qualities.

(Honneth 2002: 510)

This version of the perception model stresses the second-natural character of the attributes that we perceive and confirm in acts of recognition. Even though by the standards of our lifeworld humans are autonomous agents with moral responsibility, our acts of recognition, in affirming this fact, enable them to see themselves as such agents. This is in keeping with sociological insights. Even though the belief in human dignity is a cornerstone of Western modernity, people struggle to “live up” to it, to live dignified lives without forms of social recognition that publicly affirm their possession of dignity (Jütten 2017).

Turning to the three dimensions of recognition, Honneth's conception of love as a form of mutual recognition in the bourgeois family also poses challenges. Some critics have suggested that while he rejects the Rousseauian and Hegelian models of conjugal love as based on the complementarity of the male and female genders, *The Struggle for Recognition* does not have the resources to elaborate an alternative, egalitarian vision of conjugal love (Young 2007). Arguably, *Freedom's Right* addresses this problem. To be sure, Honneth argues that conjugal love is a form of social freedom in which the lovers supplement and complete each other, but this completion does not presuppose the natural complementarity envisaged by Rousseau and Hegel. Rather, in conjugal love,

each person is a condition for the freedom of the other by becoming a source of physical self-experience for the other; each person's natural being thus strips off its socially imposed constraints and recovers in the other a piece of his or her individual freedom.

(Honneth 2014: 151)

On this account, lovers complement each other, because their intimacy creates shared experiences in which both feel completed.

While love as a form of recognition (and social freedom) continues to attract critical attention (McNay 2015), the differentiation of legal respect and social esteem, and the transformation of social esteem in the capitalist recognition order have been the most innovative, but also the most controversial aspects of Honneth's theory of recognition.

### **Social Esteem, Self-Realization, and Solidarity**

The concept of a capitalist recognition order does not appear in *The Struggle for Recognition*. Honneth introduces it in his first contribution to his exchange with Nancy Fraser,

*Redistribution or Recognition?* However, much of its conceptual background first appears in the earlier work when Honneth discusses the transformation of social esteem during the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Social esteem enables individuals to relate positively to their own traits and abilities. It is a form of recognition that affirms the socially defined worth of their individual characteristics, that is, particular qualities which differentiate individuals from others. These qualities are worthy of esteem to the extent that they enable individuals to contribute to socially shared goals or values. This presupposes socially shared background assumptions about what these goals or values are, and these assumptions clearly will be historically variable (Honneth 1996: 122).

In particular, Honneth argues that in pre-modern estates-based societies such ethical goals and values are substantive and hierarchical. Society is stratified and assigns a different value to different social estates (e.g. the nobility, the clergy), corporations, and guilds, according to their purported contribution to society and the specific style of life that characterizes membership of these estates. Individuals gain social esteem, which here is conceived of as honor, to the extent that they fulfill the functions of their estate and live up to the socially expected standards defined by their membership of that estate. Social recognition between members of a given estate, corporation or guild is symmetrical, while relationships of recognition between members of different status groups are asymmetrical. Esteem is graded according to the hierarchy of the groups (Honneth 1996: 123). As a result, individuals are not esteemed as individuals but as members of their status group.

This system of recognition relations, which Honneth also calls corporative, comes under pressure when the cultural self-understanding of modernity begins to challenge the legitimacy of traditional hierarchies. This process splits traditional honor into three distinct valuations. First, legal respect becomes a separate form of social recognition and enshrines the equal moral standing of each individual in law. From now on, individuals are recognized as autonomous subjects, and this autonomy gives them their dignity as persons. Second, the aspect of honor that is concerned with personal conduct is privatized as subjectively defined "integrity." It plays no further role in Honneth's theory of recognition. Finally, social esteem comes to be the form of social recognition that bestows "prestige" or "standing" on individuals, and it becomes associated with their chosen form of self-realization through which they contribute to socially shared goals. Social status comes to track "achievement." However, as Honneth recognizes, the problem with a recognition order that accords social esteem on the basis of individual achievement is that it presupposes a shared conception of social goals and a shared horizon of values which can be used to judge what counts as a contribution. But it is precisely this shared self-understanding that modern societies lack in the absence of the substantive ethical self-understanding of traditional societies. Instead, modern societies are characterized by permanent cultural conflicts and struggles for recognition in which individuals fight for the recognition of their particular achievements as contributions to socially shared goals (Honneth 1996: 126). Still, esteem recognition in modern societies does require some agreement about socially shared goals.

Honneth suggests that individual conceptions of self-realization come to take the place of a collective ethical self-understanding. The argument is that individuals contribute to socially shared goals through their individually chosen form of self-realization, and for that they are accorded social esteem (Honneth 1996: 126). Social worth is accorded to various forms of self-realization, because modern societies recognize as worthy the particular ways in which individuals have chosen to live their lives. As a result, judgments about social esteem can be quite complex, because it is not always obvious or universally recognized that a particular form of self-realization contributes to socially shared goals. Moreover, individuals or social groups may engage in struggles for recognition in order to gain affirmation for their particular ways of life. In the case of successful struggles for recognition, the contribution of a particular form of self-realization to socially shared goals becomes recognized. At one point,

Honneth gives the example of a “stay-at-home dad” in order to make this point. A man’s staying at home and raising his children only becomes a recognizable form of self-realization once it is no longer seen as a euphemism for unemployment and instead seen as a genuine contribution to socially shared goals (Anderson and Honneth 2005: 136). This example also reminds us that struggles for recognition often are necessary in order to break up traditional gendered norms about recognizable forms of self-realization.

Honneth characterizes the form of social recognition expressed through social esteem as one of solidarity. This is intuitively plausible in pre-modern estates-based societies, where individuals are accorded symmetrical social esteem by their peers on the basis of their common membership in an estate, corporation or guild and their shared value system. According to Honneth, in this context solidarity “can be understood as an interactive relationship in which subjects mutually sympathize with their various different ways of life because, among themselves, they esteem each other symmetrically” (Honneth 1996: 128). But how does solidarity arise in modern societies? Honneth’s answer is that in the absence of a shared substantive self-understanding, solidarity will arise to the extent that individuals recognize each other as individually valuable in the joint pursuit of socially shared goals. This affirmation of individual value is a state of solidarity, because it gives self-esteem to the individual who is recognized. According to Honneth,

Relationships of this sort can be said to be cases of ‘solidarity’, because they inspire not just passive tolerance but felt concern for what is individual and particular about the other person. For only to the degree to which I actively care for the development of the other’s characteristics (which seem foreign to me) can our shared goals be realized.

(Honneth 1996: 129)

Honneth wants to characterize this form of mutual recognition as symmetrical, too, although it seems clear that not every individual contributes equally to socially shared goals, and the value of any contribution is open to dispute. The symmetry of esteem recognition therefore consists in the fact that all individuals are free from collective denigration.

This is a puzzling claim, and it becomes more puzzling still when Honneth adds that given the form of solidarity described in the quote earlier, “individual competition for social esteem can then acquire a form free from pain,” because it is “not marred by experiences of disrespect” (Honneth 1996: 130). First, it is not clear what work the concept of solidarity does in Honneth’s account of social esteem in modern societies, and second, it is not clear how Honneth conceives of the relationship between solidarity and competition. Let me expand on each of these two points, in turn.

As we have seen, in estates-based societies, individuals are bound together by bonds of solidarity, because they share a value system and a broad style of life, perhaps based on the ethos of their corporation or guild, even though Honneth makes clear that individuals may pursue various different ways of life within the confines their shared ethical self-understanding. The bonds in question are described appropriately as solidarity in the sense that they serve a unifying function that mediates between individuals and society and ground positive duties between individuals (Scholz 2008: 18–20). In terms of Sally Scholz’s helpful typology, the form of solidarity is described appropriately as social, because it is a form of mutual dependency based on social cohesion and shared consciousness and experience which issues in the positive duties of individuals to help and support each other in day-to-day life. In particular, drawing on Durkheim’s famous distinction, it is a form of “mechanical” social solidarity in the sense that individuals are bound together by their similarity, rather than by their complementarity (Scholz 2008: 21–27).

In contrast, in modern societies individuals may pursue radically different ways of life based on highly individualized conceptions of the good. Nevertheless, Honneth must assume that individuals share at least some social goals, and solidarity is based on the recognition that different individuals through their chosen form of self-realization contribute to these socially shared goals. Thus, while modern social solidarity has a much weaker affective basis, it has a basis in the recognition of limited but significant shared interests that bind members of society together and give them reasons to help and support each other. In terms of Scholz's typology, Honneth's modern social solidarity therefore sits somewhere between a weaker form of social solidarity, which is "organic" rather than "mechanical" in that individuals are bound together by their complementarity rather than their similarity, and "civic solidarity," which exists between members of a political state and protects individuals from vulnerabilities that would exclude them from participation in the civic public (Scholz 2008: 27). This form of solidarity is weaker because it is instrumental and conditional. It is instrumental, because it establishes positive duties of help and support on the basis of mutual self-interest in the realization of socially shared values, rather than on affective ties and shared consciousness and experience, and therefore it is conditional on individuals being perceived as making a contribution to socially shared goals.

It seems that the role of solidarity has shifted in the transition from pre-modern to modern societies. In the former, solidarity seemed to be the expression of social esteem. To be esteemed is to be included in social relations of solidarity. Solidarity is a medium of social esteem. In the latter, solidarity seems to be the background against which social esteem is distributed and pursued. Therefore, in modern societies, solidarity does not seem to be a medium of social esteem. As we shall see in the next section, in modern societies money, and in particular income, becomes the primary medium of esteem.

This leads to the question of the relationship between solidarity and competition. Honneth suggests that the existence of this form of solidarity enables individuals in modern societies to compete for social esteem without fear of collective denigration. Solidarity expresses the socially shared conviction that individuals in society, through their chosen form of self-realization, typically do make a contribution to socially shared goals, even though they may do so to various degrees and with varying degrees of success. Against this background of "felt concern for what is individual and particular about the other person" (Honneth 1996: 129), individuals will be motivated to pursue socially shared goals in order to gain the social esteem of their peers, and thereby maximize the realization of these goals. But this optimistic conception of esteem competition as a mechanism that maximizes the realization of socially shared goals as if by an invisible hand seems to overlook that competition also can undermine solidarity and lead to status hierarchies that embody precisely the denigration of ways of life that the theory of recognition criticizes. One reason for this is that social status is a positional good. Once social esteem is gradated, so that some individuals or groups are more esteemed than others, individuals or groups can improve their position in the status order either by increasing their own social esteem or by decreasing that of their peers. In such a competitive environment, we have no good reason to believe that everybody will be satisfied with basic social recognition as a contributor to socially shared goals. As a result, there will be a very strong stratification of social esteem in society, and social solidarity will come under severe pressure. Honneth's analysis of the capitalist recognition order in *Redistribution or Recognition?* bears this out. For the concept of solidarity disappears from his analysis in that book.

### The Capitalist Recognition Order

Honneth's analysis of modern capitalism as a recognition order is one of the greatest achievements of his theory of recognition. To conceptualize society as a recognition order is to

consider it as a normative order that institutionalizes the distribution of respect and social esteem and therefore expresses the social valuations that most people in this society see as legitimate. It is the normative horizon against which specific struggles for recognition take place (Honneth 2003a: 148–149). This analysis is innovative, because it offers conceptual tools for the moral evaluation of market societies which depart from established debates about distributive justice in liberal political philosophy and argues that misrecognition underlies many of the injustices that individuals experience in the market economy. It is also a valuable addition to critical theories of capitalism in the Marxist tradition which analyze structures of oppression but do not have the conceptual tools to articulate how and why the oppressed experience their oppression as moral injury. However, Honneth's analysis of capitalism also has been criticized for failing to explain all forms of injustice that individuals experience. This section will trace Honneth's account of the emergence of the capitalist recognition order in some detail, before focusing on some of the criticisms. The next section will look at Nancy Fraser's criticism of Honneth in her contributions to *Redistribution or Recognition?*

Honneth begins his discussion in *Redistribution or Recognition?* with a restatement of the history of the modern recognition order as the breaking up of the pre-modern "alloy of legal respect and social esteem – the moral fundament of all traditional societies" (Honneth 2003a: 140). Like in *The Struggle for Recognition*, but in much more detail, Honneth next focuses on the basis of social esteem in modern capitalist societies. As we have seen, the neutral term for this basis is "individual achievement" (Honneth 2003a: 140). In particular, the capitalist recognition order valorizes "individual achievement within the structure of the industrially organized division of labor" (Honneth 2003a: 140). Social esteem is accorded to individuals on the basis of their success as productive citizens, and the implication is that esteem therefore has been meritocratized (Honneth 2003a: 141), so that what matters now is ability, effort or success, rather than social status conferred on the basis of birth, caste or class, that is, characteristics that individuals cannot deserve or be responsible for.

As we have seen in our bird's-eye view of Honneth's theory of recognition, his discussion of the capitalist recognition order in *Redistribution or Recognition?* aims to paint a realistic picture of modern capitalist societies. Honneth acknowledges that these societies were "hierarchically organized in an unambiguously ideological way from the start" (Honneth 2003a: 141). In terms of the recognition-theoretical framework, this means that what counts as "achievement" was always already skewed in favor of the independent, male, middle-class bourgeois, and this ideological bias has survived until today. As a result, a specific model of individual achievement, "investment in intellectual preparation for a specific activity" (Honneth 2003a: 147), which is paradigmatically realized in entrepreneurship and the professions, still dominates the capitalist recognition order, while many other contributions to socially shared goals are under-valued. This includes manual and repetitive forms of labor performed by dependent working-class laborers and many forms of care and house work primarily performed by women.

To be sure, Honneth's discussion of the capitalist recognition order in *Redistribution or Recognition?* does not offer a justification of the ideology underpinning this order. Rather, it serves the twin aims of explaining the legitimacy of capitalism in the eyes of modern subjects and of showing that there are immanent resources in the capitalist recognition order that justify criticism of that order. According to Honneth, capitalism is not "norm-free," a position often ascribed to Habermas, but rather governed by normative principles, namely, principles of social recognition, even though the specific recognition principles and their application frequently are contested (Honneth 2003a: 142). Consider the labor market. People often appeal to the normative vocabulary of desert or merit in order to articulate their claims for better working conditions or better pay. But labor markets are complex social institutions

in which “efficiency considerations...are inextricably fused with cultural views of the social world” (Honneth 2003a: 156), which determine the social value of a particular job or profession. Until recently, in modern capitalist societies, labor markets were tightly regulated, and these regulations expressed these societies’ understandings of desert and justice and of the specific vulnerabilities to which workers are exposed. These immanent norms go some way toward explaining why people see capitalism as legitimate, but they also explain why people feel justified in criticizing it when it falls short of its immanent promise, the surplus of validity that all norms contain (Honneth 2003a: 186).

This account of the capitalist recognition order suggests that struggles for recognition in the sphere of social esteem which appeal to social solidarity, including struggles for social-welfare benefits for the unemployed, but also for better working conditions, can be transformed into struggles about social rights, so that unemployment benefits and decent working conditions are no longer seen as expressions of esteem for the social contribution of workers but of respect for their equal rights (Honneth 2003a: 149). In fact, Honneth conceives of this boundary-shifting between recognition spheres as a form of moral progress because it decouples social rights from the need for justification in terms of individual achievement (Honneth 2003a: 188). This seems right, because the legal guarantee of social-welfare entitlements establishes the social minimum as something that one is due as everyone’s equal, rather than as a social inferior. However, Honneth also notes that the demonization of the unemployed as skivers and the attempts to curtail their social rights are obvious examples of the erosion of respect based on a prior erosion of social esteem. The “social stigma” (Honneth 2010b: 224) of unemployment cuts across respect and esteem recognition. Once a class of individuals is characterized as useless and replaceable and therefore not worthy of social esteem, their ability to exact the equal respect that is due to them as citizens in the form of social rights is undermined too (Honneth and Stahl 2013: 283).

This points to an important insight of Honneth’s theory of recognition. Once social esteem becomes a necessary condition for individual self-realization, the ability to be recognized as making a contribution to socially shared goals, in other words, the ability to be recognized as useful to others, becomes of the utmost importance. In the capitalist recognition order, most individuals demonstrate their usefulness through work, organized in the social division of labor. But not everyone can or does make a contribution to socially shared goals, and not everyone can develop such ability to the same degree. As a result, the capitalist recognition order issues in a social status order in which social esteem is unequally distributed between people. This would be true, even if this order were to track genuine social contributions and to reward genuine achievements. In reality, where the capitalist recognition order is ideologically distorted and one-sided, the distribution of social esteem reproduces and legitimizes the existing hierarchies of social class and prestige. And in such a hierarchical class society, many struggle to establish their worth in the eyes of others, as it becomes comparative and positional in nature (Jütten 2017).

### Fraser’s Criticism

In her contributions to *Redistribution or Recognition?* Nancy Fraser puts forward a number of objections to Honneth’s conception of the capitalist recognition order (Fraser 2003a, 2003b). Perhaps the most influential objection is directed at Honneth’s “monism,” that is, his view that struggles for redistribution can be reduced to struggles for recognition. Fraser uses the example of an industrial worker who loses his job because of an industrial merger (Fraser 2003a: 35). The loss of his job cannot be explained meaningfully by a re-evaluation of his achievement or contribution to socially shared goals. Rather, it must be explained by reference to political-economic factors that operate at the systemic level of the market economy



and are governed by profitability considerations (Fraser 2003b: 215). The upshot of this example is that there is an entire dimension of capitalism that the theory of recognition does not capture, and therefore the recognition-theoretical analysis of capitalism is incomplete. Fraser's alternative is an explanatory dualism, according to which individuals can suffer from maldistribution, misrecognition, or both, and neither can be reduced to the other (Fraser 2003a: 34–37).

In response, Honneth could suggest a “weak” reading of his argument (Zurn 2015: 140), according to which the capitalist recognition order is one of several causal determinants of market outcomes, which derives its force from the fact that the functioning of the market has recognitional preconditions. The market depends on laws, social norms, psychological dispositions, and particular self-relationships of actors which could be withdrawn if people no longer believed that the market is a legitimate sphere of social recognition. The problem with this weak version of the argument may be that it is too abstract to offer explanations of specific economic problems or guide emancipatory politics (Zurn 2015: 145).

For better or for worse, Honneth seems to move in the direction of a weaker argument, which stresses the fact that economic action is embedded in a moral framework. In his most recent discussion of the market economy in *Freedom's Right*, Honneth returns to the language of solidarity in order to make this point:

[T]he market can only fulfill its function of harmoniously integrating individual economic activities in an unforced manner and by means of contractual relations if it is embedded in feelings of solidarity that precede all contracts and obligate economic actors to treat each other fairly and justly.

(Honneth 2014: 181)

Of course, it remains unclear what exactly the relationship is between solidarity, fairness, and justice on the one hand, and individual economic action, which is self-interested by definition, (although it may include a concern for others' welfare), on the other. If it turns out that fairness and justice are compatible with the economic choices that have put Fraser's industrial worker out of a job, then the solidarity underpinning these norms must be very weak. Otherwise, we would expect such job losses to be accompanied by very substantial forms of compensation, redeployment or retraining, which would reassure the workers of their continued worth in the eyes of their fellow citizens. But if it turns out that fairness and justice are incompatible with it, then we have strong reasons to believe that solidarity, fairness and justice, in fact, are not immanent norms of the market economy (Jütten 2015). To be sure, some norms of fairness and justice may be operative in market economies because they are demanded by respect for the autonomy and dignity of individuals, but they are not based on the solidarity that individuals owe to each other, because they recognize each other as making a contribution to socially shared goals.

### Conclusion: Looking Forward

Honneth's theory of recognition offers a unique perspective on modern capitalist societies. Its focus on mutual recognition as a necessary condition of individual self-realization reveals forms of disrespect and humiliation to be deeply political phenomena that form the experiential basis of social struggles for recognition and resistance against many forms of material and symbolic domination. At the same time, as we have seen, some basic questions about the explanatory power of recognition remain contested, especially in the sphere of the market economy. At the same time, Honneth has taken the lead in using the recognition-theoretical

framework in order to offer re-interpretations of both philosophical concepts and social phenomena. For example, he has developed a recognition-theoretical re-conception of ideology (Honneth 2007b) and an account of the decline of normative conceptions of work and the labor market (Honneth 2010b). It would be interesting to see the theory of recognition used in other areas of social and political thought.

One obvious area for development is feminist philosophy. As we have seen, Honneth has been very interested in gender from the beginning, and his treatment of love and the family has led to many debates among and with feminists. The question of whether feminists ought to advocate the recognition of childcare and housework as work that should be recognized through payment is a good example of this (Rössler 2007). However, there are other questions in feminist philosophy which may profit from a recognition-theoretical perspective. For example, sexual objectification could be analyzed fruitfully as a form of ideological recognition or misrecognition. Likewise, more work could be done on the persistent “hidden injuries of class” (Sennett and Cobb 1972) that manifest themselves as a lack of social recognition (Jütten 2017). One expected pay-off of such work would be the further conceptual specification of the phenomenon of misrecognition through its application to specific social issues. It is a strength of the recognition-theoretical approach that it is able to disclose forms of social suffering that are difficult to capture in the language used by liberal theories of justice. The enduring legacy of this latest shift in Frankfurt School critical theory will depend on whether there is uptake for the concepts that it adds to the toolbox of social criticism.

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## Further Reading

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# HISTORY AS CRITIQUE

Walter Benjamin

*Eli Friedlander*

## Introduction: The Concept of Critique

Benjamin's 'critical theory,' his idea of social critique, is one with his concept of history, and its fullest elaboration is to be found in his *Arcades Project*. To justify this claim would require invoking various earlier moments in his writings and relating them to his historical materialism. This would include considering how he takes up Kant's Critical Philosophy in his 'Program for the Coming Philosophy'; his understanding and problematization of the concept of criticism in early Romanticism in his dissertation, as well as the formulation, in the epilogue of that work, of the task of overcoming the polar opposition of Romantic critique and Goethe's classicist understanding of the 'uncriticizable' character of great art. It would further demand developing the relation of critique and commentary in the opening of his essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities* as well as elaborating the relation established in the last part of that essay between rescue, reconciliation, and hope. It would require us to consider the meaning that critique has in the much-discussed 'Critique of Violence' and the sense in which history reveals the co-implication of the order of law and that of myth. Or yet again, we would have to ask why the preface to the *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* is epistemo-critical, and how the critical character of the presentation of origin depends on recognizing it as a natural-historical, rather than a logical, category.

Benjamin's understanding of history as critique culminates in his *Arcades Project*. Yet the difficulty in drawing the contours of his position is not least due to this work itself being something of a riddle, and not only because it was left unfinished. Adorno refers to it, after reading the 'Exposé' of the project, as Benjamin's *prima philosophia*. Despite appearances, it is not a work of cultural history on a limited subject matter. But how could an investigation of the Paris arcades be compared to what Herder, Kant, Hegel, Marx or Nietzsche saw themselves as engaged in, when they were writing philosophical histories? And how are Benjamin's more obviously philosophical remarks, gathered for the most part in convolute N, not his reflections on historiography (as if 'history' is an ontic concept), but rather the scaffolding of a critical philosophical history?

## The Work of Art: Critique and Commentary

The idea of critique is part and parcel of the legacy of Kant in philosophy. Internal criticism is for Kant the expression of the autonomy of reason, of its capacity to limit itself while at

the same time orienting itself so as to fulfill all its true needs. Kant's concept of critique is closely related to his account of judgment. The grammar of judgment, laid out in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, primarily through the articulation of the form of the field of aesthetics, provides an important model for the self-orienting character of internal criticism. Self-guidance through feeling essentially involves a form of subjective activity, which Kant calls reflective judgment. This form of reflection is adopted by the Jena Romantics, through the intermediary of Fichte. Their ensuing concept of the criticism of art is the topic of Benjamin's doctoral dissertation. But there are many indications that he is reluctant to adopt wholesale the Romantics' conception. In the epilogue to the dissertation, he sets an opposition between the Romantics' creative critical reflection, which positions a work within the medium of the idea of art, and Goethe's conception of art as devoted to the revelation of pure contents, ideals, or archetypes of true nature.

Benjamin's attempt to develop a concept of critique that overcomes the opposition of Goethe and the Romantics informs the opening of his essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*. He suggests that there is a contrast, as well as an intimate bond, between the philological commentary, the investigation of what he calls "material content," and critique, turned to the recognition of what he calls "truth content." The initial relation between the two is articulated in the understanding that the more significant a work of art is, the more what appears to us as essential and necessary in it fully permeates the material content, that which is contingent and time bound. The idea permeates the material content, and it, in turn, allows the idea sensuous manifestation. Material content and truth content are thus inseparable in the lived experience of the work. This further implies for Benjamin that one can get a sense of the idea in lived experience only on the condition of assuming it not to be perspicuously or decisively present, as truth content. It is immersed, or dispersed, in contingencies. The sense of completeness or perfection through which the truth contents of the work is manifest in the lived experience of art thrives on indeterminacy. This indeterminacy of meaning inheres at the heart of our experience of a great work of literature. It is *through* that ambiguity that the heart of the matter is signified. Put slightly differently, it is as though the work harbors a secret. Only in being veiled, can truth manifest itself in beauty, as complete and self-identical. There is a dimension of semblance (*Schein*) in the appearance of perfection that so spellbinds us in the experience of the powerful, magical, beauty of a great work. It would require criticism of a particular character to recognize how truth does justice to beauty, to recognize what in beauty partakes of true nature.

It is here that one begins to appreciate the essentially historical character of critique. By this, Benjamin does not mean stepping outside the space of the work and considering the historical conditions of its production. Yet time is the medium of a transformation of meaning in the work. For sure, it is not a transformation in its truth content, which is assumed to be immutable, but rather the shift is in the character, in the meaning of its material contents. The more the work detaches itself from the life in which it was formed, the more realities that belong to its contingent content stand out in their peculiarity. What remains inconspicuous as long as the work is experienced in its lifeworld emerges in time as strange or striking and therefore as material that provides the occasion for philology or commentary. But philology is not to be taken as historicizing, or attempting to reposition the work in its element of life, in that world in which the work was made.

Philological knowledge is strictly speaking the meticulous attentiveness to the emerging details in the internal *transformations* of the contingent meaning-material. Commentary is, first of all, a form of *knowledge* that is destructive of the semblance of wholeness, through which the idea shines in the lived experience of the beauty of art. But, in a second moment, the knowledge of the material contents, now released from the unity of the reflective form, can reveal for us a tendency in the work, through which we can first be directed to

the recognition of the order of truth contents. Philological commentary is knowledge that extinguishes the immediate beauty and attractiveness of the work, but opens it to the recognition of a higher actuality of meaning. Thus critique, properly understood, would be inescapably wedded to commentary. Philology is, at one and the same time, the eradication of the immediacy of the beautiful semblance, as well as what prepares or purifies the material content for the presentation of truth content. "The truth content emerges," as Benjamin puts it, "as that of the material content" (Benjamin 1996, 300).

Benjamin's concept of critique differs essentially from the Kantian and Romantic idea of reflective criticism, which is conceived as enlivening the work in meaning (see Friedlander 2016a, Part I). For, the quickening of the mind, the unfolding in reflection of a potential endlessness of meaning, which makes the work into a medium of advance toward the idea, would precisely intensify at the same time the semblance character of the work. Critique, as Benjamin conceives of it, does not enliven but, in his words, it is "mortification of the works" (Benjamin 1977, 182). It extinguishes the semblance of beautiful life that inheres in the work in favor of the sober recognition of a fragment of the highest reality it harbors. Through the philological commentary, we can recognize that necessity in the work as an *inner* limit condition of its content. This inner limit is not one of form, which bespeaks of the active synthesis of the mind, but rather of content. It is tantamount to recognizing the work as imitating or taking part in the highest reality.

### Historical Materialism and the Afterlife of Meaning

In the epilogue to his dissertation, Benjamin recasts in relation to the field of aesthetics a problem prevalent in the wake of the Kantian philosophy, that of how to think of the highest unity of reason equally in terms of a transcendental philosophy of the subject and of a philosophy of nature, as an identity of ideal and real, or both as subject and as substance. This was evident in his setting the opposition between the Romantics who draw on Fichte's philosophy of the absolute subject, and Goethe's realism of nature as living substance inspired by Spinoza. The problem of overcoming this duality also informs his understanding of history. The model of the work of art showed us that the key to overcoming the antithesis of subject and substance in a higher, critical realism is the attending of philology to the transformation of material contents. Similarly, we can expect a pronounced philological aspect to Benjamin's historical practice. This is for sure evident at one level in the sheer mass of meaning materials, of quotations, that he amasses in the convolutes of his *Arcades Project*. But merely pointing to the presence of such material is in no way sufficient without understanding its pertinence to the highest contents philosophy is after.

Benjamin seeks the proper grounding of the critical dimension in history not in the unity that subjectivity and its internal norms provides us with, but rather in the attention to the material dimension of historical life. But our conception of materiality itself must be such that it takes up the sphere of *meaning*. Benjamin is after the *expressive* character of material existence. "The collective," Benjamin writes, "from the first, expresses the conditions of its life" (Benjamin 1999a, 392). Expression should not be psychologized. It is not the manifestation of an inner mental state, but rather the expression of life. The concept of expression plays an important role in bringing together the forms of living nature and the sphere of human culture. The metaphysics of expression, as it pertains both to nature and man's belonging to nature, and to his place and task in relation to the natural order, is articulated most succinctly in Benjamin's early writings on language (see Friedlander, 2012, Chapter 1). Human language can be the medium in which the expressive unity of living nature can be actualized. It is not just that language can be used to express various human natural needs but that, properly viewed, it is the medium of expression of the human form of life (and

through it, of nature as a whole). It is only when the concepts of language, meaning, and expression are understood as manifestations of life that we can further think of the expressive character of historical products.

"This research," Benjamin writes of his *Arcades Project*, "deals fundamentally with the expressive character of the earliest industrial products, the earliest industrial architecture, the earliest machines, but also the earliest department stores, advertisements and so on" (Benjamin 1999a, 460). Correlative with the idea of an expressive unity of life, we can then speak of a morphological or *physiognomic* understanding of history: "To write history means giving dates their physiognomy" (Benjamin 1999a, 476). As he relates himself to Marx, Benjamin contrasts the natural-historical register of expression to an account that relies on a concept of causality drawn from the natural sciences:

Marx lays bare the causal connection between economy and culture. For us, what matters is the thread of expression. It is not the economic origins of culture that will be presented, but the expression of the economy in its culture.

(Benjamin 1999a, 460)

An implication of the distinction that Benjamin makes between following the thread of causality and that of expression is that, whereas cause is distinct from effect, the essence from its reflection in appearance, that which expresses itself realizes itself in its expression. Recognizing the economy as origin does not mean that we will be able to delimit well-defined economic processes that are found 'behind' the distinct cultural manifestations. Origin is present in the gathering of phenomena, when these are revealed as the unfolding of its inner life. So, it is the very ordering and presentation of the historical material as an origin that will make manifest how economy permeates the sphere of culture. We will perceive the economy *in the culture*, that is, recognize how it expresses itself in a whole range of cultural manifestations.

"At issue, in other words, is the attempt to grasp an economic process as perceptible Ur-phenomenon, from out of which proceed all manifestations of life in the arcades (and, accordingly, in the nineteenth century)" (Benjamin 1999a, 460). As the reference to the Ur-phenomenon makes evident, the key to Benjamin's higher realism or expressive materialism is his inheritance of Goethe's naturalism. In an important statement of the theory of the *Arcades project*, Benjamin writes,

my concept of origin ... is a rigorous and decisive transposition of the basic Goethean concept from the domain of nature to that of history. Origin – it is, in effect, the concept of *Ur-phenomenon* extracted from the pagan context of nature and brought into the Jewish contexts of history.

(Benjamin 1999a, 462; see also Friedlander 2016b)

In attempting to assess Benjamin's appropriation of Goethe's conception of nature for history, we need to consider that a form, or method of investigation, cannot merely be taken from one domain and applied to another. The method is inseparable from the character of the domain it opens. Specifically, Goethe's idea of the primal, or original, is not accidentally related to the presentation of the forms of living nature. Thus, insofar as Benjamin seeks to take up Goethe's concept of origin from nature into the investigation of history, this would imply that for him history contains a dimension of primal nature, or can be a field in which living nature manifests itself.

Therefore, even if we ultimately establish, following Benjamin, a distinction between nature and history, it would be necessary to bring out the way in which the authentically

historical emerges out of the natural in human collective existence. In presenting history as a primal phenomenon, we assume in it a dimension of *natural history*. The articulation of the historical must take up what philosophers have referred to as the anthropological dimension of human collective existence. As Benjamin puts it in his *Trauerspiel* book: "The life of the works and forms which need such protection in order to unfold clearly and unclouded by the human is a natural life" (Benjamin 1977, 47 translation modified).

Benjamin's notion of life extends beyond the confines of the identification of life with the sensitive, beyond the notion life understood in terms of the purposiveness of the organic, and beyond the Aristotelian hylomorphic account of living beings. In Benjamin's essay 'The Task of the Translator,' it becomes clear that he attributes life in a non-metaphorical sense to works of art and cultural products. The highest manifestation of life investigated by philosophy is recognized in what has "a history of its own": "the philosopher's task consists in comprehending all of natural life through the more encompassing life of history" (Benjamin 1996, 255).

The historical unity of life is related, yet also distinguished from the characterization of life in terms of purposiveness, whether of the organic or of practical reason. "All purposeful manifestations of life, including their very purposiveness, in the final analysis have their end not in life but in the expression of its nature, in the presentation of its significance" (SWI, 255). This formulation, which distinguishes the terminal actualization of life in significance from the realization of purposes of life, precisely leaves room for the understanding that the unity of significance, the life of history, can even encompass the destruction of the purposive nexus. So as to mark this higher life that comes to expression in history, Benjamin refers to it as including what he calls afterlife (*nachleben*).

One could therefore think of the meaning of social products insofar as they are part of a functional nexus of social practices. They would then pertain to articulating the *life* of the collective body. But, the philological investigation of material corporeality that is of interest to history, to *historical materialism*, does not seek the expressions of the life of the collective body, but rather of its *afterlife*, as such contents or cultural products reveal their meaning when detached from their life surroundings.

### Myth and Primal History

We can get a glimpse of the breadth of expression that Benjamin seeks to achieve through the prism of the historical phenomenon of the arcades by reading his 'Exposés' of the project. Virtually every topic of the convolutes is touched upon in this concentrated presentation in an extraordinarily abbreviated manner. But more importantly, something like a *cosmology*, or a natural history of modern humanity, involving the most fundamental dimensions of the human form of life, is laid out in the 'Exposés'. They are schemata for a monadological presentation of a human world, expressed through the material culture of nineteenth century Paris. The ordering of these material contents presents the dimension of what Benjamin calls in other contexts creaturely life (see, in particular, *The Origin of German Trauerspiel* and the essay 'Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death'). The 'Exposés' gives us thereby a sketch of historical existence configured in terms of the broadest categories. A list of some of them would include New – Primal, Utopia – Myth, Wish – Fate, Organic – Inorganic, Inner – Outer, Movement – Petrification, Mechanism – Life, the Universe – the Particular, Construction – Destruction, Work – Play, Individuality – Typicality, Repetition – Uniqueness.

The opening of the 1939 exposé formulates the subject matter of the work as following the implications of an antinomy of the nineteenth century's historical consciousness: the sense of progress in history, on the one hand, and a view of its repetitive character, on the



other. This latter is attributed to Schopenhauer, who supposedly argues that the meaning one could draw from history would be already available in comparing Herodotus and the morning newspaper. All the intervening adds nothing but tedious details to the repetitive dynamics of primal forces. The opposed vision of universal history isolates the 'achievements' of humanity, its great moments so to speak, thereby providing us with a measure of progress. This is why Benjamin calls such a view, best represented in the history of civilizations, "the treasure trove" of the present.

The two horns of the antinomy properly formulated will prove to feed on each other and belong to one another: "The belief in progress ... and the representation of eternal return are complementary. They are the indissoluble antinomies in the face of which the dialectical conception of historical time must be developed" (Benjamin 1999a, 119). Schopenhauer's schema of repetition is not a truthful vision of history but, if anything, an inkling of the reality of his present times whose idealized mirror image is the ideology of progress. More importantly, these visions of history are themselves expressions of distorted collective life. A different history, a different 'transmission' of the past, or a different tradition that the present can take on, would be recognized when we turn to the dynamics of the material basis. It becomes evident how the directionality of progress in the reified vision of the past rests on another vector that involves "a constant toil of society" (Benjamin 1999a, 14). Benjamin represents this duality of standpoints in a powerful figure:

Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which current rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to the traditional practice, the spoils are carried in the procession. They are called 'cultural treasures'.

(Benjamin 2003, 391)

The deeper tendencies expressing the conditions of existence of the nineteenth century reveal themselves to the historical gaze of the present initially in the afterlife of the material contents in a peculiar illumination of the material culture of the past: "the new forms of behavior and the new economically and technologically based creations that we owe to the nineteenth century enter the universe of a phantasmagoria" (Benjamin 1999a, 14). The notion of phantasmagoria suggests how what achieves expression is precisely a compromised state of collective existence. In other words, the attention of the historical materialist to the 'metamorphosis' of material products makes manifest the space of human life whose schema is the rule of myth. Benjamin seeks to characterize through the investigation of the arcades the primal phenomenon of history. The primal in human existence is the mythical. Authentic historical time emerges in the struggle against the burden of myth.

The mythical isn't merely identified in the character of early human societies, or of primitive forms of human existence. The force of Benjamin's view of primal history lies in the understanding that the mythical is ever-present in the space of human life. His presentation of the nineteenth century as primal history brings out the form of the struggle with the mythical that shapes the image of modernity. "Every ground must at some point have been made arable by reason, must have been cleared of the undergrowth of delusion and myth. This is to be accomplished here for the terrain of the nineteenth century" (Benjamin 1999a, 456). The struggle against the hold of the mythical is a dimension of the task of articulation of the space of meaningful fulfillment open to the present. The mythical has its hold, precisely as long as the space of life of the past does not undergo the highest meaningful articulation. This would mean that the problem of emerging out of myth is ever renewed, both in the struggles of the individual life as well as for the collective. Myth is the primal ground against which individuation or uniqueness in history arises.

Mythical life belongs to the dimension of totality which has not undergone concretization or individualization; it is un-actualized life, which Benjamin sometimes calls 'mere life' (*bloße Leben*). Early on, in the essay 'Fate and Character,' he thinks of such a field of life as ruled by fate. Such existence may not be conscious of the sources of its suffering. In part, this has to do with the close connection between the entanglement in myth and the form of a wishing consciousness. The latter is "the utopia that has left its trace in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions" (Benjamin 1999a, 5). Both sides are equally expressed in the material products of the nineteenth century. The entanglement in myth can be called the primal past and the utopian wish the primal future. (Benjamin speaks of "primordial passion, fears, and images of longing" as well as of the "alluring and threatening face of primal history" (Benjamin 1999a, 393).) Primal history is the recognition of a period through the polarity of utopia *and* as mythical dread, as wish and as guilt. Ultimately, it is a form of human existence that is captivated and doomed to repetition. Blanqui's cosmological phantasmagoria of eternal return – the vision which *sums all others* – ends the 1939 'Exposé'.

### The Dream Configuration and the Dialectical Image

The material reality of the past comes together as a whole, meaningfully, initially as a configuration of dream, expressing the distortion of primal history. Dream is the expressive character of the reality that the past takes as it is gathered from its material products. Benjamin writes of the moment in which the things of the past put on their "true – surrealist – face" (Benjamin 1999a, 464). This means that even if we can speak of such and such facts that happened, that belong to the reality of the past, referring to the past as a dream implies that it is not fully actualized in its significance. But a further important implication of the language of dream is that the distortions expressed in material existence *point* to a higher measure, to that which is their highest actualization. As Benjamin puts it: "... we seek a teleological moment in the context of dreams. Which is the moment of waiting. The dream waits secretly for the awakening" (Benjamin 1999a, 390). The possibility of awakening in decisive social action is grounded in being attuned to this inner teleology of the dream. The dream configuration contains within itself the 'direction' for actualization, the *signal of true historical existence* in relation to which the historical materialist *orients* himself. The sense of the historical tendency to be actualized in and through the metamorphoses of material content is put powerfully in a figure that one finds in 'On the Concept of History':

As flowers turn toward the sun, what has been strives to turn – by dint of a secret heliotropism – toward that sun which is rising in the sky of history. The historical materialist must be aware of this most inconspicuous of all transformations.

(Benjamin 2003, 390)

In seeking further to articulate the emergence from a space ruled by myth into social action informed by history, it is essential to take up Benjamin's deep suspicion about the notion that it is in a system of law of the state that the possibility of the highest expression and realization of the concept of the will lies. One aspect of this problem with the place of the law in human existence is developed in his 'Critique of Violence' and can be encapsulated in the understanding of the collusion of law and the manifestations of mythical life in human collective existence.

Benjamin takes the distinction between force that is involved in setting up law, and force involved in its preservation, and problematizes the separation between them, which is a necessary condition of their legitimacy. Throughout the essay, Benjamin develops a number of cases of the perverse relation of the law-preserving and the law-making, recognizable,

for instance, in what he calls the “spectral” character of the police. The ambiguous co-implication of these two aspects of legal force is their expression as the manifestation of mythical violence. Benjamin identifies the critique of violence with the “philosophy of its history.” “A gaze directed only at what is close at hand can at most perceive a dialectical rising and falling in the lawmaking and law-preserving forms of violence” (Benjamin 1996, 251). But, history, properly understood, “makes possible a critical, discriminating, and decisive approach to its temporal data”; it makes visible the perverse entanglement of law-preserving and law-instating violence. What becomes visible in history is precisely the demonic ambiguity in their ‘cooperation.’ The cycle, or oscillation, of the two manifestations of force is “maintained by the mythic forms of law” (Benjamin 1996, 251). It is fate that manifests itself in time, as eternal return, through the perverse character of law (see Friedlander 2015).

But the space of political action cannot simply be separated from the mythical manifestation of law by setting up different principles of action or even by adopting a total disengagement from the state as in the nonviolent general proletarian strike, which Benjamin discusses in that essay. Politics gets its direction from the critical character of materialist history:

Materialist historiography ... is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the movement of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly comes to a stop in a constellation saturated with tensions, it gives that constellation a shock, by which thinking is crystallized as a monad.

(Benjamin 2003, 396)

Several things need to be noted about this important passage. First, the necessity of a *monadological* presentation of history means that what is highest in it, its truth contents, can never be present as abstract essences or ideas, but rather always as they come to be mirrored, concentrated or abbreviated in a carefully chosen individual phenomenon, such as the arcades of Paris. But the discrete multiplicity of truth contents recognized in the monadic presentation is not to be identified with the endless plurality of material contents gathered in the construction. The construction allows the present to recognize these weighty highest contents, as it were, as the balance of the myriad of material contents of the past:

All historical knowledge can be represented in the image of balanced scales, one tray of which is weighted with what has been and the other with the knowledge the present has [of that past]. Whereas on the first the facts assembled can never be too humble or numerous, on the second there can only be a few heavy, massive weights.

(Benjamin 1999a, 468 translation modified)

Secondly, as we have argued, material contents appear initially as a configuration of myth, in which we become aware of the hidden opposed demands that are made of life. Repetition ensues from these contradictory demands that implicitly rule the life of the collective. The impossibility of encompassing these dimensions together *concretely* leads Benjamin to refer to this problematic ambiguous unity as a “constellation of dangers.” This makes clear that the constructive character of Benjamin’s historiographical practice should be contrasted to, say, a Kantian constructivism such that developed by John Rawls, which aims to determine a *reflective* equilibrium between the fundamental intuitions found in public political culture. Benjamin’s presentation of origin is constructive as well. But for him the construction of an origin does not take the form of representing our deepest commitments in an original position, in a procedure that yields the contentful equilibrium between these values. The balance of the highest contents emerges in the arrest of the ambiguity of myth.

Finally, whereas the movement of thought presupposes the intentional forms of consciousness, the arrest is to be understood as the *realist* moment of thought or of meaning, as the highest articulation of content. The constructive work opens to a non-intentional moment of recognition of the standard of the highest actuality. "... [O]ne could speak of the increasing concentration (integration) of reality, such that everything past (in its time) can acquire a higher grade of actuality than it had in the moment of its existing" (Benjamin 1999a, 392). The founding concept of historical materialism, as Benjamin puts it is "not progress but actualization." Actualization is not to be confused with purposive realization. It cannot be characterized as realizing an aim or goal, or even in terms of the regulative character of an infinite task of practical reason. The schema of action that actualizes the past emerges as an *image* unique to that present which takes up the past as its own. "How [the past] marks itself as higher actuality is determined by the image as which and in which it is comprehended."

The imagistic dimension of Benjamin's understanding of history has been the object of a variety of interpretations. Benjamin clearly states his "refusal to renounce anything that would demonstrate the materialist presentation of history as imagistic [*Bildhaft*] in a higher sense than the traditional presentation" (Benjamin 1999a, 463). So as to account for this imagistic character of materialism, it is not sufficient to point to the concrete character of the material contents (such as arcades, fashion, or flânerie). For what is at issue is the recognizability of *truth-contents* in an image. The higher intuitability needs to be understood in relation to the recognition of the standard or measure for actualizing the past emerging in the construction that orders the material contents as an origin or primal phenomenon. The highest actuality of the origin of possibilities is an *archetype*. An archetype is not an abstract idea, but rather a primal *image*, which Benjamin calls the dialectical image.

The dialectical image is not an object of knowledge but rather of *recognition*: "The authentic – the hallmark of origin in phenomena – is the object of discovery, a discovery which is connected in a unique way with the process of recognition" (Benjamin 1977, 46). Benjamin avails himself of the notion of recognition not in order to articulate an ideal of mutual recognition through social institutions, but rather to mark the mode of revelation of the archetypal, of that which is not an intentional object of consciousness, but rather an ultimate actuality. The language of archetypes might for sure be open to various problematic misappropriations. And Benjamin is concerned with distinguishing the dialectical image from "archaic images" or from the archetypal that is at the service of myth, as it is, for instance, in Jung. One might also worry, especially if one relates the account of the 'dialectical image' to that of 'origin' in the 'Epistemo-Critical Preface' of the *Trauerspiel* book, that such a turn to archetypes would lead to Platonism, to seeking the image of history in a heaven of eternal forms. For sure, a Platonic idea, as opposed to a Kantian regulative idea, is precisely the unique highest reality, the archetype, of which all phenomena are copies or ectypes. Yet paying attention to what recognition involves for Benjamin makes clear that the standard of highest actuality is always presented through the ordering of contingent material as the "purification" of the phenomenal (the "saving of phenomena" (Benjamin 1977, 33)), and its temporality is that of the passing: "The true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again" (Benjamin 2003, 390).

Recognition is bound with the temporal category of opportunity. Opportunity is the temporal category through which the political subject of the present relates to a specific past as part of his own historical life, that is, views the present as a chance for actualizing the tendencies revealed in the afterlife of the historical material. Opportunity is *for someone*, and for that reason, it is *unique* and *passing*. A situation does not present an opportunity in and of itself, but rather it becomes an opportunity only for the one who has the presence of mind to recognize it as his own. Yet the conditions for something being an opportunity cannot be

predicted subjectively, for they are not reducible to the abstract characterization of preexisting goals or aims. That an opportunity is unpredictable and unique means that it can only be recognized in its concreteness, in concretizing the dream configuration of the past. Since grasping an opportunity depends on seeing *your own* chance to actualize the past, one could speak here of a unity of historical *life* that brings together the present and *its* specific past. It is the dimension of *memory* or *remembrance* (*Eingedenken*) in history. Since opportunity is concrete, unique, and unpredictable, Benjamin speaks of the dialectical image as “the involuntary memory of humanity.” Put slightly differently, from the standpoint of the present, the distorted character of the past is the *presence* of the *forgotten* in history. The forgotten is not nothing, but rather has presence as distortion, as the dream image of the past for the present: “the form which things assume in oblivion ... [is that] they are distorted” (Benjamin 1999b, 811). (The hunchback is a figure for such distortion, which appears in numerous writings of Benjamin’s, and famously in the first thesis of ‘On the Concept of History’.)

### Hope in the Past

The idea of actualizing the past in the present is the basis of Benjamin’s reinterpretation of Kant’s figure for the critical moment in philosophy:

The Copernican revolution in historical perception is as follows. Formerly it was thought that a fixed point had been found in ‘what has been’ and one saw the present engaged in tentatively concentrating the forces of knowledge on this ground. Now this relation is to be overturned, and what has been is to become the dialectical reversal – the flash of awakened consciousness. Politics attains primacy over history. The facts become something that just now first happened to us, first struck us; to establish them is the affair of memory.

[K1,2]

This appropriation of the Kantian moment can be confusing. Recall that for Kant the Copernican moment is the *idealistic* understanding that there is a primacy to the subject in the constitution of the very form of the object. But Benjamin uses the same figure to think of a *materialistic turn* in history.

Therefore, we cannot articulate the place of the historical subject of the present in the constitution of the image of the past in terms of the unity of the present. Understood in idealistic terms, Benjamin’s statement that “Politics attains primacy over history” would risk making the critical turn merely a call to marshal or use history for political ends and interests. But the interests of the present are “*preformed* in the object,” preformed in the past [K2,3] (Benjamin 1999a, 391). In other words, we must ask ourselves how the turn of the past around the present is tantamount to a *critique of the present order*. To actualize the past would be “interspersing [history] with ruins – that is, with the present” (Benjamin 1999a, 474). The present undergoes critique insofar as it becomes the locus of action oriented to the highest actualization of the past. It is precisely by understanding the unity of life between a specific past and the present, revealed in the dynamics of the material contents, that one can avoid the ideological misappropriations of history.

This can be further underscored by considering how Benjamin reconceives Kant’s question ‘what may I hope for?’ For Kant, the concept of hope points to the religious dimension of the ethical. Hope is for the highest good – the unity of morality and happiness. Strictly speaking, this is not an object of volition, or it cannot be brought about by the will. This is why it involves, for Kant, the postulates of God and the immortality of the soul. For Benjamin, this theological moment is translated into a dimension of the afterlife of meaning

in history. It establishes the space of afterlife as that wherein the process of transformation of meaning opens the horizon of hope.

If we think of this notion of afterlife as essential to the opening of a horizon of hope in history, it would imply a duality in the space of hope, the separation of the one who hopes from the one *for whom* there is hope. I cannot hope in the first person, for myself. This is not to be understood subjectively. One might indeed speak of a person feeling hopeless, yet objectively speaking, the situation presents possibilities open to them. And similarly, there would be a subjective possibility of being full of hope, yet one's situation being in fact a dead end. But what we consider through the relation of hope and afterlife is that though there might not be redeeming possibilities in the world of the past (in its own time), there is hope *for* that world from outside it, as it were, from an another-worldly standpoint, meaning from the present. The present hopes *for* the past.

"Only for the sake of the hopeless have we been given hope" (Benjamin, 1996, 356). To construe this understanding historically leads to the following problem: A world in which there is no room for hope cannot share the same possibilities with that world from which we can kindle the hope for it. Otherwise, those possibilities would already lie within the space of meaning of the world we conceive to be cursed. But if they do not share the same space of meaning, in what sense can the world to come be that in which the hope for the past arises? What kind of mediation can be established between the two worlds, the mournful or cursed world on which darkness descends and the world in which morning dawns and a horizon of reconciliation for that past is revealed? The emerging possibilities in the dialectical image of the past were neither possibilities of the past, nor are they identified through the purposes of the present. Recognizing them does, however, require the present to take up the dreams of happiness of the past, even if they are wholly semblance. Benjamin establishes this relation in a powerful passage of the second thesis of 'On the Concept of History':

in the idea of happiness vibrates the idea of redemption. The same applies to the idea of the past, which is the concern of history. The past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption... like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim. Such a claim cannot be settled cheaply. The historical materialist is aware of this.

(Benjamin 2003, 390 translation modified)

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## Further Reading

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- Benjamin W. (1996), pp. 178–185, Epilogue to ‘The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism’, Cambridge: Harvard University Press. (A condensed expression of the fundamental opposition between Goethe and the Romantics standing at the background of Benjamin’s concept of critique of the work of art).
- Benjamin W. (1996), pp. 201–206, ‘Fate and Character’, Cambridge: Harvard University Press. (An articulation of the inner relation between mere life, or nature in the human, and the nexus of fate).
- Benjamin W. (1996), pp. 236–252, ‘Critique of Violence’, Cambridge: Harvard University Press. (An elaboration of the co-implication of the legal order and the violence of the rule of myth, as well as of the opposition of the divine and the mythical through which rescue and actualization in history can be thought).
- Benjamin W. (2002), pp. 260–302, ‘Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian’, Cambridge: Harvard University Press. (A concrete example of the elaboration of some of the most important themes of Benjamin’s historical materialism).
- Benjamin W. (2003), pp. 99–115, ‘Exchange with Theodor W. Adorno on ‘Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire’, Cambridge: Harvard University Press. (An important document of the differences between the approaches of these two central figures of the Frankfurt School to the idea of critique).
- Benjamin W. (1999a), pp. 3–26, ‘Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century’ (1935) and ‘Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century’ (1939), Cambridge: Harvard University Press. (The two exposés of the “Arcades Project” that present Paris of the nineteenth century as primal history).

# TOPOGRAPHIES OF CULTURE

Siegfried Kracauer

*Andreas Huyssen*

## I

Kracauer's writing about mass culture emerged at a time when social and cultural transformations of the metropolis made the issue of the masses central to political and sociological thought. From the detective novel to photography, film, and advertising in urban space, he was the first to develop an open-ended mosaic of mass cultural forms and technologies in the Weimar years. His essays and reviews for the *Frankfurter Zeitung's* feuilleton from the mid-1920s on developed a predominantly leftist but undogmatic critique of mass culture grounded in an argument that new ways of thinking about the social and the political might emerge in the metropolis as a result of the overbearing presence of photography and film.

Scholars have shown how key ideas of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and of Benjamin's thinking about photography and film were anticipated in Kracauer's essays from the late 1920s, including the fate of rationality and experience under capitalism, the impact of media on changing modes of perception, and the acknowledgment of distraction as an alternative form of attentiveness (Koch 2000; Hansen 2012). Adorno acknowledged his debt to Kracauer in their correspondence, but never in his published writings. Multiple resonances also connect Kracauer and Benjamin's literary writings of metropolitan miniatures about Paris, Marseille, and Berlin. It was only with the rise and fall of fascism that the notion of mass society and mass man developed the uniquely sinister connotations that prevailed in post-World War II totalitarianism theory and the Cold War. Much of that debate as well is anticipated in Kracauer's sociological analysis of the salaried masses, the first succinct analysis of the explosive rise and political makeup of white-collar labor in the late Weimar years, published serially in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* from December 1929 to January 1930 (Kracauer 1998).

Critical Theory in the 1920s and 1930s occupied the pivotal historical space between notions of mass culture as a potentially emancipatory agent of progressive change or as a de facto homogenizing, enslaving, and ultimately totalitarian force. The two sides of this argument played out in the legendary mid-1930s debate between Benjamin and Adorno, a debate that took on a reductive life of its own in the North American obsessions with the postmodern and the rise of cultural studies in the 1980s, which privileged Benjamin's political embrace of mechanical reproducibility and condemned Adorno's elitism. Far from undercutting the traditional distinctions between high and low culture, all too often it



simply reversed its value terms. By contrast, it is in Kracauer's trajectory from his early romantic anti-capitalism via his sociological Marxist tinged feuilleton essays and journalistic reviews to his post-war books, written in New York exile, *From Caligari to Hitler* and the *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Reality*, that we can find a model of mass cultural analysis that sidesteps such ossified binaries while avoiding the inherent depoliticization of the currently favored term "media culture." To celebrate Kracauer and Benjamin as early media theorists today is to sideline the fact that to them thinking about new media was always part and parcel of social and political understanding. After all, the culture of the masses for Kracauer did not pertain only to products of the film and publishing industries nor to media technologies alone. He was anything but a technological determinist. His notion of mass culture included the concrete material aspects of the metropolitan lifeworld, its social stratifications, and the ways urban dwellers understood and perceived their fast changing environment. Kracauer spoke of the "thicket of material life" (Kracauer 1997: 48) to which all his analyses, whether of films, novels, sports, the book market, architecture, or metropolitan sites, remained bound. He was trained as an architect and employed as feuilleton editor and writer of that major left-liberal newspaper in Frankfurt, and it is his attention to the concrete social conditions of a cultural production and stratification in flux that distinguishes his writings from those of Benjamin and Adorno. Clearly, he kept his distance from Adorno, whose philosophical rigor about mediation and dialectics he did not share. And his difference from Benjamin is perhaps best articulated toward the end of his overall positive 1928 review of Benjamin's *The Origins of Tragic German Drama* and *One Way Street* where he criticizes Benjamin for "hardly tak[ing] into account the very life he wants to stir up" (Kracauer 1995: 263). At stake is the life of the metropolis, which indeed is rendered very differently in Kracauer's street texts as compared with Benjamin's collection of urban texts, often called *Denkbilder* (Huysen 2015). And yet, as Leo Löwenthal, countering Adorno's condescending essay about Kracauer of 1965, said in a moving tribute to his friend: "He really was a super-member of our school of critical thinking" (Löwenthal 1991: 10).

It is not surprising that binary thinking has distorted the complexities of the disagreements between Adorno and Benjamin about mass culture. Binaries indeed are deeply entrenched in the longstanding debate between high and low, elite and popular, art and mass culture in Western societies. Today, I would argue, this topographical vertical stratification is both obsolete and up to date. Kracauer's work embodies this contradiction *in nuce*. It is obsolete in that today in Western societies there is a horizontal layering of cultural production and consumption. Rather than one mass culture, we have a panoply of subcultures with multiple crossovers. The cultural capital that identification with high culture used to provide is mostly exhausted as all cultural products have become commodified (already Adorno's insight) and the unquestioned status of a cultured class is no longer being upheld. High culture has lost its cachet and mark of distinction among the elites. In line with a post-Fordist economy, consumers are free to choose laterally from cultural offerings, and many are as invested in certain forms of mass culture as in forms of high art. At the same time the high/low division is up-to-date in that we still need to distinguish ambitious works of art from trashy cultural products based on cliché, stereotype, and deadening monotony. If, on the other hand, one looks at the vertical integration of cultural industries (Sony, Time Warner, Disney) and corporations like Apple or Google, maintaining a vertical Adornean model still seems to make economic sense. The difference with the old high/low model, however, is that now there is an ever expanding realm of ambitious inter-minglings and challenging hybrid forms that partake in both realms without being mindless middle-brow or what Adorno, in a letter to Walter Benjamin of March 18 1936, described as the middle term between Schönberg and the American film (Adorno et al. 1980: 123). Sometimes this

recent dissolution of boundaries is attributed to postmodernism, but our post-postmodern understanding of modernism itself, especially in its geographic expansion toward the globe, shows that such hybridities were already being explored in the earlier 20th century. In the European context, Kracauer is a case in point.

## II

It is important to remember that terms like crowds and masses had already assumed negative connotations in Le Bon's late 19th-century crowd psychology and in the context of a post-Nietzschean German Kulturkritik (Le Bon 2001; Jonsson 2013). Kracauer's early thinking about culture emerged from that context. While he did not use terms like high or low culture, the radical separation of higher and lower spheres, with the human being occupying a middle realm in Kierkegaardian fashion between the divine and the natural, the spiritual and the material, was the starting point for Kracauer's analysis of contemporary culture. It explicitly grounds his reading of the detective novel, his first engagement with a mass cultural form (Kracauer 1971: 103–204). He reads the detective novel not sociologically or literarily, but rather philosophically as an allegory of a fallen world distorted by blind rationality. The detective novel thus confronts the civilized world with a *Zerrspiegel*, a distorting mirror, “from which a caricature of its own terror stares back at it” (Kracauer 1971: 105, my transl.). This reading of a popular cultural form was energized by a radical critique of modernity as loss of meaning and disintegration of community (Tönnies), rationalization and disenchantment (Weber), and transcendental homelessness (Lukács). Georg Simmel's critical observation that objective culture was overwhelming subjective culture in metropolitan modernity prompted Kracauer not to abandon the individual in favor of a false collectivity. Indeed, the place of human subjectivity was always of central concern to Kracauer. But then he went much further than Simmel, whose lectures he had attended in Berlin. He fully recognized the structural transformation of individuality itself, brilliantly captured in his novel *Ginster*, whose protagonist displays the metropolitan subject's deterritorialization and loss of inwardness, making him a precursor to Ulrich in Musil's *Man Without Qualities*. In *The Detective Novel*, the lamented loss of meaning is juxtaposed to the hope that the distorted image in the mirror might raise the reader's consciousness about a distorted world and thus lead to action and social change—a structure of knowledge production that we find again later in a different inflection in Kracauer's Marxist analysis of the mass ornament and in his understanding of photography and film. Alienation in modernity—this was his core modernist belief—must be countered by estrangement in strategies of visual or verbal representation. Only the distortion of a distorted world that is no longer accepted as second nature can make it recognizable as distorted and lead to action. If this strategy is to have broad social effect, it implies that the antidote to mass culture must be found in mass culture itself (Hansen 2012: 8).

While strategies of distortion and estrangement were widespread in left cultural thought and practice in the 1920s, in Kracauer it was politically never purely Brechtian. The dimension of romantic anti-capitalism and *Lebensphilosophie*, tied up with a lapsarian philosophy of modernity and a residual secularized Jewish messianism, resonates through all of Kracauer's work, not just his early pre-Marxist writings. He never fully abandoned the existentialist topographical metaphor of higher and lower spheres. Traditional German high culture with its celebration of *Geist*, however, was subjected to a withering critique. Low, on the other hand, was meant to open a new and different venue to an alternative culture that would overcome the reciprocal, ultimately class-bound limitations of high vs. low. Kracauer thus turned his attention to forms of life and culture which the German conservatives despised or feared as contaminating authentic culture, early film being paramount among them. As

he put it in the “Marseille Notebooks” written in 1940/41, when he was in mortal danger of being handed over by Vichy to the Nazis:

It [Film] does not aim upward, toward intention, but pushes toward the bottom, to gather and carry along even the dregs. It is interested in refuse, in what is just there—both in and outside the human being. The face counts for nothing in film unless it includes the *death's head* beneath. ‘Danse macabre.’ To which end? That remains to be seen.

(Kracauer 2005: 531, trsl. by Hansen 2012: 259)

Against the anthropocentric obsession with physiognomy and the human face in the years following the mass slaughter and mutilations of World War I, Kracauer, like Benjamin, is mindful not just of mortality, but of all that is outside of the human. Especially the world of things can be revealed in its stubborn reality in film in ways only available to this new medium. As a matter of fact, physiognomy is no longer even limited to the human face, when Kracauer writes that “the world itself has taken on a ‘photographic face’” (Kracauer 1995: 59).

### III

Kracauer articulated his position on mass culture in famous essays from 1926 to 1927: “The Cult of Distraction,” “Photography,” “The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies,” and “The Mass Ornament” (Kracauer 1995). Before engaging his thinking about these mass cultural phenomena, we need to sketch whom Kracauer had in mind when he spoke of the culture of the masses. Key here is his sociological study entitled “Die Angestellten,” hitting the pages of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* less than two months after the October 1929 crash before being published as a book (Kracauer 1971: 205–304; in trsl. Kracauer 1998). In its literary montage of interview, reportage, distanced observation, irony, and narrative construction, this work still stands as one of the most incisive analyses of the rise of white-collar employees in the Weimar Republic. Kracauer sees mass man neither as proletarian working class nor as completely unmoored from class, as Arendt did later in her analysis of totalitarianism. Instead, he sees white collar as a new social stratum wedged between the working class and the bourgeoisie, proletarianized by the economic crisis of the late 1920, but holding on to the pretense of higher cultural standing which then could become captive to Nazi nationalist and racist propaganda, as the economic crisis and mass unemployment deepened. As a highly literary text—some compared it to a novel—it occupies a place beyond new-matter-of-fact journalistic reportage and Soviet style operative writing both of which Kracauer criticized in his reviews of the late 1920s. Neither Hans Fallada, the popular new-objectivity novelist, nor Sergei Tretyakov, the Soviet avant-gardist influential with the radical Weimar left, provided a model for his writing. Kracauer’s text mixes a dramatizing present tense that suggests immediacy and immersion of the narrator in his subject with the past tense of distanced observation. It offers fragments of interviews, clinical dissection of petit-bourgeois ideology, and ironic if not satirical commentary. His position vis-à-vis his material was that of distanced but engaged observer, not that of revolutionary operative participant, and he marked his distance from reportage in the first segment entitled “Unknown Territory”:

Writers scarcely know any higher ambition than to report; the reproduction of observed reality is the order of the day. A hunger for directness that is undoubtedly a consequence of the malnutrition caused by German idealism. Reportage, as the self-declaration of concrete existence, is counterposed to the abstractness of idealist thought. [...] But existence is not captured by being at best duplicated

in reportage [...] A hundred reports from a factory do not add up to the reality of the factory, but remain for all eternity a hundred views of the factory. Reality is a construction. Certainly life must be observed for it to appear. Yet it is by no means contained in the more or less random observational results of reportage; rather it is to be found solely in the mosaic that is assembled from single observations on the basis of comprehension of their meaning. Reportage photographs life; such a mosaic would be its image.

(Kracauer 1998: 32)

Mosaic instead of photography then as method to create an appropriate image of reality. Mosaic as an image that captures life beyond the static indexicality of the photograph. This takes up his critique of photography, as articulated in the famous essay of 1927, but it also points to that which goes beyond photography and *neusachlich* reportage: the mosaic as an inevitably open-ended construction subject to temporality. The image of reality emerging from a mosaic is neither close to photomontage nor to avant-garde abstract film of the 1920s since it contains a strong narrative dimension rather than just spatial juxtaposition or rhythmic movement. Film at its best, however, transforms the static image, even the mosaic, into a world in motion in which perspectives constantly change, thus allowing the spectator reorientation in the world in its dialectic of immersion and distancing. Kracauer's ultimate point, however, is not distanced analysis of white-collar labor but political intervention in a moment of extreme crisis after the 1929 crash. The last lines read: "What matters is not that institutions are changed, what matters is that human individuals change institutions" (Kracauer 1998: 106). Institutional change comes not from abstract demands, but only after individual human beings engage in changing institutions. All his writing aims at such change and film, and photography, are to play a key role. Film especially is able to capture human beings "with skin and hair" in totally embodied fashion (Kracauer 2005: 559). This was also the goal of his feuilleton pieces as they created an image of white-collar metropolitan life deploying filmic strategies of narration and text manipulation like close up, slow motion, direct dialogue, panoramic shots, and narrative montage.

"The Cult of Distraction," written a few years before *The Salaried Masses*, did not limit the urban mass to white-collar employees but offered a broader notion of the mass as experienced in the metropolis. As his subject in that essay was the audience of the big film palaces of 1920s Berlin, he argued that even the educated classes

are being absorbed by the masses, a process that creates the *homogeneous cosmopolitan audience* in which everyone has the *same* responses, from the bank director to the sales clerk, from the diva to the stenographer.

(Kracauer 1995: 325)

The suggestion of responses transcending class and gender is questionable. He himself argues more subtly about gender, film, and working women in "Mädchen im Beruf" (Kracauer 1990: vol. 3: 60–66). But he is right to see metropolitan Berlin as the center for the emergence of such a mass audience:

It cannot be overlooked that there are *four million* people in Berlin. The sheer necessity of their circulation transforms the life of the street into the ineluctable street of life, giving rise to configurations that invade even domestic space. The more people perceive themselves as a mass, however, the sooner the masses will also develop productive powers in the spiritual and cultural domain that are worth financing.

(Kracauer 1995: 325)

Clearly, the appended reference to financing must be read here as referring to the film industry and might thus be a sly ironic damper on what preceded. Yet it is here that Kracauer's hope for real social change appears. Film becomes an agent in the critical self-perception of the masses. It is the medium that represents the "ineluctable street of life" in moving images. Indeed, central to Kracauer's emerging understanding of film were the street films of early cinema and of the Weimar Republic, films such as Karl Grune's *Die Strasse*. Time and again, Kracauer comes back to the centrality of the metropolitan street as public space of experience both in his critical and his literary writings. Similar to Kafka's notion of *Verkehr*, a German word that refers to traffic as well as to sexual intercourse, Kracauer's urban imaginary sees the street as a site of circulation, sexual desire, and unfulfilled longings. Street life is the street of life is the "flow of life" is the cinema. Metropolitan environment, human imaginaries, and the new medium are umbilically linked with each other. The only other space that comes close to the street in his definition of film is the *Jahrmarkt*, the popular fair prominent in early film, equally contingent as the street, full of motion, itself a space of urban leisure activities, and a site of grotesque performances and freak shows. It is part of the *Abhub*, the refuse of contemporary city life to which Kracauer's eyes are invariably drawn.

#### IV

The essays on the movie palaces and distraction, on film and photography, and on film experience and spectatorship have mainly been the subject of film and media theory. A broader picture emerges if we read them together with all the other essays, reviews, metropolitan miniatures and other short prose pieces written for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in the late 1920s and early 1930s (Kracauer 1990). His feuilleton production of course ceased during the exile years in Paris when he no longer had access to the German press; but the essays and reviews from the 1920s still resonate strongly with the 1940/41 "*Marseiller Entwurf*" for his later film theory. His early pre-Marxist cultural vision of modernity as catastrophe came close to reality again with the outbreak of World War II and the Nazi occupation of France which now threatened his own life. The "Marseille Notebooks" were written in the desperate months in Marseille just before his and his wife's escape from Nazi occupied France to the United States.

Such a synthetic reading of the film essays with his other feuilleton output and even the later "Marseille Notebooks" makes it clear that all of his critical writing for the feuilleton and its mainly middle class readers is energized by the desire to construct a broad provisional mosaic of cultural phenomena that would stimulate change in the public sphere. The function of his journalism was, as he put it in an essay of 1931 "Über den Schriftsteller," "to intervene and bring change to current affairs" (Kracauer 1990, vol. 2: 344). Clearly, this desire for intervention addresses change in modes of thinking and perceiving the world, change in human consciousness as a prerequisite for action. In an essay on travel literature of 1932, he advocated journeys of exploration into an "unknown terrain," title of the first fragment of *The Salaried Masses*, sociological expeditions into the urban present in the interest of social enlightenment (Kracauer 1990, vol. 3: 88–89). In this spirit, he reviewed German, American, French, and Russian novels by authors such as Julien Green, Céline, Sinclair Lewis, Ehrenburg, Scholochov, Heinrich Mann, Döblin, and of course Kafka. He wrote about Scheler, Husserl, Benjamin, and Jünger, discussed the crises of narrative and subjectivity, problematized bestsellers and the bourgeois fashion for biographies, criticized the reportage obsessions of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, commented on modernist architecture and urban planning, and analyzed the intellectual situation of the writer in capitalist society as compared with the situation in the Soviet Union. Several reviews of Sergei Tretyakov betray

both Kracauer's fascination with the Soviet author and his critical distance from Brecht and Benjamin's full embrace of Tretyakov's operative writing (Kracauer 1990, vol. 2: 308–311 and vol. 3: 26–29). A simultaneous critique of Döblin, on the other hand, showed him close to Brecht and Benjamin's attacks on the writer of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* as bourgeois intellectual (Kracauer 1990, vol. 2: 301–308). At the same time, he took issue with Brecht's essay "Der Dreigroschenprozess," sharply criticizing it for "inverted idealism" (Kracauer 1990, vol. 3: 33–39). It all betrayed his fiercely guarded intellectual independence that put critical consciousness of real conditions above any fixed political position, be it liberal or communist.

A key factor in Kracauer's thinking about the topography of culture was the urban terrain itself, its streets and public squares, its shop windows and electric advertising, its chaos of moving people and traffic. A mode of distanced observation is in play as cultural and political differences between France and Germany crystallize around comparisons between Paris and Berlin. Kracauer sees Berlin, similar to the Benjamin of the surrealism essay, as the frontier of coming "struggles in which the human future is at stake" (Kracauer 1990, vol. 2: 375). Paris, by contrast, is not an alternative to modernity, but a city that still preserves residues of a fast fading earlier time of civility, memory, and aesthetic surplus. Berlin, not Paris "represented the inescapable horizon within which the contradictions of modernity demanded to be engaged" (Hansen 2012: 69). Poetic street miniatures such as "Schreie auf der Strasse," "Das Quadrat," "Erinnerung an eine Pariser Strasse," or "Die Unterführung" articulate a haunting experience of urban terror emanating from architectural space itself which is imbued with sexual desire, class distinction, and an insidious overpowering rationality (all in Kracauer 1990). In a completely different vein of writing, there is the mode of irony and whimsy in those wonderful metropolitan miniatures, in which he writes about modern objects like umbrellas, suspenders, and typewriters as if they were human and had a social biography, a kind of vision enabled by the stop-motion animation technique of the cinema of attractions and its obsession with the social life of objects. In all of these texts written in different narrative and descriptive modes, he has an eye for moments of strangeness, both *Entfremdung* and *Verfremdung*, for distortion, capricious humor, and the vicissitudes of a subjectivity under siege. The basic gist of this journalistic endeavor, however, is one of enlightenment, awakening his readers from metropolitan dreamworlds, making them see the world anew. It is remarkable to note how close Kracauer is to the notion of urban dreamworlds, first developed by Benjamin in the 1920s under the influence of Aragon's surrealism. In the 1931 miniature "Aus dem Fenster gesehen," Kracauer states programmatically: "The knowledge of cities depends on deciphering its dream-like articulated images" (my trsl., Kracauer 1990, vol. 2: 401). Kracauer deciphers uncanny images of urban space, but Benjamin, in *One Way Street* focuses on script in the city, taking print advertising, announcements, names of stores and buildings as stimulus for his reflective wanderings up the one-way street. Quite distinct from Kracauer, he wrote "as if the world were script," as Ernst Bloch had it in a comment on this work (Bloch 1968: 17). And yet deciphering that which could not be simply read or seen due to its compromised or even hidden visibility is what they had in common. Also, common to both was the idea that deciphering would lead to a political awakening. Reading spatial images such as mass ornaments as embodying the dreams of society required an awakening to that other, still undetermined reason which would free the mass ornament from its mute abstractions and keep it from relapsing into mythology (Kracauer 1995: 84). Freud's work on dreams, on mass psychology and the pathologies of everyday life hovers in the background of Kracauer's detective penetration of the unconscious surfaces of the metropolis. Here is that explicit call for another expansive form of reason which also lies hidden at the bottom of Horkheimer/Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Of course, the entanglement between enlightenment and myth has become almost total in Horkheimer and Adorno's work. The

difference lies in the fact that in the late 1920s, the political situation still seemed to harbor possibilities that had been closed down when Horkheimer and Adorno wrote their book in Californian exile. To Kracauer in the late 1920s, an enlightenment beyond myth still seemed possible based on self-reflexivity and grounded in strategies of modernist art and critical thought, strategies Kracauer saw potentially at work in the new media of photography and film, i.e., in mass culture itself. Already by the mid-1930s, however, the mass ornament was no longer mute, but loud and propagandistic in the service of Nazi mass organization and myth-making. Kracauer already lived in exile in Paris, when Riefenstahl gave it visual perfection in *Triumph of the Will*.

## V

The unresolved dialectic between a utopian hope for mass culture and its dimming prospects can already be seen in the constellation between the photography essay and the essay on the mass ornament, both of them published in the *FZ* in 1927. Kracauer never saw photography simply superseded by film as media historians might suggest. Structurally, he insisted, film emerges from photography set in motion. In light of his conviction that in order to understand film the critic has to go back to the “childhood” (Kracauer 2005: 539) of the medium, it is not surprising that his perhaps most salient essay on the nature of the new visual media is the essay on photography, an essay in which film only emerges at the very end as a game changer. This essay contains in purest form Kracauer’s argument about the radical potential of the visual media. No surprise that its arguments were reprised in the later *Theory of Film*. Many have read the essay as positing an anti-technological critique of the photograph and, by contrast, a celebration of the image preserved in human memory. True enough, if one focuses on the first five chapters of the essay and ignores the radical turn in the latter part, Kracauer seems to inscribe himself in an anti-photography tradition that reaches back to Proust, Rilke, and Baudelaire. But this is where Kracauer’s dialectical thinking emerges at its best. The critique of modern illustrated magazines, in which “the blizzard of photographs betrays an indifference toward what the things mean” acknowledges that “the flood of photos sweeps away the dams of memory” (Kracauer 1995: 58). Key here is Kracauer’s critique of mere indexicality as a limiting condition of photography: “The resemblance between the image and the object effaces the contours of the object’s ‘history’” (Kracauer 1995: 58). Effacing history and temporality, in turn, means effacing mortality: “That the world devours them [snapshots, AH] is a sign of the *fear of death*. What the photographs by their sheer accumulation attempt to banish is the recollection of death, which is part and parcel of every memory image” (Kracauer 1995: 59). Less than ten years after the end of the Great War, such sentences speak of a society bent on forgetting. Kracauer, however, is not interested in moralizing. He is interested in the structure of the photographic image. Enter his philosophy of history: “No different from earlier modes of representation, photography, too, is assigned to a particular developmental stage of practical and material life. It is a secretion of the capitalist mode of production” (Kracauer 1995: 59). Historians of technology might quibble with this definition. But in the context of his critique of illustrated papers and the commercial press in the Weimar Republic, it makes perfect sense. Politically, then, to paraphrase the final argument from the “Mass Ornament” essay, the process leads directly through the center of photography, not away from it. Photography, i.e., mass culture itself, contains the seed of its transcendence: “The turn to photography is the *go-for-broke game* of history” (Kracauer 1995: 61). This stunning claim ends Chapter 7 of the essay. What follows as Chapter 8 lays out in partly cryptic language how this go-for-broke game might succeed. The basic idea seems simple enough if one reads “nature” as a negative term referring to the second

nature of habit and its understanding of reality. Photography enables social self-reflexivity on a large scale:

A consciousness caught up in nature is unable to see its own material base. It is the task of photography to disclose this previously unexamined *foundation of nature*. For the first time in history, photography brings to light the entire natural cocoon; for the first time, the inert world presents itself in its independence from human beings. Photography shows cities in aerial shots, brings crockets and figures down from the Gothic cathedrals.

And then a seemingly totalizing claim emerges from his lapsarian critique of modernity, but now turned in a different direction:

All spatial configurations are incorporated into the central archive in unusual combinations which distance them from human proximity. [...] The photographic archive assembles in effigy the last elements of a nature alienated from meaning.  
(Kracauer 1995: 62)

From this central archive, in which a mute and base nature is warehoused, Kracauer expects a confrontation of consciousness with reality. It is the historical process itself that plays this go-for-broke game. Only once nature has been fragmented into zillions of photographic configurations will human consciousness have the ability “to establish the provisional status of all given configurations and perhaps even to awaken an inkling of the right order of the inventory of nature” (Kracauer 1995: 62). Perhaps the Jewish notion of the shattering of the vessels that could not hold the light of God lurks behind this image of a fragmentation to be overcome, of the shards or fragments of a disenchanted meaningless world to be reassembled. The first step toward that job—and here comes another surprising move—has been taken by Franz Kafka, in whose works “a liberated consciousness absolves itself of this responsibility by destroying natural reality and scrambling the fragments.” Kafka’s novels, which Kracauer was one of the first to review in the *FZ*, do indeed “suspend every habitual relationship among the elements of nature” (Kracauer 1995: 62). The shift to Kafka is significant in that Kracauer finds the model for his go-for-broke game in the realm of radical literary modernism. Just as any discussion of mass culture cannot be uncoupled from a social and political understanding of the masses, it cannot be uncoupled from its relationship to modernism as the major formation of high culture in the twentieth century. Actually Kracauer was the first, before Benjamin and Adorno, to notice Kafka’s affinity to the visual. In his review of Kafka’s first novel *Amerika* he cites a passage about a New York street in motion that points to Kafka’s cinematic style of writing (Kracauer 1990, vol. 2: 186). Kracauer’s own literary street miniatures betray their intense negotiation with photography and film (Huyssen 2015: 118–154). If Kafka appears at the end of the essay on photography, Proust is conjured up at the beginning where Kracauer discusses two photographs, one of the film diva, the other one of the grandmother. The latter clearly resonates with a famous scene in Proust’s *The Guermantes Way* where the narrator sees the grandmother as if through the camera lens feeling alienated from her. These framing references to major literary modernists in the essay on photography suggest that literature itself can “awaken an inkling of the right order of the inventory of nature” by scrambling the fragments.

Right after mentioning Kafka’s anticipatory role, he shifts back to mass culture: “The capacity to stir up the elements of nature is one of the possibilities of film.” Film of course could reach mass audiences whereas Kafka’s novels did not find many readers at the time. So how does film perform the work Kafka, himself deeply affected by photography and film, had



initiated in literature? Ultimately, it does so by using modernist and avant-gardist strategies of distorting and estranging reality which as a result assumes a dreamlike quality:

If the disarray of the illustrated newspapers is simply confusion, the game that film plays with the pieces of disjointed nature is reminiscent of *dreams* in which the fragments of daily life become jumbled.

(Kracauer 1995: 63)

What films might Kracauer have had in mind beyond those that made up the very early cinema of attractions? Film historians have pointed to the films of René Clair, Sergei Eisenstein, Jean Vigo, Dziga Vertov, and Luis Buñuel, films now considered as canonical works of modernism, not mass culture. But this shows precisely that the boundaries between high and low, avant-garde and mass culture, were much more porous already in the 1920s than post-World War II historians of modernism or film theorists ever dreamt. Miriam Hansen has suggested the term vernacular modernism to capture this porousness and interpenetration in German, Soviet, and American cinema's project of a mass production of the senses (Hansen 1999). At the same time, we must also remember that Kracauer was very critical of certain other experimental films of an allegedly absolute cinema that to him celebrated experiment for experiment's sake, losing a grounding relationship to reality and to narrative, such as the films by Richter, Eggeing, and Ruttmann (Kracauer 2005: 721–737).

It may be hard today to share Kracauer's theologically tinged secular belief in the emancipatory dimension of modernist strategies in mass culture, but such hopes were widespread in the 1920s, when, in the context of massive social transformations, both modernism and metropolitan mass culture promised new departures before they too came to be politically exploited, domesticated, and canonized.

## VI

Central to Kracauer's dialectical thinking about the masses is the essay "The Mass Ornament." In its often abstract and elliptical theorizing about reason, nature, and abstraction, and with its broad historico-philosophical claims, the essay speaks the language of another time. And yet, once deciphered and historicized, it may be closer to our own cultural dilemmas of the digital age than Lukács and Adorno's theories of totalizing reification, or Benjamin's about politicizing the aesthetic. Kracauer insists on the ambivalence of the social transformation to a mass society and consumer culture. As critical consciousness of material conditions and a heightened self-reflexivity were key demands of Kracauer's intellectual project, he had to address the question whether and how the metropolitan masses might gain such self-reflexivity and become critically conscious of themselves as mass. The "go-for-broke game of history" and the positing of a "homogeneous cosmopolitan audience" defined the arena where such a process could be nurtured. The impetus, at any rate, had to come from the masses of the republic, not the "Volk," nor the proletariat. Celebrating the individual flaneur's merging with the masses in Baudelairean fashion clearly would not achieve a self-consciousness of the mass. Nor would the mass audience of the big Berlin film palaces gain such consciousness automatically. Kracauer sees clearly how spectators got caught in the dream machine of capitalist film production and in the new form of seductive film exhibition he described as that of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of effects in the "Cult of Distraction." In order to find an answer Kracauer turns neither to the cinema, nor to the metropolitan street. He focuses instead on a neglected surface phenomenon of metropolitan culture—the assembly of a mass of spectators in the tiers of sports stadiums watching geometrically organized ornamental clusters of human bodies performing gymnastics or rhythmic patterns on the field such as we still see them

at the Olympic games or the American super bowl. On a smaller scale, he discusses the mass ornament in cabaret and revue performances as they have survived to this day with the performances of the Rockettes in New York's Radio City Music Hall. With his focus on the Tiller Girls, an English dance troupe that had become famous in America, Kracauer frames his argument with the mid-1920s obsessions with Americanism. When he describes their precisely patterned movements, comparing their synchronized legs to the workers' hands on the assembly line, he draws on the contemporary technology cult in both its utopian and dystopian versions. Key to both examples of the mass ornament, the stadium and the revue, is the mechanization of the human body—deindividualized, fragmented, desexed, and part of a calculated machinery of geometric spectacle. To be sure, the stage of a dance revue is not the same as the factory floor, but it is precisely the comparison of leisure performance and Taylorized production, chorus line and assembly line, that enables Kracauer to develop his dialectical argument about the ambivalence of the mass ornament which matches his analyses of the ambivalences of film and photography. Underneath this description of Taylorized reification, there lies a reassertion of the human and of human pleasure.

Interpreting such a surface phenomenon present in metropolitan culture also required a new method of reading. Choosing surface and externality rather than depth and interiority was a calculated provocation to German *Geist* and its representatives who denounced the superficiality of modern culture. Yet surfing the surface was not sufficient to Kracauer:

The position that an epoch occupies in the historical process can be determined more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface-level expressions than from that epoch's judgments about itself. [...] The surface-level expressions, however, by virtue of their unconscious nature, provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things.

(Kracauer 1995: 75)

Just as the *Raumbilder* of metropolitan space can only be deciphered as one breaks through their unconscious nature grounded in habitual perception, the mass ornament, too, must be *durchdrungen*, penetrated by reason in order to reveal its true nature. The challenge is this: "Although the masses give rise to the ornament, they are not involved in thinking it through" (Kracauer 1995: 77). As he then thinks it through by emphasizing its still deficient *ratio*, present in its lines and circles, waves and spirals, all elements of a Euclidean geometry, he concludes: "However, the *Ratio* of the capitalist economic system is not reason itself, but a murky reason. Once past a certain point, it abandons the truth in which it participates. *It does not encompass man*" (Kracauer 1995: 81). His emphasis on man points to a humanism that still resonates with *Lebensphilosophie* and Simmel, but is now inspired by the early humanist writings of Karl Marx. Kracauer's philosophy of history comes to bear as he claims, in line with a Weberian argument about the inevitable disenchantments of modernity, that "the *capitalist epoch* is a stage in the process of demystification" (Kracauer 1995: 80). The mass ornament then not only appears as part of this insidious demystification process, but its very structure "reflects that of the entire contemporary situation" (Kracauer 1995: 78). This may sound totalizing, but it does not take away from the ambivalence of the mass ornament which mirrors that of an enlightened reason captive to capitalist instrumentalization. In its pure capitalist form, the mass ornament, as part of the then fashionable *Körperkultur* which Kracauer subjects to a withering critique, reveals itself as "a *mythological cult* that is masquerading in the garb of abstraction" (Kracauer 1995: 83). Rather than advocating a return to older cultural forms and genres, however, Kracauer argues for a way forward, resulting in the provocative claim that capitalism "rationalizes not too much but *rather too little*" (Kracauer 1995: 81)—a claim that seems perversely over the top if compared with other

radical critiques of capitalist modernity at the time. It seems we have here yet another go-for-broke game of history. Just as he saw photography as a secretion of the capitalist production process, so, it seems, is the mass ornament in the realm of aesthetic consumption. But under present conditions, he argues, it remains mute. He concludes rather abstractly: "The process leads directly through the center of the mass ornament, not away from it" (Kracauer 1995: 86). Thus, he begs the question what an alternative form of rationalization might be or who would implement it. Leaving out this all important answer inscribes this text in a tradition of utopian thought about an alternative reason. What that reason might be is only hinted at in an earlier passage in the essay:

*Reason* does not operate in the circle of natural life. Its concern is to introduce truth into the world. Its realm has already been intimated in genuine *fairy tales*, which are not stories about miracles but rather announcements of the miraculous advent of justice.

(Kracauer 1995: 80)

Justice rather than redemption—this is closer to the secular Blochian idea of *Vorschein* (anticipation) than to Benjamin's messianic intervention. The reference to fairy tales in this essay as well as in the epigraph of the photography essay also illuminates Kracauer's ambivalence in 1927, years before the mass ornament became a tool in the machinery of Nazi propaganda.

## VII

Engaged ambivalence pervaded Kracauer's analysis of film from the start. If film was the key new medium that both attracted and represented the masses, creating new ways of being in the world, then the rise of film contained the possibility to challenge the traditional hierarchy of high and low, providing a path toward genuine cultural democratization. Indeed, it was the rise of film as modern vernacular in the public sphere that made the class-bound hierarchies of high and low seem exhausted, if not obsolete. Sure, you had the rearguard attempt to elevate film (and photography, for that matter) to the level of art, thus shoring up the high/low divide, an argument Kracauer always rejected as forcefully as Benjamin did. On the other hand, major literary and visual artists at the time incorporated the new media into their work, thus fundamentally changing literature and painting itself in a reciprocal interweaving of the verbal with the visual, the technological with the organic. Kracauer's privileging of modernist techniques in film shows that within modern culture, the two realms were already reciprocally linked with each other. It was that interpenetration of high and low, elite art and mass culture, that brought a new form of the public sphere into being, reflecting the experience of mass existence in the metropolis.

Recent work on Kracauer's American writings on film has emphasized how the political hopes he placed in the new media during the late 1920s faded and were transformed in the post-World War II years in New York. After Auschwitz and World War II, the time for another go-for-broke-game-of-history was used up. With his work on Nazi propaganda films, on German film from Caligari to Hitler, and on film theory, there is also a narrowing of mass cultural forms to film alone in Kracauer's writing. The earlier assessment of the dialectics of the mass ornament now reappears in weakened form in a reading of film as creating a new kind of spectatorship, described with the term "redemption of physical reality," subtitle of the *Theory of Film*. Both Miriam Hansen and Johannes von Moltke argue correctly that this is not, as so often claimed, a celebration of naïve realism or, worse, political defeatism (Hansen 2012; von Moltke 2016). Instead, film precisely as a mediating

mode of representation is held to counter that loss of experience in modernity lamented by early Kracauer and later by Benjamin. The notion that modernity is characterized by abstraction, alienation, and fragmentation after all was never abandoned. Thus Hansen argues that rather than offering a theory of film in general, Kracauer gives us “a theory of a particular type of film experience, and of cinema as the aesthetic matrix of a particular historical experience” (Kracauer 1997, X). For both Hansen and von Moltke, it is the historical experience of Nazi terror and of totalitarianism that shaped Kracauer’s notion of spectatorship in *Theory of Film*.

Von Moltke also shows how Kracauer had to confront yet another version of the high/low debate that all his work of the 1920s had aimed to undercut. Here in New York it was Clement Greenberg, Dwight Macdonald and other New York intellectuals (with Robert Warshaw as only exception) who raged against kitsch, mid-brow, and mid-cult, condemning popular culture in ways we usually associate with the Eurocentrism of Adorno. Against this American trend of the 1940s and 1950s, Kracauer posited his validation of film experience and spectatorship that still held a promise of enlightened consciousness enabled by the medium.

## VIII

The term mass culture sounds slightly quaint today, conjuring up the interwar period in Europe with its hope for mass democracy as well as the post-World War II period in the United States and in Europe with its predominantly negative notion of the masses in the context of totalitarianism theory. We no longer use terms like “the masses” or “mass culture” at a time when culture and society have become ever more fragmented in a post-Fordist economy with hundreds of TV channels and social media laid on top of the digitalization of many of the traditional segments of the culture industry: publishing, print journalism, music, image worlds. Inundated as we are 24/7 with information, communication, and social media, it no longer makes sense to entertain a hierarchy of high and low culture, which Kracauer already had dismantled *de facto* in his attack on traditional bourgeois understandings of high. By validating complex representational strategies in film, he generated a kind of leveling of cultural topography without denying quality differences among cultural products. That move makes his thinking about topographies of culture pertinent for our time. Such quality differences in Kracauer were never only aesthetic; they pertained centrally to how aesthetic strategies articulated social and political realities. He advocated a realism within modernism (Hansen 2012), and film, that he hoped might be its main agent. The topography of culture became horizontal with Kracauer, not with Benjamin who linked film single-mindedly to the proletarian masses, nor with Adorno who insisted on the vertical division between culture industry and modernism, nor with the New York intellectuals. At the same time, the Kierkegaardian upper and lower spheres with the human being in the middle were never abandoned in Kracauer’s language. The topographical metaphor of high and low runs through many of his feuilleton essays throughout the years. It even colors the concluding passage in his 1960 Preface to his *Theory of Film* where he shares a boyhood reminiscence of his first film:

What thrilled me so deeply was an ordinary suburban street, filled with lights and shadows which transfigured it. Several trees stood about, and there was in the foreground a puddle reflecting invisible house façades and a piece of the sky. Then a breeze moved the shadows, and the façades with the sky below began to waver. The trembling upper world in the dirty puddle—this image has never left me.

(Kracauer 1997: LI)

The higher sphere mirrored and transformed in the lower—what could be a better image for Kracauer’s upending of the dogmatic vertical structure of high and low culture? It captures in a topographical image how the high/low divide is both obsolete and up to date. The name Kracauer gave to this experience which was to become his first literary project was “Film as the Discoverer of the Marvels of Everyday Life.” It is up for debate if there are marvels to discover in our negotiations with digital media and what realism could mean in the world of the virtual that is fast becoming second nature. Film as providing a global archive that redeems reality in its multiple temporal and spatial instantiations may be more pertinent than ever at a time when fragmentation and alienation have overtaken the media world in simulacral ways that threaten experience in qualitatively and quantitatively entirely new forms.

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# HISTORY AND TRANSCENDENCE IN ADORNO'S IDEA OF TRUTH

*Lambert Zuidervaat*

*It can no longer be maintained that the immutable is truth and ... the transient is illusion [Schein].*  
—Theodor W. Adorno (ND 361/355)

Theodor W. Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* appeared in 1966, when he was at the height of his intellectual presence as a professor, author, cultural critic, and administrator. A second edition was published one year later. Along with Adorno's unfinished *Aesthetic Theory*, which appeared one year after his death in 1969, *Negative Dialectics* marks the brilliant culmination to his philosophical work. It also gives an uncompromising summation of Critical Theory in its first generation. As Adorno states upfront, he wants to "lay his cards on the table" (ND xix/9), and he stands ready for the attacks this book will invite in both the west and the east ["hüben und drüben" (ND xxi/11)—a Cold War phrase used to indicate both sides of the "Iron Curtain"]. Aside from some of Adorno's students and close colleagues, however, few critics at the time engaged thoroughly enough with his *Hauptwerk* to figure out exactly why and how to attack it. Serious reception in the wider philosophical world has experienced a fifty-year delay.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, *Negative Dialectics* provides a virtual compendium of everything Adorno has to offer contemporary philosophy and social critique. The long Introduction (ND 1–57/13–66), nearly a small book in itself, reveals the inner dynamics of what Adorno calls negative dialectics and positions it in the history of Western thought. Next, in Part One of the book (ND 59–131/67–136), Adorno explains how his negative-dialectical philosophy relates to existential ontology, launching an immanent critique of Heidegger's *Being and Time* that complements Adorno's more overtly polemical *The Jargon of Authenticity* (1964). Part Two, titled "Negative Dialectics: Concept and Categories" (ND 133–207/137–207), explicates the most important ideas and arguments of Adorno's philosophy, with an emphasis on questions of epistemology and social philosophy. There is no better statement of how Adorno both continues and challenges the legacies of Kant, Hegel, and Marx, with an eye to the problems posed by both existentialism and logical positivism.

Part Three, comprising nearly half the book (ND 209–408/209–400), makes good on the Introduction's claim that a comprehensive and socially critical philosophy needs to construct "thought models" in which theory and experience interact (ND 28–31/39–42).

The three models Adorno constructs seek to illuminate contested ideas by engaging critically with their most important philosophical articulations. In effect, each is a metacritique, reminiscent, in this regard, of *Hegel: Three Studies* (1963) and Adorno's earlier book on Husserl titled *Toward a Metacritique of Epistemology* (1956) (inaccurately translated as *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique*). The first model, "Freedom: On the Metacritique of Practical Reason," takes up central issues raised by Kant's moral philosophy. The second, "World Spirit and Natural History: An Excursus on Hegel" deals with questions concerning the ideas of progress and rationality in Hegel and Marx. The third model, which also concludes the book, offers twelve "Meditations on Metaphysics."

Given the ambitions and complexity of *Negative Dialectics*, there are many ways to enter it for the first time. Yet I think no one should exit it without grappling with these concluding meditations and especially with the idea of truth that they disclose.

### Truth and Metaphysics

Truth, Adorno writes, is "the highest" (*die oberste*) among metaphysical ideas (ND 401/394). His "Meditations on Metaphysics," where this description occurs, can be read as Adorno's attempt to articulate a defensible idea of truth, despite and amid the collapse of metaphysics (Wellmer 1998; Zuidervaat 2007: 48–76). Moreover, as Adorno wrote in a letter to Gershom Scholem dated March 14, 1967, "the wish to salvage metaphysics is in fact central to *Negative Dialectics*" (quoted in Gordon 2016: 159). This wish to rescue metaphysics is closely connected to Adorno's "inverse theology," which some have linked to his "allegiance" to Kierkegaard and "the philosophy of existence" (Gordon 2016: 160), and others have anchored in his Hegelian Marxist emphasis on "determinate negation" (Cook 2017). To the extent that the key to Adorno's negative dialectics lies in his "Meditations on Metaphysics," the attempt there to spell out what truth is and why truth matters is crucial for his contributions to contemporary philosophy.

Many readers of Adorno, attentive to his insisting in Part Two of *Negative Dialectics* on the preponderance or priority of the object (*Vorrang des Objekts*, ND 183–6/184–7), regard the mediation between subject and object as central to his negative-dialectical conception of truth. One sees this, for example, in Brian O'Connor's focus on "the priority of the object" and "the role of subjectivity" in Adorno's epistemology (O'Connor 2004: 45–98) and in Andrew Bowie's discussion of Adorno's critical appropriation of Kant and Hegel (Bowie 2013: 38–74). At strategic spots Bowie refers to Axel Honneth's critical retrieval of the notion of reification from the subject/object dialectic established by Georg Lukács and partially retained by Adorno (Honneth 2008). Honneth proposes to redescribe reification as a forgetting of the *intersubjective* recognition that ontogenetically and conceptually precedes object-oriented cognition—a redescription he derives, in part, from Adorno. Although Honneth does not spell out here the implications of an emphasis on intersubjective recognition for a conception of truth, it points to one in which subject/object mediation is secondary rather than primary. Honneth's own interpretation of *Negative Dialectics* (Honneth 2009) implies this shift in priority, it seems to me.

I have sympathies both with an emphasis on subject/object mediation in interpreting Adorno's approach to truth and with attempts to expand his approach to include intersubjective recognition. For example, I have portrayed Adorno's appeal to emphatic experience as a dialectical counterpart to Heidegger's emphasis on authenticity in *Being and Time*, arguing that both Adorno and Heidegger provide problematic accounts for what I call the authentication of truth (Zuidervaat 2007: 77–106). I have also examined selected passages from Part One in *Negative Dialectics*, where Adorno tries to extract a viable conception of propositional truth from Husserlian phenomenology and Heideggerian ontology (Zuidervaat 2018). I consider this extraction only partially successful because Adorno fails to

explain how predication contributes to knowledge, a failure that stems, ironically, from his giving insufficient priority to the object of cognition.

In the current essay, I want to explore how Adorno's inadequate account of propositional truth relates to his larger project in *Negative Dialectics*. I focus on passages from the concluding "Meditations on Metaphysics" (ND 361–408/354–400) where Adorno tries to rescue the idea of truth from the collapse of metaphysics. Of primary importance in Adorno's rescue effort is not the mediation between subject and object, but rather the polarity between history and transcendence. First, commenting on Meditations 1–4, I consider the issues raised by Adorno's insistence on the historical necessity of certain ideas and their demise. Next, reviewing portions of Meditations 6–9, I show how Adorno addresses these issues via a critical retrieval of Kant's transcendental ideas of immortality, freedom, and God's existence. Then, focusing on Meditations 11–12, I propose a social transformationalist interpretation of the idea of truth that, via this critical retrieval, Adorno tries to rescue from the collapse of metaphysics. I conclude by demonstrating an unavoidable tension between the idea Adorno has rescued and what a viable conception of propositional truth would require.

### Historical Necessity and Possibility

From the outset, in the Meditation titled "After Auschwitz" (ND 361–5/354–8), Adorno's meditations on metaphysics insist that philosophy needs a different conception (*Begriff*) of truth in order to be true to what life after Auschwitz demands. With this different conception, metaphysics might succeed by becoming materialist and by thinking against thought. Central to the change Adorno envisions lies the claim that truth, like other crucial metaphysical ideas, would not simply transcend what is transient. Rather, truth would also be temporal and historical through and through. On Adorno's conception, the historical character of truth has two dimensions. One is the necessity of historical development. The other is the historical possibility of transcendence. Let me discuss historical necessity first.

As is well known, Adorno is sharply critical of Hegelian speculations about the universal history of spirit, and he takes distance from Marxian constructions of a progressive dialectic between forces and relations of production. Yet he does not hesitate to claim that history, as it has unfolded, requires certain ideas and undermines others. In this sense, historical development necessarily makes certain ideas true and others false.

For example, when Adorno announces a new categorical imperative in the Meditation titled "Metaphysics and Culture" (ND 365–8/358–61), he suggests this imperative is imposed by what happened under Hitler's regime. He also says that the "course of history" compels metaphysical reflections to embrace, as the true basis of morality, the "unvarnished materialist motive" of corporeally abhorring the infliction of "unbearable physical pain" on any individual (ND 365/358). In at least one sense, then, he claims that his materialist turn is true insofar as it is historically required. This suggests that if, as Adorno says in the Introduction to *Negative Dialectics*, the need to let suffering speak is a condition of all truth (ND 17–18/29), then the historical conditions under which suffering occurs and is voiced govern the truth of such expression. Moreover, this historical necessity, as Adorno recognizes, governs the truth of his own philosophy.

Adorno's insistence on historical necessity exposes his truth conception to two worries. One is that his conception—indeed, his entire philosophy—relies so heavily on a historical metanarrative—i.e., the dialectic of enlightenment—that the truth of particular assertions and claims cannot be tested. Instead, every particular assertion or claim is so thoroughly embedded in the historical metanarrative that the only way to either confirm or challenge it would be to accept or reject Adorno's entire philosophy of history. The other worry is that, despite Adorno's repeated warnings against collapsing validity and genesis—against judging



the validity of an idea solely on the basis of how and where it originated—he may have turned historical forces (origins) into guarantees for the truth (validity) of his own ideas. Here the worry is that Adorno regards his philosophical responses to his historical context as true just by virtue of being products of that context—and, more generally, that he regards the truth of all philosophical ideas as similarly tied to the historical contexts in which they arise. The first worry pertains to a kind of historical absolutism and the second to a kind of historical relativism. I shall return to these worries in a moment.

The dialectical counterpart to historical necessity in Adorno's conception of truth lies in the possibility of transcendence. He introduces this possibility in the very next Meditation, titled "Dying Today" (ND 368–73/361–6). The issue here is whether contemporary experience provides any basis for hope in life after death of the sort seemingly attached to traditional metaphysical ideas about the immortality of the soul. Although Adorno thinks capitalist society after Auschwitz severely impedes the requisite metaphysical experience, he also asserts it is philosophically impossible to regard death as "simply and purely ultimate [*das schlechthin Letzte*]." The reason he gives for this impossibility is that to regard death as absolute would undermine any and every truth claim. Amid truth's temporality, truth must endure, he says; if truth did not endure, its final trace would be swallowed up in the victory of death (ND 371/364). Here Adorno employs the same verb—*verschlengen*—used by Martin Luther to translate two biblical passages about death being "swallowed up": swallowed up by "the Lord of hosts" in Isaiah 25:7, and swallowed up "in victory" in I Corinthians 15:54. I do not believe Adorno's usage is a coincidence: the text in I Corinthians punctuates a passage about the perishable body's putting on immortality—the body, not the soul—and this resonates with Adorno's subsequent claim that "hope means corporeal resurrection," something he says Christian dogmatic theology understood better than speculative metaphysics did (ND 401/393).

Similarly, in the following Meditation, titled "Happiness and Waiting in Vain" (ND 373–5/366–8), Adorno suggests that the anticipation of unique and irreplaceable happiness (*Glück*), even while one waits in vain for the happiness promised, is intrinsic to the experience of truth. Truth has to do with the possibility that there is something more to life than the death that surrounds us. Just as every trace of truth would vanish if death were absolute, so anything we could experience "as truly living [*als wahrhaft Lebendiges*]" would also promise "something that transcends life [*ein dem Leben Transzendentes*]" (ND 375/368).

This possibility is not simply a logical possibility; rather, it is both historical and anthropological. The promised transcendent both "is and is not," Adorno says (ND 375/368): the very course of history that points toward it also blocks its arrival, and our experience of what's promised, although real, is fragile. The mixture of historical and anthropological possibility is especially striking in Adorno's lectures on metaphysics where, in the lecture "Dying Today" (a precursor and parallel to Meditation 3, ND 368–73/361–6), Adorno suggests that "only if the infinite possibility ... radically contained in every human life ... were reached ... might we have the possibility of being reconciled to death." The context makes clear that Adorno regards this "infinite possibility" as not only historically enabled and blocked but also anthropologically universal: it is a potential that, if actualized, would mean we are "really identical to that which we are not but which we deeply know we could become, though we may want to believe the contrary" (MCP 132–3).

The manner in which this possibility is historical differs from a Hegelian understanding that subordinates possibility to actuality. As Iain Macdonald shows, the historical possibility that carries most weight for Adorno is one that historical actuality has blocked but that nevertheless remains both possible and preferable to the "real possibilities" afforded by "real historical actuality" (Macdonald 2017). Yet it remains crucial that historical actuality *points toward* the possibility it also blocks. This is why Adorno claims happiness simultaneously inhabits objects and is remote from them. It is also why he says "objective" theological and

metaphysical categories simultaneously encapsulate a “hardened society” and the “priority of the object” (ND 374/367).

Consequently, as a parallel passage in Adorno’s lectures on metaphysics states, metaphysical experience, to the extent it is still possible, occurs in a nearly instantaneous configuration between “flashes of fallible consciousness” and “the primacy of the object” (MCP 142). *Negative Dialectics* translates this depiction of metaphysical experience into the following description of truth:

The surplus beyond the subject, however, which subjective metaphysical experience does not want to surrender, and the truth-moment in what is thing-like [*das Wahrheitsmoment am Dinghaften*] are extremes that touch in the idea of truth. For [truth] could not exist without the subject that wrestles free from illusion [*Schein*] any more than [it could exist] without that which is not the subject and in which truth has its prototype [*Urbild*].

(ND 375/368)

To wrestle free from societally imposed illusion, and to be touched by the nonidentical, are the key to metaphysical experience. Together, they are what the experience of truth comes to for Adorno, and their conjoint occurrence is a historically and anthropologically real possibility.

Adorno’s pointing to the possibility of transcendence goes some distance to allay the worries about absolutism and relativism raised by his emphasis on the necessity of historical development. Despite and amid the pervasiveness of his historical metanarrative, he emphasizes the openness and fallibility of philosophical experience. This emphasis raises the possibility that the truth of particular assertions and claims can be tested in experience and not simply deferred along an endless chain of interlinked assertions. Although, as I have argued elsewhere, Adorno problematically makes philosophical experience self-authenticating (Zuidervaart 2007: 66–9, 98–101), nevertheless the appeal to experience provides an important counterweight to his historical metanarrative—one that Habermasian critics, who charge Adorno with having an “esoteric” idea of truth, have been reluctant to acknowledge.

So, too, by indicating that historico-anthropological transcendence is not impossible—that the sociohistorically comprehensive context of illusion (*Verblendungszusammenhang*) does not have the final word—Adorno alleviates the worry that historical forces would be thought to guarantee the truth of his ideas. Given his own conception of truth, whether or not his ideas are true depends, in the end, on the extent to which they align with the possibility of something else and something more than the historical forces that require him to articulate these ideas. These forces might necessitate the articulation, but they do not guarantee the truth of his ideas.

Now, however, other concerns arise. For to test truth claims in experience requires that the right sort of experience be historically available and not simply historically possible. Moreover, to appeal to the possibility of historico-anthropological transcendence presupposes that this possibility actually obtains and is not simply the figment of a historically desperate imagination. Is the right sort of experience historically available? Does the possibility of transcendence actually obtain? To address these concerns, we need to look at Adorno’s critical retrieval of Immanuel Kant’s transcendental ideas in *Meditations* 6–9.

### Critical Self-Negation and Mimetic Self-Disclosure

Like Hegel, Adorno criticizes Kant for having an unduly restricted conception of truth, one that makes a certain model of scientific rationality the standard for all knowledge. This

scientistic and restricted conception of knowledge is at odds, however, with what Adorno calls the “pathos of the infinite” (ND 384/377) in Kant’s account of practical reason, which is supposed to have primacy over theoretical reason. As a result, the (infinite) truth toward which Kant aspires in his practical philosophy cannot be assigned to what he regards as finite knowledge. Unlike Hegel, who resolves this tension in an absolute knowledge of the absolute, Adorno reconfigures it via a novel reconstruction of Kant’s transcendental ideas. As Martin Shuster suggests, this reconstruction of transcendental ideas belongs to the effort in Adorno’s late work to negotiate between the dialectic of enlightenment, which threatens to dissolve agency, and the “rational theology” Kant articulates in order to support rational autonomy (Shuster 2014).

There are three such ideas in Kant’s Critiques. Kant construes all three as pointing to matters that can be thought but cannot be known: the immortal soul, an intelligible world in which humans can be free moral agents, and God as the Supreme Being. In the Second Critique, Kant treats the soul’s immortality, human freedom, and God’s existence as “postulates of pure practical reason”: these ideas are subjectively necessary in order for people to be moral and to pursue the highest good (Kant 1996: 228–58; AK 5: 110–48). In this way, as Adorno says, Kant retains traditional metaphysical ideas and even gives them a crucial role. Yet Kant refuses to conclude from the practical necessity of our having these ideas that therefore their objects must exist—for such we cannot know, given Kant’s restricted conception of knowledge (ND 385/378).

What Kant attributes to the inherent limitations of human knowledge, Adorno ascribes instead to the barriers imposed by the societal (and historically changeable) preformation of knowledge. Capitalist society privileges science over other modes of experience, Adorno claims, and it imprisons people in the pursuit of self-preservation and production for its own sake; Kantian restrictions on knowledge both ratify and arise from such societal preformation (ND 386–90/379–82). As an alternative, Adorno once again points to the historical possibility of wrestling free from illusion and giving priority to the object:

The moment of independence, of irreducibility in spirit [*Geist*] might very well accord with the priority of the object. Where spirit becomes autonomous [*selbstständig*] here and now, as soon as it names the fetters in which it lands by fettering others, it, not entangled praxis, anticipates freedom.

(ND 390/382)

This independence in spirit, this wrestling free from illusion, is precisely what Adorno finds in Kant’s transcendental ideas. Taken collectively as what Adorno calls “the concept of the intelligible” (*der Begriff des Intelligibeln*), they must be thought in a negative fashion, he says, as the “self-negation of finite spirit” (ND 392/384). In this self-negation is registered not only the insufficiency of spirit—caught, as it is, in the partially self-spun webs of societally truncated life—but also the insufficiency of finite existence itself. At the same time, however, the finite existence that spirit tries to comprehend and, in comprehending, tries to dominate, receives an opportunity to show itself as being more than what it is under the distorting conditions of societal domination. Accordingly, the object of the transcendental ideas—what the concept of the intelligible is about—is, in Adorno’s memorable formulation, that which what is concealed to finite spirit discloses [*zukehrt*] to finite spirit and which finite spirit is compelled to think—but which finite spirit also deforms, due to its own finitude, its own societal preformation (“*was das dem endlichen Geist Verborgene diesem zukehrt, was er zu denken gezwungen ist und vermöge der eigenen Endlichkeit deformiert*,” ND 392/384). In other words, the transcendental ideas—immortality, freedom, God—are about the nonidentical, and they are a “moment of transcendent objectivity” in spirit. They are about “something

that does not exist and yet is not simply nonexistent [*etwas, was nicht ist und doch nicht nur nicht ist*]” (ND 392–3/385).

As responses to the concerns I raised earlier, these formulations seem to suggest that the right sort of experience for testing truth claims is indeed historically available and that the possibility of historico-anthropological transcendence actually obtains. On the one hand, what Adorno calls the “self-negation of finite spirit” is itself made possible by the historical dialectic of enlightenment. On the other hand, the self-disclosure of that which resists and exceeds the grasp of finite spirit does not completely depend on the operations of finite spirit: spirit’s self-negation helps create the opportunity for the nonidentical’s self-disclosure, but this self-disclosure is not constituted by the operations of finite spirit. There is, one could say, a precarious yet historically rooted oscillation between finite spirit’s self-negation and the nonidentical’s self-disclosure.

Because this oscillation is both precarious and historical, Adorno describes the transcendental ideas as a necessary illusion or necessary semblance (*Schein*). Their objects are neither real nor imaginary (ND 391/384) yet, as a historically rooted semblance of transcendence, the transcendental ideas are necessary. That is why the redemption of illusion, which Adorno makes central to aesthetics, has “incomparable metaphysical relevance,” he says (ND 393/386).

Here still other questions arise. It is one thing to claim that the experience needed to test truth claims is historically available and that the possibility of historico-anthropological transcendence actually obtains. It is something different, however, to suggest that the historically necessary illusion that epitomizes such experience and such transcendence can be redeemed. What makes the redemption of illusion possible, and in what does it consist? In other words, what is truth?

### Convergence and Hope

At this point readers of Adorno face a fork in the hermeneutical road. Some interpreters, such as Habermas, read Adorno as having become so entrapped in his own historical metanarrative that only (modern) art and aesthetic theory could provide the escape hatch he both seeks and needs: only in aesthetics could he rescue the semblance of transcendence. Habermas’s interpretation presupposes that Adorno and Horkheimer regard reason as being only instrumental both in modernity and throughout human history. Part of the difficulty here is that Adorno and Horkheimer might or might not have different views of reason in history. Espen Hammer has given good reasons to regard Habermas’s presupposition as incorrect with respect to Adorno (Hammer 2015: 32–44); Martin Jay has given equally good reasons to consider Habermas’s presupposition more or less correct with respect to Horkheimer, especially in Horkheimer’s *Eclipse of Reason* (Jay 2016); and I have taken issue with Habermas’s *The Theory of Communicative Action* and *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* for giving reductionist readings of both Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of reason (Zuidervaat 2007: 107–31).

Unlike Habermas’s influential interpretation, others read the occasional references to art and aesthetics in Adorno’s “Meditations on Metaphysics” as emblematic, not definitive, of the semblance of transcendence and its rescue. For such interpreters, the most fundamental redemption of illusion would not occur in art and aesthetics but in a structural transformation of society as a whole. Let me distinguish these two lines of interpretation as the aestheticist and the social transformationalist readings of Adorno’s metacritique of metaphysics. I count myself among the social transformationalist interpreters, also in my book on Adorno’s aesthetics, where the subtitle does not intend to restrict “the redemption of illusion” to art and the philosophical interpretation of art (Zuidervaat 1991).

Meditation 11, titled “Semblance of the Other [*Schein des Anderen*]” (ND 402–5/394–7), bears out a social transformationalist interpretation. One could call this meditation Adorno’s negative eschatology. Not surprisingly, it begins with Hegel, whose metaphysical construction of world history is the antipode to Adorno’s historical construction of metaphysical experience. According to Adorno, Hegel problematically resurrects ontological proofs for God’s existence when he makes the concept the guarantor of the nonconceptual, thereby abolishing transcendence. After that, transcendence crumbled at the hands of societal and cultural enlightenment and became increasingly arcane [*zum Verborgenen wird—das Verborgene* being the same term used in Meditation 8 (ND 392/384) to talk about the object of the transcendental ideas]. This arcanization was registered, Adorno suggests, in dialectical theologies of the “wholly other” (e.g., Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann) (ND 402/394). So questions about the historical possibility and availability of transcendence have intensified.

In response, Adorno appeals to something that resists being demythologized. What resists being demythologized, he says, is a metaphysical experience, namely, the experience that thought that “does not decapitate itself” flows into transcendence. It flows all the way into the idea of a world where “not only extant suffering would be abolished but also suffering that is irrevocably past would be revoked.” It is the experience of having all thoughts converge in the concept of “something that would be different” from the current unspeakable world (ND 403/395). It is, one could say, the thought expressed by Max Horkheimer in “The Longing for the Wholly Other,” his remarkable interview in *Der Spiegel* magazine one year after Adorno’s death. There, Horkheimer suggests that in the end, despite all the injustice and violence both experienced in the past and continuing today, injustice will not prevail—a thought Horkheimer describes as a “theology,” a “hope,” and a “longing”:

Theologie ist ... die Hoffnung, dass es bei diesem Unrecht, durch das die Welt gekennzeichnet ist, nicht bleibe, dass das Unrecht nicht das letzte Wort sein möge. ... [Theologie ist] Ausdruck einer Sehnsucht, einer Sehnsucht danach, dass der Mörder nicht über das unschuldige Opfer triumphieren möge.

(Horkheimer 1970: 61–2)

Adorno calls this the “concept” (*Begriff*) and the “experience” of convergence (*Erfahrung von Konvergenz*) (ND 403–4/395–6). The experience of convergence does not ignore socio-historical reality. Yet it resists any claim that this reality is all there is, that no better future is possible. The basis for such resistance lies in the traces we experience of something other within the “disturbed and damaged” course of the world, the broken promises of something other within the breaches to total identity, the fragments of happiness (*Glück*) that people have while they both deny and are denied complete happiness (ND 403–4/395–6). Adorno calls such convergence “the humanly promised other of history” (ND 404/396), and he says it points to that transcendence which (Heideggerian) ontology illegitimately locates before or outside history. The humanly promised other of history points to a historically possible society in which violence and suffering have ended.

Unlike ontological proofs for God’s existence, Adorno’s negative eschatology does not claim that this utopian condition is real or actual (*wirklich*) just because certain sociohistorical traces and fragments point to it. Yet he does claim that the concept of convergence could not be conceived if something actual (*in der Sache*) did not press toward it (ND 404/396). Just as he had said earlier that the object of the transcendental ideas discloses itself to finite spirit and compels finite spirit to think it, so now he claims that something within the sociohistorical world elicits and compels the thought of convergence.

Here we have answers to the questions posed earlier about the redemption of illusion. The redemption of illusion is made possible by the convergence of experience on the humanly

promised other of history, and such redemption consists in the persistent refusal to give up on what is humanly and historically promised. In other words, truth is the undying and critically articulable hope for complete social transformation. Art is emblematic in this regard, not because it is the only bastion left where truth can occur, but because it amplifies both the refusal and the promise.

This, it seems to me, is how we should read the eloquent passage that concludes Meditation 11. Let me quote parts of it before I comment on it:

Thought that does not capitulate before wretched existence comes to naught before its criteria, truth becomes untruth, philosophy becomes folly. And yet philosophy cannot give up, lest idiocy triumph in actualized unreason [*Widervernunft*] ... Folly is truth in the shape that human beings must accept whenever, amid the untrue, they do not give up truth. Art, even at its highest peaks, is semblance [*Schein*]; but art receives the semblance ... from nonsemblance [*vom Scheinlosen*]. By refraining from judgment, [art] says ... everything would not be just nothing. Otherwise everything that is would be pale, colorless, indifferent. No light falls on people and things in which transcendence would not appear [*widerschiene*]. Indelible in resistance to the fungible world of exchange is the resistance of the eye that does not want the world's colors to be destroyed. In semblance nonsemblance is promised.  
(ND 404–5/396–7)

In this passage, art is emblematic of anything in society and experience that resists the “fungible world of exchange,” but art is not exhaustive in this regard. Adorno also mentions “philosophy” and “human beings” as being capable of not capitulating “before wretched existence” and not giving up truth. Moreover, he does not restrict the light falling on people and things to either art or philosophy. As Adorno suggests earlier in this Meditation, transcendence can appear wherever people experience fragments of happiness or, as he says in the passage just quoted, whenever the eye “does not want the world's colors to be destroyed.” Truth is a persistent hope for complete social transformation; in principle, access to it cannot be limited.

Looking back, we can see more clearly why Adorno regards truth as the “highest” among “metaphysical” ideas. It is highest because no resistance to “wretched existence,” including the resistance within Adorno's own negative dialectics, would have a purpose or a point if there were no hope that existence could be otherwise. Further, the idea of truth is metaphysical because, in the end, the only way for this hope to show up is by breaking through the finitude and fallibility of necessary illusion. If there were no hope for complete social transformation, then “actualized unreason” would have the final word, and Adorno would have to surrender his claims to speak truth about “wretched existence.” It is by rescuing a negatively eschatological idea of truth from Kant's critique of metaphysics that Adorno shows “solidarity with metaphysics in the moment of its collapse” (ND 408/400). The entire point of what Adorno calls the migration of metaphysics into “micrology” is to assemble existence into a “legible constellation” (ND 407/399) where, despite and within the wretchedness, the historically actual possibility of social transformation shines through.

### Predicative Self-Disclosure and Hopeful Critique

The unprecedented mixture of history and transcendence in Adorno's idea of truth makes it susceptible to criticisms from many different angles. I have raised some of these criticisms myself, arguing, for example, that Adorno fails to find an adequate basis for transformative hope (Zuidervaart 2007: 70–6). Here, however, I want to explore what is right about Adorno's

idea of truth as a whole and then consider how it relates to a conception of propositional truth. Paradoxically, as I shall show, Adorno's most important contributions on the topic of truth as a whole undermine his potential contributions to a conception of propositional truth. Conversely, what Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* could offer a theory of propositional truth conflicts with his conception of truth as a whole.

Like Adorno, and unlike most contemporary truth theorists, I regard propositional truth as only one dimension of truth as a whole—an important dimension, to be sure, but not all-important. Once one distinguishes propositional truth from truth as a whole, however, one also needs to account for their relation. Like Heidegger, albeit in strikingly different ways, Adorno fails to give an adequate account of this relation. Soon I shall explain why. But first let me say what Adorno has contributed to our understanding of truth as a whole. Two contributions stand out: the nexus of hope and critique, and a negative epistemic relation.

To begin, Adorno's idea of truth calls attention to a nexus of social hope and social critique that receives short shrift in most philosophical conceptions of truth. Moreover, Adorno accomplishes this without turning the object of hope into an ahistorical unknown. We might not know precisely what a wholly transformed society would be like, but we can know it would be one where violence and suffering do not prevail. Further, we have sufficient indications in our experience—ciphers of promise, as it were—to believe hope for such a society need not be misplaced. At the same time, precisely because social hope need not be misplaced, it makes sense to undertake a thoroughgoing critique of the historical societal formation we inhabit. It makes sense, as Adorno famously put it at the end of *Minima Moralia*, to try “to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption” (MM 247/283). Truth is the idea in which social hope and social critique interlink. If Adorno is right, we cannot have one without the other, and without truth as a whole we would not have either hope or critique.

So, too, Adorno's idea of truth calls attention to the negative side of a cognitive relation that most truth theorists either dismiss or treat in an exclusively positive manner. The relation in question holds between the subject and the object of knowledge: between what I label the epistemic subject and the epistemic object. Contemporary truth theorists primarily discuss this as the relation (if any) between “truth bearers” and “truth makers” (if any), a discussion that is central to debates between alethic realists and alethic antirealists. Alethic realists and antirealists share an underlying assumption, however, namely, that if there is a truth-making relation between, say, propositions and facts, then this would be a positive relation: a correspondence or correlation or congruence, for example.

Adorno explodes this assumption. He introduces the notion of a precarious, historically rooted oscillation between critical self-negation on the part of the epistemic subject (“finite spirit”) and mimetic self-disclosure on the part of the epistemic object *in its nonidentity*. According to this notion, the truth of knowledge would primarily consist not in a positive relation between epistemic subject and object (e.g., correspondence) but in a negative relation. It would consist in the epistemic subject's *not* imposing conceptual identity on the object and in the epistemic object's *not* aligning with the subject's identifications. Moreover, such nonalignment would occur when the epistemic subject criticizes its own identifications and thereby allows the epistemic object to show itself to be more than it is thought to be. Unlike most contemporary truth theorists, then, Adorno makes subjective self-critique and objective otherness central to the truth of knowledge. This, in turn, implies that social critique and social hope are intrinsic to the acquisition and confirmation of true knowledge—yet another insight one seeks in vain among most contemporary truth theorists.

Nevertheless, both of Adorno's contributions concerning truth as a whole—truth as a nexus of hope and critique, and negativity as central to the truth of knowledge—make it difficult for him to give an adequate account of propositional truth—the truth that accrues

to beliefs, assertions, propositions, and the like. I believe Adorno recognized this difficulty. Moreover, precisely because he recognized it, he labored mightily to distinguish his negative dialectics from Heideggerian ontology, where a similar disconnection occurs between propositional truth and truth as a whole, but for different reasons. Whereas Heidegger's disconnection occurs because his account of Dasein's disclosedness (*Erschlossenheit*) leaves too few ways to distinguish true assertions from false ones (Zuidervaat 2017: 47–73), Adorno's disconnection occurs because his emphasis on the nonidentical prevents him from giving an adequate account of the epistemic object's *predicative* self-disclosure. Let me explain.

Adorno's idea of the nonidentical is a protean notion, and it can be applied to many different matters. Insofar as it pertains to the epistemic object, however, the “nonidentical” indicates something more to the object than the identity it has under existing (societally preformed) predications. In order for this “something moreness” to become available for predication, two things must happen on the epistemic subject's side. First, existing ways of predication that miss—indeed, suppress—the object in its nonidentity must be overturned. That is the role of self-negation and self-critique. Second, other ways of relating to the object, ways that are open to the object's being something more, must come into play. That is what Adorno indicates with the concept of mimesis: an archaic mode of conduct that can persist even in the outer reaches of abstract thought. What I discussed earlier as the nonidentical's self-disclosure takes place via mimesis.

Predication, however, occurs in ordinary language usage and, as Adorno himself recognizes, language usage is highly variable. For the requisite self-critique to be at all on target, there must be a way to specify which predications concerning an object are better or worse with respect to the object's identity. Further, in order for there to be better and worse predications in this respect, the object's own identity must offer itself for predication in better and worse ways. But the object can offer itself in better and worse ways only if it already has an identity that exceeds any that the subject asserts about it. This implies, in turn, that objects must be capable of self-disclosure *not only in their nonidentity* vis-à-vis the subject's existing predications but also—and importantly—in *their identity* prior to the subject's predicating and *in openness to being predicated*. In addition to *mimetic* self-disclosure, then, the epistemic object must be capable of *predicative* self-disclosure.

Adorno cannot countenance predicative self-disclosure, however, because, as Espen Hammer has argued, his conception of propositional truth rests on a fundamental failure “to distinguish properly between predication and identification” (Hammer 2015: 106). Adorno tightly associates the ordinary *use of predicates* to identify something in a certain respect with the (dominating) *imposition of identity* on something as such. Because of this, he cannot see that ordinary predication neither attempts nor accomplishes an imposition of identity. When I say, “This house is green,” for example, I do not violently subsume a particular house under universal greenness. Nor do I thereby violate either the full-blown object (a particular house) or my robust experience of it. I simply call attention to one specific aspect of the object's identity, an aspect it shares with other objects but displays in its own unique way, and an aspect that is only one among many aspects it displays. Because Adorno tends to equate predication with impositional identification, he needs, as an alternative, to appeal to a Benjaminian notion of non-intentional truth—accessible via mimetic conduct, artworks, and dialectical self-critique—as what allows the particular “to identify itself as what it is independently of all human strategies or procedures for identification” (Hammer 2015: 112). For Adorno, the only self-disclosure available from the epistemic object is mimetic, not predicative. In this position Adorno shows what Hammer describes as an indebtedness to “two radically diverging philosophical visions,” a Kant/Hegel idealist emphasis on the conceptual mediation of experience, which Adorno takes in a primarily negative direction, and a



Schelling/Benjamin metaphysically realist emphasis on non-discursive access to “transcendent objecthood” (Hammer 2015: 115, 117).

Hence, Adorno cannot really account for what I call predicative self-disclosure. He cannot account for this because he ties predication so closely to the societally preformed and conceptual imposition of identity upon the epistemic object. Indeed, as Owen Hulatt shows in his detailed account of “the interpenetration of concepts and society” in Adorno’s conception of truth, this results in a type of “negativism” with respect to propositional truth (Hulatt 2016: 27–104). In an odd way, the deception of constitutive subjectivity, which Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* rightly aims to shatter (ND xx/10), returns in his failure to recognize the object’s availability for predication. Now one could try to defend Adorno by arguing, as Philip Hogh suggests, that Adorno does not conflate predication and identification. For Adorno, one could say, there is always more to the concept than its being a “unit of properties” (*Merkmalseinheit*): it has both an ethical and an aesthetic “surplus” (Hogh 2017: 98–101). Similarly, there is always more to predicative judgments than their being conceptual identifications for they always also give expression to subjective experiences and sociohistorical contexts (Hogh 2017: 101–3). The problem with such a defense, however, is that it accepts Adorno’s claim that, under current sociohistorical conditions, the primary usage of concepts—as units of properties—and predicative judgments—as conceptual identifications—is to *impose* a universal identity on objects and thereby to do an injustice to particular objects in their particularity. Adorno’s mistake, in my view, lies precisely here, in his thinking that ordinary predications “only determine that moment of an object that marks it as a specimen of a universal concept” and that therefore we need other means—negation, conceptual constellations, and the like—to redirect concepts “towards the nonidentical by their ethical surplus” (Hogh 2017: 109). It may be so that, for Adorno, “the relationship between the concept as a unit of properties and its ethical surplus ... is the leading concern in approaching predicative judgments” (Hogh 2017: 113). The reason why this would be his leading concern, however, is because Adorno has misconstrued concepts and predications as impositions of universal identity in the first place.

Contra Adorno, it is because epistemic objects are always already available for linguistic reference and predication that we can make assertions about them. And it is because such predicative availability on the part of objects can align with their other, nonlinguistic modes of availability that our assertions can be more or less correct. In other words, so-called propositional truth requires not only that the object of knowledge have its own prior identity, as Adorno rightly insists, but also that this identity can disclose itself *when predication occurs* and that it is *not imposed* by the epistemic subject’s predication.

In the context of propositional truth, this prior identity of the object vis-à-vis predication is the true priority of the object, it seems to me, and it is one that Adorno’s worries about the societal preformation of knowledge prevent him from spelling out. Because of this, Adorno fails to offer an adequate account of predicative self-disclosure, as I have tried to show at greater length in a separate paper on his critique of Husserl and Heidegger (Zuidervaat 2018). Adorno thereby also fails to provide an adequate account of propositional truth within his conception of truth as a whole.

At this point, the loyal defender of Adorno’s negative dialectics might be tempted to retort, “So much the worse for propositional truth.” I am not such a defender. Yet, in expecting Adorno to give an adequate account of propositional truth, I believe I remain faithful to the spirit of his philosophy. And here I agree with Peter Gordon who, while demonstrating “the hidden and not-so-hidden points of contact between Adorno and existentialism,” nevertheless distinguishes Adorno from irrationalist critics of modernity: Adorno’s negativity “still glows, however faintly, with a rationalist’s hope for a better world” (Gordon 2016: 11). To distort the facts, embrace the lie, and spout destructive ideology cannot be in line with

a world without violence and suffering. To say why this is so, philosophers need to account for propositional truth. Yet, as Adorno understood, their account also needs to align with a vision of hopeful critique.

## Note

- 1 “Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* at Fifty,” a conference organized by Peter E. Gordon and Max Pensky and held at Harvard University on November 18–19, 2016, where I first presented this chapter, was a truly historic occasion. I thank the conference organizers for their invitation and the conference participants for their lively and inspiring conversation. Later versions were presented to the Sixth Annual Meeting of the Association for Adorno Studies at Duke University, March 24–25, 2017 and to the Philosophy Colloquium at Grand Valley State University on November 3, 2017. Again, my thanks go to the event organizers and participants for their instructive comments and questions.

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## Further Reading

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Part II

# HISTORICAL THEMES



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# UNGROUND

## Horkheimer and the Founding of the Frankfurt School<sup>1</sup>

*Martin Jay*

In the 1962 preface to the republication of *The Theory of the Novel*, Georg Lukács introduced an epithet that has served ever since to belittle the Frankfurt School's alleged pessimism, distance from political practice and privileged personal lives:

A considerable part of the leading German intelligentsia, including Adorno, has taken up residence in the “Grand Hotel Abyss” which I described in connection with my critique of Schopenhauer as “a beautiful hotel, equipped with every comfort, on the edge of an abyss, of nothingness, of absurdity. And the daily contemplation of the abyss between excellent meals or artistic entertainments, can only heighten the enjoyment of the subtle comforts offered.”

(Lukács 1962)

As he admitted, Lukács had used the term before, but, as it turns out, not only in reference to Schopenhauer in his 1954 *The Destruction of Reason*. It had in fact been coined even earlier in a piece he wrote in 1933, but never published in his lifetime, to mock *soi-disant* progressive intellectuals like Upton Sinclair or Thomas Mann, who refused to abandon their bourgeois lifestyles and affiliate themselves with the Communist Party (Lukács 1984).

This more diffuse usage did not, however, resonate publicly, and it was not really until the identification with Adorno and his colleagues that it gained any real traction. Although normally employed by detractors of the Frankfurt School from the left, the term gained enough familiarity that a sympathetic “photobiography” of the School edited in 1990 by Willem van Reijin and Gunzelin Schmid Noerr could be called without apparent irony *Grand Hotel Abgrund*, a title repeated in two subsequent studies of the Frankfurt School (Reijen and Noerr 1990; Jeffries 2016; Safatle 2016).

I want to pause for a moment with this term because it raises an important question that goes beyond the easy condemnation of unaffiliated radical intellectuals for their alleged betrayal of the link between theory and practice. The German word *Abgrund* has a connotation that is absent in the English equivalent “abyss,” for it suggests the loss of the foundation or ground (*Grund*) on which one might securely support critique. For a Communist militant like Lukács, the only way for an intellectual to avoid hurtling into the abyss was to stand

firmly on the ground of the vanguard party of the worker's movement, subordinating himself to the dictates of its enlightened leadership. No matter how brilliant the analysis of an anti-capitalist critic might be or how intense his moral indignation, it was only by joining with the forces that would change society that he could avoid impotence and be on the right side of history. The metaphor of a firm ground or foundation was also evident in the frequent use of the word *Standpunkt* by other Marxists of Lukács's generation like Karl Korsch, who insisted on the proletarian standpoint of historical materialism (Korsch 1993). Whether it be the consciousness of the proletariat, either actual or ascribed, an objective historical process leading to the terminal crisis of capitalism, or a subtle combination of both, there was assumed to be a ground on which the critical intellectual could stand, a concrete location like the French military *point d'appui* where forces could gather before an assault, a foundation to support a solid critique of the status quo.

In labeling the Frankfurt School "the Grand Hotel Abyss," Lukács was thus not only denigrating the supposedly comfortable existence of its members, but also their refusal to credit the necessary role of the party and class as the concrete historical ground of radical ideas. Whether or not he was right about the former—their "damaged lives" in exile, to cite the celebrated subtitle of *Minima Moralia*, suggests otherwise—his second reproach was on target. From its inception, the intellectuals who gathered around the *Institut für Sozialforschung* knew that critique could not be directly grounded in the praxis or consciousness of the class that Marx had assigned the historical role of incipient universal class, let alone the vanguard party that claimed to be the repository of its imputed or ascribed class consciousness. In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács had argued that although the empirical class consciousness of the proletariat might be subjectively reformist, it was possible for a dialectician to impute to it an essential class consciousness that was objectively revolutionary (Lukács 1971). The Leninist party was the expression of that deeper consciousness. Horkheimer and his colleagues, however, understood the limits of the claim, whose foundations were classically expressed in Vico's *verum-factum* principle, that those who made the world were able to know what they had made better than those who were merely contemplating it (Jay 1988).

Was it possible to ground it instead in an objective "scientific" grasp of the totality of social relations, which would allow an unaffiliated non-partisan theoretician to decipher not only the surface phenomena of contemporary society but also the deeper, more essential trends that foreshadowed a potential future? Could intellectuals who "floated freely," to borrow the metaphor that Karl Mannheim would make famous at the end of the decade when the Institute set up shop, have a totalizing perspective on the world below? Or is it a dangerous myth to assume anyone might have a disinterested view above the fray, especially when the very distinction between facts and values was itself called into question? Max Horkheimer had little use, however, for Mannheim's solution, which assumed intellectuals from different classes could somehow harmonize their positions and turn them into complementary perspectives on the whole (Horkheimer 1930; Jay 1988). Neither rooted nor free-floating, critique was located somewhere else on a map which included utopias still to be realized (Abromeit 2011: Chapter 4).

One possible alternative drew on the unconstrained will in which the act of founding was *ex nihilo*, a gesture of assertion that drew whatever legitimacy it might have entirely from itself rather than any preceding authority, whether in tradition, rationality or the practical activity of a privileged social group. Here the ground was established through what came to be called decisionist fiat, most famously defended by the Weimar and then Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt, who argued that the decision to found a legal order could not itself be rooted in a prior legality. But this alternative was frankly irrationalist. Drawing, as it did, on an analogy from the purely voluntarist version of God that had been promulgated in the Middle Ages

by nominalists like William of Ockham, who denied the limitations on divine will placed by any notion of rational intelligibility or ideal form, it relied solely on a spontaneous act of a sovereign subject. As such, it implied a unified meta-subject prior to individual subjects, with the power to do the founding, a subject whose unconstrained will might also lead to domination of the material world. Consequently, Critical Theory was never tempted by it (although before he was in the Institute's orbit, Walter Benjamin drew on Schmitt's notion of a law-constituting power prior to legality, albeit in an essay which did not influence his later colleagues [Benjamin 1978]).

For a while, the major alternative favored by Horkheimer and his colleagues was what became known as "immanent critique," that is, eschewing any universal or transcendent vantage point above the fray and seeking an alternative in the specific normative claims of a culture that failed to live up to them in practice. Or in more explicitly Hegelian terms, it meant finding some critical purchase in the gap between a general concept and the specific objects subsumed under it. As a recent champion of this approach, Robert Hullot-Kentor, has put it, "immanent criticism turns the principle of identity, which otherwise serves the subordination of object to subject, into the power for the presentation of the way in which an object resists its subjective determination and finds itself lacking." To criticize without an Archimedean point beyond or outside of the target of criticism, he continues, "is the development of the idea as the object's self-dissatisfaction that at every point moves toward what is not idea; it potentiates from within the requirement of an objective transformation" (Hullot-Kentor 2006: 230).

But what if immanent critique acknowledges the possibility that objects are *always* in excess of the concepts that define them or, in other words, that the Hegelian presupposition of an immanent dialectical totality fails to acknowledge the non-sublatable quality of radical otherness? Interestingly, in his analysis of phenomenology in *The Metacritique of Epistemology*, Adorno himself came precisely to this conclusion. Although claiming that "dialectic's very procedure is immanent critique," he conceded that

the concept of immanence sets the limits on immanent critique. If an assertion is measured by its presuppositions, then the procedure is immanent, i.e. it obeys formal-logical rules and thought becomes a criterion of itself. But it is not decided as a necessity of thought in the analysis of the concept of being that not all being is consciousness. The inclusiveness of such an analysis is thus halted. To think non-thinking is not a seamless consequence of thought. It simply suspends claims to totality on the part of thought. Immanence, however, in the sense of that equivocation of consciousness and thought, is nothing other than such totality. Dialectic negates both together.

(Adorno 1983: 5)

What this convoluted passage suggests is that the folding of all objects into a field of conceptual immanence is an idealist fantasy in which the nonidentical is absorbed into the identity with no remainder. Thus, immanent critique cannot be itself a fully sufficient ground, as the totality is itself never fully self-contained and concepts are never fully able to subsume all objects under them.

Moreover, in addition to the problems in the dialectical concept of total immanence, what if "the self-dissatisfaction of the object," its striving to be adequate to its concept, fails to manifest itself in a society that Herbert Marcuse could call "one-dimensional" and Adorno "totally administered"? What if the possibility of "objective transformation" is thwarted by the ideological seamlessness of a social order that actually functionalizes apparent dissatisfaction in the service of system-maintenance? What if the totality that prevailed was not one



whose contradictions and antinomies threatened to undermine it, but rather one in which they served to keep it going through a kind of autoimmune equilibrium? In *Minima Moralia*, Adorno acknowledged precisely this danger with reference to the decline of irony:

Irony's medium, the difference between ideology and reality, has disappeared.

The former resigns itself to confirmation of reality by its mere duplication.... There is not a crevasse in the cliff of the established order into which the ironist might hook a fingernail.... Pitted against the deadly seriousness of total society, which has absorbed the opposing voice, the impotent objection earlier quashed by irony, there is now only the deadly seriousness of the comprehended truth.

(Adorno 1978: 211–212)

With all of the possible grounds for critique thus in one way or another insufficient, was it then perhaps simply a vain quest to seek a ground or foundation as the legitimating *point d'appui*? If there were no social subject position or historical agent whose praxis could be the source of critique, no purely philosophical first principles or *a priori* transcendental grounds from which to launch such a critique, and no immanent totality in which objects might become adequate to their concepts, might looking for such a ground be itself part of the problem rather than of the solution? In the subsequent history of the Frankfurt School, this anti-foundationalist conclusion became increasingly hard to avoid, as the material basis for critique grew ever more remote and both the appeal of a philosophy of transcendent principles and the confidence in immanent critique diminished. Even the resort to an “objective” or “emphatic” notion of reason, to which Horkheimer could still desperately appeal as late as *Eclipse of Reason* in 1947, lost its capacity to inspire much confidence, as rationality itself seemed to suffer a self-liquidation destined from its very beginnings in the need for self-preservation in the face of a hostile nature. “If one were to speak of a disease affecting reason,” he wrote,

this disease should be understood not as having stricken reason at some historical moment, but as being inseparable from the nature of reason in civilization as we know it. The disease of reason is that reason was born from man's urge to dominate nature.

(Horkheimer 1947: 176)

And yet Critical Theory did not, as we know, give up the mission of critically analyzing the status quo in the hope of enabling a radically different and better future. Might some explanation of its stubborn refusal to abandon that task be found not in abstract principles, or at least not in them alone, but also in the history of its own institutional foundation in the Weimar era? In the remainder of this essay, I want to explore the historical origins of the school in the hope of casting some light on the question of its assumption of a critical vantage point on the world it inhabited. How can we characterize the literal foundation of the Frankfurt School and what kind of authority, if any, did it provide for the work that followed? Might its willingness to draw intellectual sustenance from a heteroclitic variety of sources—including, as I will suggest, even the anti-Hegelian philosophy of Schelling—be illuminated by acknowledging those origins?

The details of the origins of the Institute for Social Research have, of course, been known for some time (Migdal 1981; Eisenach 1987). What has to be emphasized is the ragged, inadvertent, adventitious quality of its beginnings. Nothing expresses this dimension of the story as explicitly as the source of its financial support, which came from the fortune of the German-Jewish grain merchant Hermann Weil, who had cornered the Argentine trade in

wheat in the late nineteenth century and came to play a critical role in the economic policies of Germany during World War I, when he was an adviser to the Kaiser and the General Staff. He shared the ambitious war aims that fueled German aggression in 1914, but by the end of the war had come to argue for a negotiated peace with England to avoid economic disaster. After the armistice, he turned away from politics to philanthropy, joining the many other generous bourgeois donors who had helped created a “Stiftungsuniversität” in Frankfurt before the war (Kluke 1972). Weil’s political sympathies, however, were certainly not on the left, so it is hard entirely to gainsay the sardonic remark of Bertolt Brecht about the Institute’s founding in his unfinished satire of contemporary intellectuals, *The Tui Novel*:

A rich old man, the grain speculator Weil dies, disturbed by the miseries on earth.  
In his will he leaves a large sum for the establishment of an institute to investigate  
the sources of that misery, which is, of course, he himself.

(Brecht 1973: 443)

Brecht was, to be sure, off the mark in his precise history, as Weil actually died in 1927, but he did put his finger on the irony involved in the generosity of an unabashed capitalist supporting a venture that was anything but a defense of the system that made him rich. In the history of Marxism, of course, this is not a new story, as demonstrated by Engels’s financing Marx’s revolutionary writings and research through his work for the family firm of Ermen and Engels, which owned the Victoria Mill in Manchester. But it does complicate our understanding of the *point d’appui* from which Critical Theory launched its critique, opening it to the accusation of militants like Brecht and Lukács that its radical credentials were tainted from the start (even though the latter’s own background was anything but plebian).

Interestingly, an earlier attempt to create another Institute by Hermann Weil at the University in 1920, focused on labor law, had been unsuccessful, but now with the vigorous participation of his son Felix, the second venture came to fruition. Felix Weil, born in 1889 and raised for the first nine years of his life in considerable comfort in Buenos Aires, had come to Frankfurt to study during the war and was caught up in the revolutionary events of 1918. Because of a prior connection with the Social Democrat Hugo Sinzheimer, a leading labor lawyer who served for a short while as police president of the city’s workers council, he had a brief taste of action, but apparently it was the reading of the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD)’s 1891 Erfurt Program on the night of November 11, 1918, that converted him to socialism (Eisenach 1987: 185). He joined a socialist student group at the university, among whose other members was Leo Lowenthal, later a colleague at the Institute. After a year at the university in Tübingen, working under the political economist Robert Wilbrandt but prevented for political reasons from getting his degree, Felix Weil returned to Frankfurt. Here he was able to complete his dissertation with the political economist Adolph Weber on “Socialization: Essay on the Conceptual Foundations and Critique of Plans for Socialization,” which was published in a series on “Practical Socialism” edited by Karl Korsch, still then a leftwing member of the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (KPD). During the early 1920s, Weil was politically close to the Spartacists, although he later acknowledged that he was always a “salon Bolshevik,” who was never jailed and never considered renouncing his fortune (Eisenach 1987: 207). He used it instead to support many leftwing causes, including the Malik Verlag, the theater of Erwin Piscator and the corrosive art of Georg Grosz, who in fact painted his portrait in 1926 reading the proofs of a German translation of Upton Sinclair’s book on the Sacco-Vanzetti case. Among his projects was the “First Marxist Work Week,” which began on May 20, 1923 in a hotel near the Thuringian town of Ilmenau. The participants, mostly from the orbit of the newly formed German Communist Party, included Korsch, Lukács, Karl August Wittfogel, Konstantin

Zetkin (son of the KPD luminary Klara Zetkin), Julian and Hede Gumperz, Bela Fogarasi, Richard Sorge, Eduard Alexander, Kuzuo Fukumoto, Friedrich Pollock, and four young friends from his student days in Tübingen (Buckmiller 1990). Here papers were given on such subjects as socialist planning and the theory of imperialism, with Lukács's just published *History and Class Consciousness* a major object of discussion. Although the meeting was apparently a success, a second week the following year did not ensue because Weil decided to found a more permanent institution. According to the recollection of Friedrich Pollock, who was married to one of Weil's cousins, it was conceived in conversations with a third figure, who had not been in Ilmenau, in the castle garden in the Taunus mountain town of Kronberg in 1922.

That third figure was, of course, Max Horkheimer, who with Pollock had been introduced to Weil by Konstantin Zetkin in the fall of 1919 in Frankfurt. Horkheimer's important role in the early years of the Institute's has not always been recognized. But as his most recent biographer, John Abromeit, has noted,

Horkheimer was instrumental in the planning of the Institute from the very beginning, a fact that is often overlooked due to his lack of involvement in the Institute's affairs under its first director Carl Grünberg. It was not a mere formality that Horkheimer was listed as one of the nine original members of the Society for Social Research, the organization formed to found the Institute.

(Abromeit 2011: 62)

What Horkheimer brought to their deliberations was a growing identification with socialism without any particular party affiliation combined with a strong commitment to academic studies, which manifested itself in a successful philosophical apprenticeship first with Edmund Husserl in Freiburg and then Hans Cornelius in Frankfurt. Although not as wealthy as Hermann Weil, Horkheimer's father Moritz was a successful factory owner from Stuttgart, and a liberal assimilated Jew who patriotically supported the German war effort. His mother was entirely devoted to domestic pursuits, the most avid of which, by all reports, was providing her only son with unconditional love. Trained to succeed his father at the factory—his position there served to excuse him from military service until 1916, when a physical ailment prevented him from seeing frontline action—the young Horkheimer was motivated more by aesthetic yearnings than commercial ones. Although growing increasingly alienated from his parents' values, he never broke with them personally, even when they disapproved of his love for the "unsuitable" woman he eventually married and objected to his academic career. Through the life-long friendship he began at the age of sixteen in 1911 with Pollock, also the son of an assimilated Jewish industrialist, Horkheimer seems to have found a microcosmic foretaste of the egalitarian community of like-minded souls for which he clearly yearned (Emery 2015). Although a sympathetic observer of the political turmoil after the war, he watched the events unfolding in Munich with the group around the radical bohemian photographer Germaine Krull rather than participating directly in them. Nor was he swept up in the quest for religious authenticity that would inspire future Institute colleagues like Leo Lowenthal and Erich Fromm, who were for a while part of the Frankfurt Lehrhaus directed by Franz Rosenzweig.

During the Institute's first few years, when Carl Grünberg served as director and its focus was on the history of the labor movement, Horkheimer was occupied primarily with his university studies, working with mentors like Cornelius and the Gestalt psychologist Adhémar Gelb. But at the same time, he resisted becoming absorbed into the world of academic careerism, the world of what Fritz Ringer was later to call that of German mandarins in decline (Ringer 1969). As Adorno was to recollect when he had first met Horkheimer in

Gelb's seminar, he was "not affected by the professional deformity of the academic, who all-too-easily confuses the occupation with scholarly things with reality" (Adorno 1986). In addition to his more scholarly writings, he wrote a steady stream of aphoristic ruminations that only appeared pseudonymously in 1934 under the ambiguous title *Dämmerung*, which means both dawn and twilight. Wrestling with a number of issues—the relationship between theoretical and practical reason, the materialist underpinnings of philosophy, the complex interaction of theory and empirical research, the contribution psychoanalysis might make to social theory—Horkheimer came to the conclusion that only interdisciplinary work guided by a common goal might provide answers to questions that traditional scholarship and conventional politics had failed to address. When the opportunity came to replace Grünberg as Institute director, following the latter's debilitating stroke in 1928, he was ready to launch an ambitious program whose outlines he spelled out in the inaugural address he gave in 1931 on "The Current Condition of Social Philosophy and the Task of an Institute for Social Research" (Horkheimer 1993). Two years earlier, Weil had succeeded in convincing the Minister of Education to transfer Grünberg's chair in political science, originally endowed by his father, to one in social philosophy. Horkheimer, newly the author of a Habilitationsschrift on *The Origins of the Bourgeois Philosophy of History*, was selected to fill it, thus allowing him officially to assume the directorship in January 1931.

From this very sketchy portrait of Horkheimer, whose assumption of the directorship might be considered more properly the origin of the Frankfurt School strictly speaking than of the Institute for Social Research, it is clear that the institutional founding of Critical Theory was as scattered, uneven and diffuse as its theoretical *point d'appui*. Financially, it was dependent on the inadvertent largess of the class whose hegemony it sought to undermine. Politically, it kept its distance from the parties or movements that might provide the historical agency to realize its hopes. Academically, it was only obliquely integrated into a university system whose advocacy of scholarly neutrality and disinterested research it could not embrace. Personally, its leadership was unsettled and uncertain, at least initially. Even its name—the bland "Institute for Social Research"—covered over its deeper agenda, which had been expressed in an earlier candidate, "Institute for Marxism," which had been rejected as too provocative.

Although for some unfriendly commentators, such as Brecht, these anomalies smacked of hypocrisy and self-deception, it might be more useful to see them as enacting the very uneasiness with seeking a firm theoretical ground that also eluded Critical Theory. In fact, over time, the very need for an explicit foundation from which critique might be launched lost its exigency. Instead, the search for origins as grounds, the need for a point from which thinking might securely begin, became itself an explicit target of Critical Theory. In his consideration of phenomenology, Adorno condemned the quest for an "ur" moment from which all else followed. "The concept of the absolutely first," he wrote in his book on Husserl, "must itself come under critique" (Adorno 1983: 6; Pizer 1995). Whether it be the concept of Being or the priority of the Subject, philosophies which sought a first principle—*prima philosophia* or *Ursprungsphilosophien*—were guilty of privileging one moment in a totality of relations that could only be entered in *media res*. Dialectics, even a negative one, understood that nothing was ever immediate and logically prior to the mediation of the whole.

Not only problematic from a purely theoretical point of view, the search for foundations and origins, the Frankfurt School came to argue, is also politically suspect. As Adorno made clear in *Minima Moralia*, in particular the aphorism "Gold Assay," and later in *Jargon of Authenticity*, there was a sinister link between the assertion of origins as priority and the fascist cult of blood and soil (Adorno 1973b, 1978: 152–155; Jay 2011). The search for authenticity and genuineness contains the "notion of the supremacy of the original over the derived. This notion, however, is always linked with social legitimation. All ruling strata claim to be

the oldest settlers, autochthonous" (Adorno 1978: 155). Here the angry voice of the exile, expelled from a connection to his original home, can be heard, but there were earlier sources for Critical Theory's distrust for foundationalist claims, both historical and philosophical.

Although the evidence for it is largely conjectural and indirect, a hitherto under-appreciated stimulus to resist first philosophies and immanentist holism may paradoxically have been the Idealism of Schelling, who was particularly aware of the function of an *Ungrund* or *Abgrund* in resisting totalizing rationalism (Bowie 1993, 1995). For those who identify Critical Theory as a variant of Hegelian Marxism or who know the Frankfurt School's critique of Schelling only from Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution*, such a suggestion will seem implausible. In that work of 1941, the later Schelling was identified along with Auguste Comte as the exemplar of a "positive philosophy" that sought to undermine the critical impulse in Hegel's "negative philosophy." Despite their differences, Marcuse charged, "there is a common tendency in both philosophies to counter the sway of apriorism and to restore the authority of experience" (Marcuse 1960: 324), which meant a rejection of metaphysical rationalism. From Marcuse's essentially Hegelian Marxist point of view, the political implications of both kinds of "positive philosophy" were affirmative, even reactionary, as evidenced by the inspiration Schelling provided to conservative theorists like Friedrich Joseph Stahl. Understood as the defender of intuition against reason, nature against history, and art against politics, as he sometime has been, Schelling seems like an unlikely inspiration for Horkheimer and his colleagues.

But the younger Schelling, the one who collaborated with Hegel on the posthumously discovered fragment "The Earliest System-Program of German Idealism" (Harris 1972; Jamme and Schneider 1984; Richter 2002) and resisted Fichte's excessive reliance on the constitutive subject (which he had himself once shared), was a very different story. Although he initially embraced the challenge laid down by Karl Leonhard Reinhold and Solomon Maimon to generate a meta-critical, phenomenological foundation for systematic philosophy, which would surpass the limits of Kant's cautious transcendentalism, Schelling, who gave up publishing his work after 1812, came to understand how difficult squaring that circle would be (Beiser 1987). As remarked by no less an interpreter than Jürgen Habermas, who had written his dissertation on Schelling (Habermas 1954; McCarthy 1978: 403; Douglas 2004; Peukert 2005: 359), the philosopher's proto-materialist defense of an otherness that escaped the idealist assimilation into a relational totality had a resonance that could be found in unexpected places:

In his remarkable polemic against the bias toward the affirmative, against the purification and the harmonization of the unruly and the negative, of what refuses itself, there also stirs an impulse to resist the danger of idealist apotheosis—the same impulse for the critique of ideology that extends all the way up to the pessimistic materialism of Horkheimer and to the optimistic materialism of Bloch.

(Habermas 1984, 1992: 123)

Horkheimer had in fact written and lectured on German Idealism in general and Schelling in particular in the 1920s before assuming the Institute's directorship (Abromeit 2011: 111–124). Although distancing himself from what he saw as Schelling's goal of absolute identity located in nature or symbolized in art, he applauded the philosopher's critique of Fichte's constitutive subjectivism and solipsistic reduction of nature to a mere effect of that subject. Toward the later anti-rationalist Schelling, to be sure, he remained hostile, but he acknowledged that there was something in Schelling's search for an Absolute beyond subjective constitution that comported well with a materialist critique of Idealisms of any kind.

In his middle period, exemplified by his unfinished *Ages of the World*, Schelling had addressed the issue of foundations directly (Žižek and Schelling 1997). Although the book is an uncompleted torso, often cryptic and hard to decipher, the gravamen of its argument was that attempts to know the Absolute were always aporetic, as it ceased being Absolute when it was transformed into an object of knowledge. Schelling's primary animus was against the rationalist monism of philosophers like Spinoza, although his contemporaries Fichte and Hegel were also inviting targets. Without regressing to a no less problematic dualism of the kind associated with Descartes, Schelling struggled to articulate a way to gesture toward something unknown that could not be adequately expressed.

It is not true, Schelling opined in opposition to the subjective Idealism of his day, that

a deed, an unconditioned activity or action, is the First. For the absolutely First can only be that which the absolutely Last can be as well. Only an immovable, divine—indeed, we would do better to say supradivine—indifference is absolutely First: it is the beginning that is also at the same time the end.

The very notion of a “ground,” he contended, is hard to defend coherently. The distinction between *Urgrund* and *Ungrund* is paper-thin. If “ground” is more than just an empty word,

the people must themselves acknowledge that there was something before the existing God *as such* that did not itself exist because it was only the ground of existence. Now, that which is only the ground of existence cannot have an essence and qualities that are as one with what exists; and if existence is to be regarded as free, conscious, and (in the highest sense) intelligent, then what is merely the ground of its existence cannot be conscious, free, and intelligent in the same sense.

(Žižek and Schelling 1997: 149)

There is thus an unbridgeable gap between absolute Ground and empirical Existence, and subject and substance cannot, *pace* Hegel and Spinoza, be seen as one, even through a sublation of their differences. Žižek glosses the implication of all this as follows:

prior to *Grund* there can only be an abyss (*Ungrund*); that is far from being a mere *nihil prativum*, this ‘nothing’ that precedes Ground stands for the ‘absolute indifference’ qua the abyss of pure Freedom that is not yet the predicate-property of some Subject but rather designates a pure impersonal Willing (*Wollen*) that wills nothing.

(Žižek and Schelling 1997: 15)

As David Farrell Krell notes, with reference to another Schelling work of this period,

the primal, primordial, incipient, or original ground and the nonground are brought as close together as possible: only a single letter distinguishes them, and not even an entire letter inasmuch as it is here merely a matter of prolonging a single stroke of one, of one letter extending the arc of the r in *Urgrund* to the n of *Ungrund*. The one stroke alters origins to nihilations.

(Krell 1988: 25–26)

Not surprisingly, Schelling's critique of rationalist metaphysics was attractive to thinkers trying to extricate themselves from an overly ambitious philosophy in which all contingency was absorbed into a relational system, and all ineffable mystery was interpreted as ultimately intelligible. In Weimar, a salient example was Franz Rosenzweig, whose abandonment of

his earlier Hegelianism was abetted by his reading of Schelling's *Ages of the World*. In April 1918, Rosenzweig wrote to his mother; "I am an anti-Hegelian (and anti-Fichtean); my holy protector among the four is Kant—and above all—Schelling. That I have just found Schelling's work [das Schellingianum] is a completely remarkable coincidence" (Rosenzweig 1935: 299). As Paul Franks and Michael Morgan explain,

for Rosenzweig, Schelling's tremendous achievement was to disclose the twin actualities of the unique individual and the actually existing Absolute that are excluded from and yet presupposed by the system of reason, the philosophy of Idealism. These gave his thinking a new foundation in the experience of the contingent, existing individual and its relation to the preconceptual, pretheoretical Absolute, the *Urgrund*, the 'dark ground'.

(Gibbs 1992: 40–56; Rosenzweig 2000: 42; Betz 2003)

The latter was also an abyss (*Abgrund*) prior to the system of rational relations that made up the world described by metaphysicians. There was no way to illuminate this negative space out of which creation emerged.

The proto-existentialism in Schelling, who preceded Sartre in denying that essence preceded existence, is not hard to discern. Nor is it surprising that later advocates of what has broadly come to be called post-structuralism, such as Slavoj Žižek and David Clark, would find in Schelling a kindred spirit (Clark 1995; Žižek 1996). His warning against the excessive reach of rationalism could be interpreted as a psychoanalytic—in Žižek's case, Lacanian—defense of the resistance of the unconscious to the claims of consciousness. His critique of the reflection theory of knowledge, in which subjects and objects mirror each other, anticipated the anti-representalism of post-structuralist epistemology (Frank 1987). And his version of an Absolute that cannot be objectified or made present has been seen as proto-Derridean, foreshadowing the ways in which *différance* both attacks identitarian concepts and serves as an anti-originary origin dependent on them (Dews 1987).

But how does Schelling help us understand the early Frankfurt School, which in so many ways drew on the power of Hegelian dialectical negation? How could a philosopher who fashioned a philosophy of identity at one point in his career and affirmed positivity at another be a possible source of Critical Theory's defense of nonidentity and negation? If there is a distance from Hegelian Marxism in Horkheimer's work, it is, after all, normally understood to be a product of his abiding sympathy for Schopenhauer's legacy, not Schelling's (although it may be possible to discern debts to Schelling in Schopenhauer himself) (Vecchiotti 1987). And in the case of Adorno, it is the anti-Hegelian Benjamin who is often credited with alerting him to the limits of even a materialist dialectics.

Yet it is not implausible to see some Schellingian motifs, especially when it comes to the question of grounds, in Critical Theory, most clearly evident in Adorno's version of it. It is first worth recalling that Adorno, as Susan Buck-Morss first argued, was likely to have learned of Rosenzweig's "New Thinking" in Jewish theology in the 1920s (Buck-Morss 1977: 5). Neither he nor Horkheimer were, to be sure, ever in the Frankfurt Lehrhaus circle, unlike Lowenthal and Fromm, but he certainly knew of Rosenzweig through Benjamin and Scholem. And although Adorno did not follow Rosenzweig in explicitly repudiating Hegel, he might well have absorbed some of his reservations about an identitarian dialectics in which all otherness was absorbed into a rational totality (Caygill 2005). After his return to Germany, Adorno would, in fact, acknowledge that "in [Schelling's] approach from the standpoint of identity philosophy many themes can be found that I reached coming from completely different premises" (Adorno 1998: 34). Here he was referring in particular to Schelling's *Lectures on the Method of Academic Study*, a work that Benjamin had also

appreciated (Scholem 1975: 33). Jürgen Habermas would also remark on the continuing influence of this book at the Institute, even in the 1950s:

What Schelling had developed in the summer term, 1802, in his Jena lectures to serve as a method of academic studies as an idea of the German university, namely to ‘construct the whole of one’s science out of oneself and to present it with inner and lively visualization,’ this is what Adorno practiced in this summer term in Frankfurt.

(Habermas 2003)

There was also a substantive debt to Schelling in Adorno’s suspicion of seeking a firm ground for philosophical critique. In his 1931 lecture “The Idea of Natural History,” he mediated history by nature and nature by history without seeking a higher-level sublimation of the two terms. Although Schelling is not explicitly mentioned, one can discern his shadow in Adorno’s resistance to a purely historicist model in which “second nature” is identified solely with Lukács’s idea of a reification that must be overcome by the power of collective subjective constitution of the historical world. As one commentator puts it, “Arguably *Ages [of the World]* invents this history of nature which will inform Benjamin’s and Adorno’s reformulation of ‘natural history’ as history subject to nature: ‘the self-cognition of the spirit as nature in disunion with itself’” (Rajan n.d). Indeed, the essay may even have provided a nuanced critique of Benjamin, to which it is in many ways indebted, for, as Hullot-Kentor has noted, “Benjamin’s study of the Baroque is a research of *origins*, which Adorno distantly criticizes” (Hullot-Kentor 1984: 106). The same impulse courses through *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written in the 1940s. As Andrew Bowie puts it, “Schelling makes, throughout his career, many of the moves which are the basis of Horkheimer and Adorno’s conception of a ‘dialectic of enlightenment,’ in which reason deceives itself about its relationship with nature, and thereby turns into its dialectical opposite” (Bowie 1993: 58). The melancholic tone suffusing much of Schelling’s work also bears comparing with the “melancholy science” Adorno practiced so diligently (Clark 1995: 109–115; Adorno 1978: 15).

In his 1959 lectures on Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, Adorno would continue to denounce the “mania for foundations” (*Funderungswahn*), which had led Kant and other philosophers to seek a firm ground for their arguments. “This is the belief,” he wrote,

that everything which exists must be derived from something else, something older or more primordial. It is a delusion built on the idealist assumption that every conceivable existent thing can be reduced to mind, or, I almost said, to Being...You should liberate yourselves from this ‘mania for foundations’ and...you should not always feel the need to begin at the very beginning.

(Adorno 2001: 16)

In *Negative Dialectics*, he positively cited *Ages of the World* as an antidote to rationalist consciousness philosophy, noting that “urge, according to Schelling’s insight, is the mind’s preliminary form” (Adorno 1973a: 202). Although resisting Schelling’s privileging of intuition above reason, an inclination that Hegel had found particularly disturbing, Adorno did seek a balance between noetic and dianoetic roads to the truth. As Herbert Schnädelbach once noted, Adorno was a “noetic of the non-identical. He always stressed, above all in his remarks on formal logic, that the goal of dianoetic operations was noetic” (Schnädelbach 1983: 75). Accordingly, in his *Aesthetic Theory*, his debts to Schelling, who more than any other German Idealist granted a special privilege to the work of art as able to express, indeed



to perform, nonidentity in a way purely discursive—that is, dianoetic—philosophy cannot, have not been hard to find (Zuidervaat 1991; Bowie 1997).

In short, the Frankfurt School's willingness to live with the abyss, or more correctly at its edge, meant that it avoided the problematic reliance on an "expressive" concept of totality, which Hegelian Marxists like Lukács had defended (Jay 1984). It reflected their recognition that nature could not be subsumed under the rubric of history and that the world of natural objects could not be seen as the projection of a constitutive subject. It allowed them to free critical thought from its dependence on an ur-moment of legitimating empowerment prior to the imperfect present.

Their hesitation before a Hegelian rationalist immanentism that would fold the pre-rational ground into the totality did not, to be sure, mean that they followed Schelling in the direction that Heidegger and others wanted to take him, a direction that could end by celebrating the irrational (Bowie 1995: 253–257). Not only Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution*, but also works like Horkheimer's *Eclipse of Reason* testify to their dogged insistence on the critical potential in rationalism. Even when Habermas could jettison the emphatic, still metaphysical concept of reason that had animated the first generation of Critical Theorists, he would warn that "whenever the one [the Absolute] is thought of as absolute negativity, as withdrawal and absence, as resistance against propositional speech in general, the ground (*Grund*) of rationality reveals itself as an abyss (*Abgrund*) of the irrational" (Habermas 1992: 121). For Habermas, the reliance on a pre-propositional, world-disclosing, intuition of the Absolute paradoxically led to abandoning the only version of "*Grund*" that he could support: grounds as the giving of reasons. And yet, by acknowledging the limits of reason in its more emphatic sense and accepting the legitimate claims of something else—aesthetic experience, mimesis, the unconscious desires of the libido, even the hopes expressed in the idiom of religion—the Frankfurt School understood that living on the edge of the abyss would not be without its benefits.

There is in short an unexpected congruence—perhaps better put a symbolic affinity—between the lack of a secure foundation in the institutional history of the Frankfurt School and in its openness to the theoretical lessons of an unexpected influence like Schelling. This is not to say that either can be called the true "origin" of Critical Theory's suspicion of origins for to do so would be to undermine precisely the force of their resistance to a firm and stable *Grund* from which to support critique itself. The Institute's "founding fathers" seem to have understood that the only viable *point d'appui* of critique was in the imagination of a possible future rather than a recollected past, a utopian hope rather than a past moment of originary legitimation.

To clarify this point, one might perhaps compare their practice with that of the American founding fathers as interpreted by another German émigré luminary, Hannah Arendt in *On Revolution*. In that work, Arendt contrasts the attempt to begin *ex nihilo* in the French Revolution, deriving legitimacy from a Rousseauist sovereign general will, with the American Revolutionaries' tacit reliance on prior compacts, covenants and precedents. Comparing it more with the Roman Republic, which drew its authority from the earlier founding of Troy, rather than the act of creation *ex nihilo* by the Hebrew God, she argued that the American Revolution did not seek a monolithic foundation, a moment of decisionist legitimation before legality. Power, she argues, "was not only prior to the Revolution, it was in a sense prior to the colonization of the continent. The Mayflower compact was drawn up on the ship and signed upon landing" (Arendt 1965). By placing the act of legitimation in a receding train of possible founding moments, prior even to the settling of the colonies out of which the new republic was fashioned, the American experience was one in which the potential for future perfection was as much of a ground for critique as any past episode of actual founding.

It is, to be sure, a long way from the Pilgrims' landing at Plymouth Rock to the founding of the *Institut für Sozialforschung*, and perhaps an even longer one between the Enlightenment hopes of the Founding Fathers and Schelling's obscure arguments about the irrational God whose existence cannot be subordinated to his essence. But what these loose comparisons help us understand is that the *Abgrund* may well be less fatal to a critical theory—and emancipatory practice—than one might suspect. It alerts us to the anarchic moment—in the sense of lacking an original ur-moment or *archē*—in Critical Theory, as well as its surprising similarity to Heidegger's notion of a simultaneous origin that defies a primal ground (*Gleichursprünglichkeit*) (Pizer 1995: 138–148). It allows us to realize that there may be many different starting points and disparate grounds for critical reflection without searching for the one Archimedean point on which critique must be balanced. It is perhaps symbolically meaningful that the actual location of the First Marxist Work Week, sponsored by Felix Weil, was not a luxurious Grand Hotel “equipped with every comfort” at the edge of an abyss, but rather a much more modest train station hotel, owned by a Communist named Friedrich Henne, in the small town of Geraberg bei Arnstadt near Ilmenau in Thuringia (Buckmiller 1990: 145). From such humble origins, although not from them alone, something remarkable came into the world.

## Note

- 1 This essay first appeared in “Politisierung der Wissenschaft”: *Jüdische Wissenschaftler und ihre Gegner an der Universität Frankfurt am Main vor und nach 1933*, eds. Mortiz Epple, Johannes Fried, Raphael Gross and Janus Gudian (Frankfurt, Wallstein, 2016), with many substantive that are footnotes absent in this version.

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# REVISITING MAX HORKHEIMER'S EARLY CRITICAL THEORY

*John Abromeit*

In the following, I will describe the emergence, development and transformation of what I call the “Early Model of Critical Theory” in Max Horkheimer’s writings from approximately 1925 until 1940.<sup>1</sup> Erich Fromm, in particular, but also Herbert Marcuse and Leo Lowenthal contributed to the formation and elaboration of this model of critical theory, although there can be no doubt that Horkheimer was its principal architect. When Fromm left the Institute and Horkheimer began working more closely with Theodor Adorno at the end of the 1930s, and when Horkheimer adopted significant aspects of Friedrich Pollock’s “state capitalism” thesis during this same time, the stage was set for a substantial shift in the content and aims of critical theory. The shifts would be on full display in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which was finished and first published in a limited edition in 1944. In what follows, I will not address *Dialectic of Enlightenment* or any of Horkheimer’s other writings after 1940. I have chosen to focus on Horkheimer’s early writings, first, because they were his best – in my own view and that of several other prominent commentators (JH1, 51). Second, I am convinced that the early model of critical theory is still, or has become once again, very relevant to contemporary concerns, in a way that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Horkheimer’s other writings from 1940 to 1970 are not. Whereas the latter reflected many of the assumptions of the of state-centric, Fordist capitalism that existed in the mid-twentieth century, his earlier writings were still directly concerned with the threat of capitalist crisis and its links to the emergence of right-wing populist and authoritarian social movements – conditions that have reemerged with a vengeance in the post-Fordist, neoliberal period of global capitalism in which we have been living since the 1970s. I have made the case elsewhere for revisiting the early model of critical theory in light of contemporary concerns, so I will not elaborate upon these brief remarks here (JA2). The currently widespread view of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as the magnum opus of the “first generation” of the “Frankfurt School” is misleading in many ways – because it obscures the differences not only between Horkheimer and Adorno’s independent trajectories before 1940, but also between *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and the early model of critical theory from the 1930s.

In contrast to Jürgen Habermas, who has argued that the early model of critical theory “failed not as a result of this or that coincidence, but because of the exhaustion of the paradigm of consciousness philosophy” (JH2, 518), I would like to argue here that Horkheimer’s critical theory took shape in the period between 1925 and 1930 as an explicit critique of consciousness philosophy as a whole. Horkheimer’s move beyond consciousness philosophy

proceeded along two interrelated, yet distinct axes: a diachronic-historical axis and a synchronic social axis (JA1, 85–90).

The best example of Horkheimer's move beyond consciousness philosophy and into history can be found in a remarkable series of lectures and unpublished essays from the late 1920s, in which he developed a sophisticated materialist interpretation of the history of modern philosophy, from Bacon and Descartes all the way up to contemporary schools such as neo-Kantianism, phenomenology and vitalism. Implicitly following Marx, Horkheimer demonstrated how modern European philosophy represented a mediated expression of the uneven development of bourgeois society. He argues, for example, that the Enlightenment achieved its paradigmatic form in France rather than Britain or German-speaking Central Europe due to the particular constellation of social, economic and political forces there. Whereas Britain had already carried out a bourgeois political revolution in 1688 and was well on the way to establishing a modern market society during the eighteenth century, the development of bourgeois economic and – to an even greater extent – political institutions lagged behind in Continental Europe. Horkheimer interprets the affirmative character of British political economy and the resigned skepticism of David Hume as expressions of a triumphant bourgeois society. Horkheimer views the remaining elements of theology and metaphysics in the German Enlightenment (which he sees, for example, in Kant's efforts to rescue a metaphysics of morality) as an expression of the relatively weak state of bourgeois society there. The spread of market relations in eighteenth-century France testified to the growing strength of a bourgeois class eager to emancipate itself from the remaining constraints of the *ancien régime* and gave Enlightenment ideals a self-consciously political form there. Horkheimer believed that the critical and tendentially materialist principles of the *philosophes* – the right of all men and women to freedom, equality and happiness in this life – were universal ideals. They were, in other words, not only an expression of ascendant bourgeois society; they also pointed beyond it. Horkheimer's lectures demonstrate that a critical, historically specific concept of Enlightenment – very different from the transhistorical concept of Enlightenment that he and Adorno would develop later (JA4) – was central to his thought from early on. Horkheimer placed the Enlightenment, along within the rest of modern European philosophy, within the larger context of the uneven development and subsequent transformation of bourgeois society. In so doing, he insisted that ideas could not be understood purely from the standpoint of consciousness but were always *historically* mediated.

If Horkheimer's lectures represented a decisive step beyond consciousness philosophy along an historical-diachronic axis, then the theory of contemporary society, which he developed during the same period, represented its synchronic counterpart. Horkheimer's critical theory of contemporary society consisted of three main components: Marx's critique of political economy and ideology, empirical social research and a psychoanalytically oriented theory of social and group psychology. Horkheimer explored the continuing relevance of Marx's ideas in *Dawn and Decline: Notes in Germany*. Stylistically and thematically, *Dawn and Decline* represents a continuation of his early novellas, a form of "interior" writing in which he could freely express his most radical, passionate and experimental ideas. In his "exterior" academic lectures and writings in the late 1920s, one finds relatively few or significantly mediated expressions of his interest in historical materialism. But this collection of aphorisms, which was written between 1926 and 1931, makes clear that Horkheimer's interest in Marx remained lively during this time. The collection was not published until 1934, after Horkheimer had already fled Germany, and even then only under the pseudonym of Heinrich Regius. The aphorisms rely on micrological observations of the inequities of everyday life to demonstrate the concrete ways in which people experienced and unconsciously reproduced abstract social domination. Many of them address the social situation in the final years of

the Weimar Republic. For example, in “The Impotence of the German Working Class” (MH1, 61–65), Horkheimer analyzes how the composition of the German working class has been altered by technological developments in production. He focuses, in particular, on the political and ideological divide that had emerged between workers with stable jobs, who tended to support the Social Democratic Party, and the mass of unemployed, who tended toward the German Communist Party. Although his unflinching diagnosis of the deep divisions among German workers seemed to cast doubt on Marx’s predictions about the increasing pauperization, homogenization and unification of the proletariat, Horkheimer did not as a result abandon Marx’s theory. Instead, he recalled Marx’s argument that “there is a tendency in the capitalist economic process for the number of workers to decrease as more machinery is introduced” (MH1, 61), in order to explain the rise of a large unemployed underclass and the resulting schism in workers’ social conditions and consciousness. He also objected to the widespread belief that Marx had advocated a progressive, or even deterministic, philosophy of history. His early study of Schopenhauer and the traumatic experience of World War I had immunized Horkheimer to the idea that progress toward a more free and just society was inscribed in the logic of modern capitalism itself, as many revisionists and Social Democrats had interpreted Marx. Horkheimer recognized that the rational tendencies introduced by capitalism had long since been eclipsed by the irrational tendencies identified by Marx, such as imperialist wars, periodic crises and commodity fetishism. Progressive historical change could be brought about only through conscious intervention, not passive reliance on the “logic” of history or capital. As he would put it later, “as long as world history follows its logical course, it fails to fulfill its human purpose” (EFR, 117). Horkheimer’s rejection of progressive philosophies of history was one example of his efforts to revitalize Marx’s ideology critique. Another can be found in his sharp critique in 1930 of Karl Mannheim’s efforts to relativize Marx’s concept of ideology by interpreting from the standpoint of the sociology of knowledge (MH2, 129–150). But his penetrating observations of the discordant state of the German working class made clear that Critical Theorists should test and, if necessary, reformulate Marx’s concepts in light of changed historical conditions.

This insistence upon a rigorous understanding of present social conditions explains Horkheimer’s interest in empirical social research, which was sparked already during his university studies in the early 1920s. This interest also grew out of Horkheimer’s aforementioned interpretation of the history of modern philosophy, which displayed more sympathy for the empiricist than the rationalist tradition. Furthermore, he believed that an empirical deficit existed in the young discipline of sociology in Germany, which prompted him to turn to the work of American sociologists, such as Robert and Helen Lynd’s *Middletown*, as models for the integration of empirical social research into his own incipient critical theory. In 1929–1930, Horkheimer was able to put his ideas about empirical social research to the test for the first time when he and Erich Fromm organized an empirical study for the Institute of the conscious and unconscious political attitudes of German blue- and white-collar workers. Horkheimer and Fromm’s interest in psychoanalysis informed their conceptualization of the study. Horkheimer wondered why substantial sections of the German working class had initially supported World War I and had proven to be reluctant revolutionaries in 1918/19. With the rising threat of National Socialism, Horkheimer also wondered how the German working class would respond if the National Socialists attempted to seize power. With these concerns in mind, Horkheimer and Fromm used psychoanalytic techniques in their design of the questionnaires and their interpretation of the responses. They distributed over 3000 questionnaires in 1929 and by 1931 over 1000 had been returned. Based on the preliminary results of study, Horkheimer and Fromm were able to identify a divergence between blue- and white-collar workers’ professed political views and their unconscious attitudes, which were,

among many respondents, deeply authoritarian. The preliminary conclusion of the study, that the German lower-middle and working classes would not offer substantial resistance if the National Socialists attempted to seize power, was soon borne out by historical events.

The third component of Horkheimer's theory of contemporary society was psychoanalytically informed social and group psychology. Horkheimer's abiding interest in psychology emerged in the early 1920s, when he was exposed to Gestalt psychology at the J.W. Goethe University in Frankfurt, which was more open than any other German university to innovative research in this field. After abandoning a plan to write a dissertation on a topic relating to Gestalt psychology, Horkheimer's interest shifted to psychoanalysis. In 1927, he underwent analysis with Karl Landauer, a Frankfurt-based psychoanalyst who had studied with Freud and become a member of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society in 1913. Horkheimer's analysis was motivated primarily by intellectual, rather than therapeutic reasons. At about the same time, Horkheimer established a working relationship with Erich Fromm, which would prove decisive for the further development of critical theory. After undergoing analysis in 1924 with his future wife, Frieda Reichmann, Fromm decided to become a psychoanalyst. He completed his training in Frankfurt with Karl Landauer. Soon afterwards, he became an active participant in the Berlin Psychoanalytic Association, which was conducting path-breaking discussions of the social and political implications of psychoanalysis. As we have already seen, Horkheimer was drawn to Fromm not only because of his knowledge of psychoanalysis but also because he had completed a PhD in sociology and was thus in a position to help Horkheimer integrate psychoanalysis into his critical theory of society.

By the time Horkheimer had been installed as the new director of the Institute for Social Research in January 1931, the basic components of his critical theory were already in place: a materialist interpretation of history of modern philosophy and a theory of contemporary society based on a critical synthesis of Marx, empirical social research and psychoanalytic social psychology. The further development of Horkheimer's critical theory in the 1930s should be seen as the attempt to carry out, test and refine these ideas. In his inaugural address as the new director of the Institute, Horkheimer outlined "The Current Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research" in precisely these terms (MH2, 1–14). He begins by showing how Hegel laid the groundwork for modern social philosophy by moving beyond Kant's consciousness philosophy. Nevertheless, Hegel remained beholden to a metaphysical philosophy of history, which justified the newly emergent bourgeois society as part of a preordained process of the historical realization of reason. Since the emancipatory ideals of the bourgeoisie had given way to the reality of class conflict, economic crisis, imperialism and social catastrophes – such as World War I – Hegel's faith in the inherent rationality of history was no longer tenable. But Horkheimer also objected to the two principal contemporary philosophical responses to this situation: a rejection of social philosophy in the name of "rigorous" positivist social research or a rejection of science in the name of metaphysics. As an alternative, Horkheimer argued that social philosophy should grasp bourgeois society as a totality, but not assume that this totality was already rational. To this end, Horkheimer proposed an interdisciplinary research program based on the "continuous, dialectical penetration and development of philosophical theory and specialized scientific praxis" (MH2, 9). Of particular interest for the Institute's future work would be "the question of the connection between the economic life of society, the psychical development of individuals and the changes in the realm of culture" (MH2, 11). By this time, the study of the attitudes of German workers was already well underway; Horkheimer would soon initiate a second major empirical research project on the relationship between authority and family structure in Europe and the United States, which would be published in 1936 (SAF).

In addition to directing these collective projects of the Institute, Horkheimer continued to develop the philosophical and historical foundations of critical theory in a



series of remarkable essays he published over the course of the 1930s. The main themes of Horkheimer's essays from this time were *materialism*, the *anthropology of the bourgeois epoch* and *dialectical logic* (JA1, 227). In the essays "Materialism and Metaphysics" and "Materialism and Morality," which were both published in the second volume of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in 1933, Horkheimer develops a thoroughly historical concept of materialism, in order to elucidate the philosophical foundations of critical theory (MH2, 15–48; MH3, 10–46). Horkheimer recognizes that materialism has usually been a pariah in the history of philosophy, a seemingly easily refuted metaphysical dogma that higher mental processes can be derived from "matter." Horkheimer argues that this definition contradicts the basic anti-metaphysical tendency of materialism to locate reason within history and society, and to see it as a means of improving the quality of human life, and not as an end in itself. Philosophical materialism is less concerned with absolute truths – such as the primacy of "matter" over "mind" – than with the possibilities of augmenting human freedom and happiness at a particular time and place. Materialism has practical, political implications and has often been associated with concrete freedom movements. Its aims and content are derived from the barriers to human freedom and happiness that exist at any given time and its efforts to comprehend and overcome them.

Horkheimer's 1936 essay "Egoism and the Freedom Movements: On the Anthropology of the Bourgeois Epoch" contained the first comprehensive formulation of the theoretical results of his collaboration with Fromm in the early 1930s (MH2, 49–110). Although Horkheimer had already applied psychoanalysis to empirical studies of contemporary society, by this time, he had integrated psychoanalysis into his theory of history as well. He had moved from the "history of bourgeois society" – which served as the foundation for his lectures on modern philosophy in the late 1920s – to the "anthropology of the bourgeois epoch." Horkheimer's use of the concept of anthropology must be distinguished from the tradition of philosophical anthropology, which maintains the possibility of determining fundamental characteristics of human beings outside of history. Horkheimer, in contrast, analyzes the origins and function of the characteristics of man which have become dominant during the bourgeois epoch. Drawing upon Fromm's efforts in the late 1920s and early 1930s to synthesize psychoanalysis and historical materialism (EFR, 477–496), Horkheimer demonstrates how common historical experiences can create similar psychic structures among members of the same social group. Since these psychic structures are relatively autonomous from the dynamic economic base of society, they can play a crucial role in either advancing or – as is more frequently the case – retarding historical progress. Insofar as Marx's theory of history presupposed a relatively straightforward interest psychology, it needed to be supplemented by the more sophisticated insights of psychoanalysis, which could account for the relative autonomy of psychic structures and the frequent willingness of the lower classes to act in ways that ran contrary to their own best interests.

Through a close historical examination of several typical "bourgeois freedom movements" in the early modern period – ranging from Cola di Rienzo and Savonarola to the Reformation and French Revolution – Horkheimer demonstrates how bourgeois leaders mobilized the masses as allies in their struggle against feudal, aristocratic and/or absolutist institutions, while at the same time never allowing their demands to progress to a point that would call into question bourgeois hegemony. Horkheimer views these exceptional instances of open political struggle and mobilization as providing insights into the more fundamental and longer-term process of the emergence and consolidation of a historically unprecedented form of society – modern bourgeois, capitalist society. The dominant character structures of both the bourgeoisie and the lower classes were formed in this historical process. Following Marx, Weber, Nietzsche and others, Horkheimer recognized that both the bourgeoisie and the lower classes were subjected to exceptionally high levels of socially mediated repression. But

the function of this repression differed for the two groups, insofar as the self-repression of the bourgeoisie was at the same time its self-assertion, whereas the repression of the lower classes was tantamount to sacrifice. Horkheimer points to the various ways in which the lower classes were compensated for their sacrifices, from the reward of membership in the imagined community of virtuous citizens, to the tacitly sanctioned permission to persecute internal or external "enemies" who refuse – or are simply accused of refusing – to make the sacrifices demanded of them. The latter point, in particular, reflected Horkheimer's effort to move beyond Freud's naturalization of aggression in a "death drive" by grasping the historically specific forms of cruelty in the bourgeois epoch. But Horkheimer's critique of Freud also drew heavily upon his pioneering analysis of the mutability of libidinal drives. Again following Fromm, Horkheimer showed how the partial and compensatory satisfaction of repressed drives could be used to reinforce existing relations of social domination. Finally, it is important to note that Horkheimer's social and social-psychological analysis of the historically specific forms of demagoguery in "Egoism and the Freedom Movements" provided the theoretical foundations for much of the Institute's later work on prejudice and authoritarianism; the essay can still shed much light on the mechanisms involved in right-wing populist and authoritarian movements today (JA2).

The third key concept in Horkheimer's critical theory at this time was dialectical logic. It represented a much richer reformulation of his reflections on materialism from the early 1930s and a continuing effort to flesh out the philosophical foundations of a critical theory adequate to twentieth-century societies. In letters from the 1930s, Horkheimer speaks repeatedly of his "long-planned work on dialectics" (MH4, vol. 16, 476) and makes it clear that he viewed the essays he was writing at this time as "in truth merely preliminary studies for a larger work on a critical theory of the social sciences" (MH4, vol. 16, 490). Horkheimer's seminal conceptualization of critical theory in his most familiar and influential essay from this period, "Traditional and Critical Theory" (1937, MH3, 188–243), should be seen as the culmination of the first stage of this larger project, which would eventually become – in a much different form – *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. This larger project can only be understood by examining the other substantial essays Horkheimer wrote during this period, including "The Rationalism Debate in Contemporary Philosophy" (1934, MH2, 217–264), "Bergson's Metaphysics of Time" (1934, MH5), "On the Problem of Truth" (1935, MH2, 177–216), "The Latest Attack on Metaphysics" (1937, MH3, 132–187) and "Montaigne and the Function of Skepticism" (1938, MH2, 265–312). When one reexamines these essays together, the contours of Horkheimer's larger project on dialectical logic emerge. Horkheimer develops further his criticism of consciousness philosophy, with its reified notion of the ego, which exists outside of history and society, and its static and dualistic concept of knowledge, which is unable to conceptualize qualitative change or the relationship of knowledge to society. Horkheimer also puts forth the argument that the philosophy of the bourgeois epoch as a whole is characterized by a recurring dichotomy between science and metaphysics. Horkheimer shows how this antinomy attains its most consequential formulation in Kant's philosophy; for example, in his efforts to limit the natural sciences' claims to absolute knowledge while at the same time preserving certain key metaphysical principles in the sphere of practical reason. According to Horkheimer, this antinomy appears in different forms throughout the history of modern philosophy: from Montaigne all the way up to vitalism and logical positivism. Although Hegel's philosophy moved decisively beyond the static and dualistic character of traditional logic, he too ultimately reproduced the antinomy of science and metaphysics, with his notion of history as the preordained self-realization of Absolute Spirit.

Only with Marx's determinate negation of Hegel was the groundwork laid for a genuinely dialectical and materialist critical theory of modern capitalist society. Horkheimer stresses,

in particular, how Marx integrated the findings of the most advanced bourgeois theories of society (Hegel and classical political economy), while at the same time developing a critical conceptual apparatus which also pointed beyond the existing social totality. Horkheimer drew upon Hegel's distinction between understanding (*Verstand*) and reason (*Vernunft*), and Marx's distinction between research (*Forschung*) and presentation (*Darstellung*) to conceptualize the division of labor in a dialectical critical theory of society. In the 1930s, in other words, Horkheimer still believed that critical theory should keep abreast of and – when beneficial – integrate the most advanced findings of traditional theory into its own larger, *critical theory* of history and society. For Horkheimer, critical still meant – as it had already for Kant – self-reflexive theory, but Horkheimer went beyond Kant in his insistence that the guiding concepts of critical theory be dialectical in a historically specific sense. In contrast to traditional concepts, which presuppose the existing form of society as a given, dialectical concepts grasp the given form of society as historical and subject to transformation in the future. Dialectical concepts – such as Marx's concept of capital or surplus value – not only grasp the essential mechanisms at work in the current society and historical epoch, but they also link these mechanisms to exploitation and social domination, and they call for the practical, historical realization of a different society in which these mechanisms – and thus also the concepts that grasp them – would no longer exist. The concepts of critical theory are dialectical, in other words, because they grasp a historically given state of affairs, while also aiming for its abolition, that is, a qualitatively new society in which the concepts would no longer have an object. In short, Horkheimer's dialectical logic project was an attempt to flesh out the philosophical foundations of Marx's critical theory and, where necessary, to reformulate it in light of changed historical conditions.

Although Horkheimer's essay, "Traditional and Critical Theory," makes clear that he still accepted many key aspects of Marx's critical theory of modern capitalist society, it also displays his willingness to question reigning Marxist orthodoxies. For example, Horkheimer criticized the tendency among many Marxists – articulated most clearly by Georg Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* – to view the "standpoint of the proletariat" as the ultimate source of truth in theoretical questions (HCC, 149–222). Critical theory must be willing to oppose the immediate aims or unreflective consciousness of the working class if such aims and/or consciousness undermine the larger, long-term aims of emancipatory praxis. Accordingly, Horkheimer did not hesitate to criticize the "bureaucratic" socialism of the Soviet Union in the 1930s (MH3, 218). But Horkheimer's arguments here do raise the questions of how he justified the truth claims of critical theory and what he viewed as its long-term aims. The first question is what led Horkheimer to elaborate at length his theory of dialectical concepts, or dialectical logic, which we discussed earlier. To reiterate, dialectical concepts differ from their traditional counterparts insofar as they not only grasp the forms of social domination specific to current historic epoch but also seek to guide a historical praxis that would abolish these forms through the creation of a qualitatively new society. The question of the justification or verification of the truth claims of critical theory cannot be resolved in the same manner as traditional theory because those claims presuppose a transformation of the existing, "factual" conditions which would be used to judge them (MH2, 177–216). As Marx put it in his second Thesis on Feuerbach, "The question of whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question. Man must prove the truth [...] of his thinking in practice" (MER, 144). In this regard, critical theory reveals its affinity with the imagination and its opposition to positivism, pragmatism and reified "common sense," which are unable to transcend the given state of affairs (MH3, 221). Regarding the closely related second question, Horkheimer does offer a number of different formulations of the long-term aims of critical theory. He speaks, for example, of a "new organization of labor," a transformation of the blind necessity of capitalism

into conscious planning and a future society as a “community of free men” (MH3, 209, 229, 217, respectively). Yet, in the end, Horkheimer remains true to Marx’s critique of utopian socialism, insofar as he refuses to provide any concrete blueprints for a future, emancipated society. Only through identifying and striving practically to eliminate the essential features of the existing capitalist society can a different society be brought about. Horkheimer writes, “critical theory cannot appeal to any specific authority, other than its inherent interest in the abolition (*Aufhebung*) of social injustice. This negative formulation [...] is the materialist content of the idealist concept of Reason” (MH3, 242).

Whereas the concepts of the anthropology of the bourgeois epoch and dialectical logic marked the culmination of the model of early critical theory in Horkheimer’s thought, the period from 1938 to 1941 witnessed a significant shift in some of his basic positions and set the stage for a new phase in the development of critical theory. This important theoretical shift cannot be fully understood without first examining certain crucial changes in Horkheimer’s life during this time. Foremost among these changes was Horkheimer’s split with Erich Fromm and his increasingly intimate working relationship with Theodor W. Adorno. Fromm had been Horkheimer’s most important theoretical interlocutor from their collaboration on the empirical study of German workers in 1929 through the publication of the *Studies on Authority and Family* in 1936. During this time, Horkheimer remained distant from Adorno and, to a surprising extent, critical of his work (JA1, 349–393). But when Fromm began to move away from his earlier, more or less orthodox psychoanalytic position in the mid-1930s, serious tensions began to develop between him and Horkheimer. Fromm had become increasingly critical of Freudian drive theory, and he began increasingly to privilege social over sexual factors in the formation of character and the etiology of neuroses. Adorno, who was living in exile in Oxford at the time, attacked Fromm’s revisions of Freud in a letter to Horkheimer in March, 1936, claiming that they represented a “genuine threat to the line of the *Zeitschrift*” (MH4, vol. 15, 498). The final break between Horkheimer and Fromm was precipitated by a financial crisis at the Institute in the late 1930s. In the meantime, Horkheimer had patched up his relationship with Adorno, who left Oxford in February 1938 and finally became an official member of the Institute upon his arrival soon thereafter in New York. Horkheimer’s theoretical collaboration with Adorno in the following years would lead to a reconfiguration of his own thought of the tradition of critical theory as a whole, which found its first full expression in 1944 with the publication of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

Horkheimer’s theoretical shift in the late 1930s and early 1940s has been variously described as a “pessimistic turn” (TLSD, 104–120), a “rephilosophization of critical theory” (TP, 106) and a shift from “the critique of political economy to the critique of instrumental reason” (EFR, 20). The most important overall factor in this shift was Horkheimer’s adoption of a modified version of the “state capitalism” thesis, which had been worked out over the course of the previous decade by his long-time friend and Institute colleague Friedrich Pollock (EFR, 71–94). Pollock and Horkheimer viewed state capitalism as the logical conclusion of a process that had begun with the rise of liberal capitalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and continued with the transition to monopoly capitalism around the turn of the century. Whereas liberal capitalism had been defined by a large number of small and medium-sized privately owned firms, which competed with each other in both domestic and international markets and whose relations were regulated by formal law, under monopoly capitalism increasingly large corporations and cartels came to dominate domestic markets and compete with each other at the international level, beyond the restraints of formal law. State capitalism reinforced and completed these tendencies by bringing the large corporations and cartels under state control for the purposes of more efficient, planned domestic production and distribution and more effective international competition.

Horkheimer identified the “integral statism” of the Soviet Union as the purest form of state capitalism, but he viewed fascism and the new state-interventionist economies of Western Europe and the United States as different versions of the same basic form. What characterized state capitalism everywhere, according to Horkheimer, was the tendential elimination of the economic, social and cultural forms of mediation peculiar to bourgeois society in its liberal phase. These included not only the market, the rule of law and replacement of individual owners by shareholders or the state, but also relatively autonomous spheres of bourgeois cultural life, such as art, the family and even the individual him or herself. Social domination had, in other words, become much more direct under state capitalism. The independent economic dynamism of capitalism had been replaced by the primacy of politics. The operations of politics came increasingly to resemble a common “racket”: survival and protection were secured through obedience to the most powerful groups (MH4, vol. 12, 287–292). Capital and large labor unions collaborated in the planning of the economy and divided up the spoils between them. Insofar as surplus value continued to be produced and appropriated by a dominant social class, capitalism still existed, but the political and ideological integration of the working class eliminated the possibility of any serious opposition emerging in the future.

Horkheimer’s acceptance of the state capitalism thesis reflected the changed historical realities of state-interventionist economic models which arose in the mid-twentieth century. From our contemporary perspective, it is clear that “state capitalism” was not the “end of history” – as Horkheimer and Adorno feared at the time – but rather a new phase in global capitalist development which would give way to the current post-Fordist, neoliberal phase of global capitalism in the 1970s and 1980s. But Horkheimer’s adoption of the state capitalist thesis brought with it a fundamental rethinking of many of the basic assumptions that had informed his critical theory in the 1930s. First, the focus of critical theory shifted from a historically specific critique of social domination within modern capitalism, to a transhistorical critique of instrumental reason and the domination of nature (JA4). Second, this shift was reflected in the increasing prominence of a negative philosophy of history, which Adorno had adopted from Walter Benjamin in the late 1920s. Third, Horkheimer became increasingly skeptical about the emancipatory character of the Enlightenment ideals that had guided his earlier work. During the early phases of his project on dialectical logic, Horkheimer still believed in the possibility of a materialist reinterpretation and realization of basic Enlightenment principles. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* demonstrated clearly his new conviction that only a radical critique of these principles could create a new, self-reflexive concept of Enlightenment that could transcend its inherent limitations. Fourth, Horkheimer’s newfound pessimism about the Enlightenment also translated into a radical critique of science in its traditional forms. Whereas Horkheimer’s model of critical theory in the 1930s rested heavily upon a critical integration of research from a wide variety of scientific and scholarly disciplines, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno stated unambiguously that they had to abandon their trust in the traditional disciplines (DoE, xiv).

In conclusion, many of the basic assumptions of the model of early critical theory, which had guided Horkheimer and the Institute’s work in 1930s, had been called into question by the early 1940s. A new phase in the history of critical theory had begun. I will not describe that new phase in Horkheimer’s work here. I would like to reiterate, however, that the model of early critical theory may well be more relevant to contemporary concerns, insofar as it reflected the particular dynamics of liberal and monopoly, but not yet state, capitalism. More than any other single historical experience, the emergence of fascism during a period of capitalist crisis and, in particular, a failed attempt to reestablish liberal capitalism in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, shaped the formation of early critical theory. Horkheimer and Fromm paid particularly close attention to the social and social-psychological dynamics

of authoritarianism and right-wing populism that made the triumph of fascism possible. At a time when the prosperity and security of the “Affluent Society” and the “Golden Age” of post-World War II capitalism have become a distant memory, and nearly four decades of the hegemony of global neoliberal capitalism have recreated the social and social-psychological conditions for the emergence of the authoritarian and right-wing populist movement on a scale unprecedented since the 1930s, the analyses of early critical theory have become *unheimlich aktuell* (uncannily timely) once again (JA2). Of course, the social and historical conditions are qualitatively different today from the 1930s, and substantial analysis of new forms of capitalist crisis and its relationship to new authoritarian and right-wing populist movements in Europe, the United States and elsewhere would need to be based on extensive empirical studies of those movements. But the uncanny persistence of such phenomena makes it all too clear that we are still living in the bourgeois epoch, and that Horkheimer and the Institute’s analyses of the social forms characteristic of that epoch are still a valuable theoretical resource and one eminently worthy of reconsideration, particularly in light of the inability of more recent normative approaches to critical theory to adequately analyze such phenomena (JA3).

### Note

- 1 This chapter is a revised version of the second section of the following essay of mine: “Max Horkheimer and the Early Model of Critical Theory,” *The SAGE Handbook of Frankfurt School critical theory*, vol. 1, *Key Texts and Contributions to a Critical Theory of Society*, eds. Werner Bonefeld, Beverly Best, Chris O’Kane and Neil Larsen (Los Angeles and London: SAGE, 2018). This revised version appears here with the permission of SAGE Publications.

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# THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL AND THE ASSESSMENT OF NAZISM

*Udi Greenberg*

In the years following the creation of the Third Reich in 1933, European thinkers in exile fiercely debated the extent of its uniqueness. Was Nazism a phenomenon rooted in particular German pathologies of the early twentieth century, or did it exemplify broader trends in European or even modern society, and could thus emerge again elsewhere? While historians such as Hans Kohn and novelists such as Thomas Mann believed that Germany had followed a “special path” that led it to Hitler (Kohn 1944; Mann 1947), political theorists and philosophers were much more inclined to identify Nazism as an extreme example of widespread patterns. In her *Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt 1951), for example, philosopher Hannah Arendt claimed that Nazi “totalitarianism” had emerged from European imperialism in Africa and Asia, a racist endeavor that included also Britain, France, and other democratic regimes, implying that a similar violent autocracy could emerge in these latter states. Similarly, the economist Friedrich Hayek’s *Road to Serfdom* (Hayek 1944) argued that Nazism was the product of the growth of state power and centralized economic planning, a process which he warned was unfolding also in the United States. The leading figures of the Frankfurt School, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, shared this outlook, locating Nazi brutality in the culture and psychology of Western culture. In their classic *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Adorno and Horkheimer 2007) and other publications, they interpreted Nazism as the product of a profound impulse for domination and annihilation of “otherness,” which had been rife in Western cultures for centuries and which late capitalism had significantly boosted. This is why, despite their lasting interest in the Third Reich, their reflections on it remained submerged in writings on American and other cultures. For many of the émigré generation, the Nazis were of crucial importance because they revealed the persistent dangers lurking everywhere in the industrial world.

While scholars of the Frankfurt School have mostly focused on Adorno and Horkheimer, they were far from the only members of the Institute for Social Research to express their views on Nazism. Remembered less today, but well known at the time, the Institute also supported the works of legal scholars Otto Kirchheimer and Franz Neumann, whose celebrated essays and books in the 1930s and 1940s broke new ground in the Marxist study of Nazi law, politics, and economics. In fact, Neumann’s mammoth 1942 book, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism*, was considered by many at the time to



be “unquestionably the best work on the subject” (Sweezy 1942, 281). On the strength of their reputations, Kirchheimer, Neumann, and other members of the school were hired by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) to serve in its Research and Analysis Branch (Katz 1987; Laudani 2013). Yet, despite the considerable interest these works sparked upon their publication, after 1945 the Frankfurt School’s legal scholars never enjoyed the attention accorded to Arendt, Hayek, or Adorno and Horkheimer. Their works remained out of print and did not enter the canon of writing on Nazism. Over the past two decades, several political scientists have explored their works (Scheuerman 1994, 2008; Kelly 2003; Offe 2003). Still, their revival has been partial at best, and Kirchheimer and Neumann’s work remains familiar mostly to specialists of legal history.

Examining Kirchheimer and Neumann’s assessment of Nazism is more than a historical curiosity. Although at the time their focus on law, politics, and economics was less innovative than Adorno and Horkheimer’s insistence that psychology and culture lay at the core of modern human relations, their scholarship was part of an ambitious intellectual project that similarly sought to refigure Marxist theory in light of the realities of modern capitalism. Long before the Third Reich’s ascendance, the Frankfurt School’s legal scholars harbored concerns that capitalism not only fostered economic injustice but also chaos, violence, and irrationality. By studying Nazism, they sought to provide the intellectual tools to strengthen and stabilize modern society and overcome the vicious impulses that they feared could destroy it from within. To be sure, the tendency of readers to overlook their intellectual ambitions and novel arguments has not been accidental. Rich in technical legal jargon and filled with numerous empirical examples, their publications often obscured their theoretical insights. Moreover, the emergence of the Nazi genocide as the center of interest in Hitler’s Reich has rendered Kirchheimer and Neumann’s legal and economic analysis less appealing. Having published their works before the Holocaust’s full scope became known, and having never written about it systematically thereafter, their approach appeared woefully inadequate to those who sought to understand the depth of the Nazi regime’s horrifying dynamics. Despite these glaring shortcomings, their theories still merit attention. They offer some of the richest explorations of law, economics, and politics written in the Marxist tradition.

To illuminate the origins and evolution of Kirchheimer and Neumann’s theoretical contributions, this essay progresses in three steps. First, it explores the genesis of their thinking during the Weimar Republic (1919–1933), before Hitler’s rise to power. In particular, it focuses on the era’s intense debates over the relationship between socialism, law, and the state, and on the two thinkers’ innovative efforts to reconcile Socialism with liberal conceptions of law. The essay’s second section explains how Kirchheimer and Neumann’s ideological project reached its culmination in their assessments of the Third Reich. It highlights how they came to define Nazism as a regime of perpetual and deliberately fostered anarchy, an assault on the very concept of state, which could have occurred outside of Germany. Finally, the last part briefly discusses how their work, and Neumann’s in particular, conceived Nazi racism and anti-Semitism, and concludes with a few reflections on the limits and lacunae of their approach. Together, these sections chart the broad contours of the two thinkers’ intellectual project, its many penetrating insights as well as its significant weaknesses.

### **Capitalism and Law in the Weimar Republic**

The roots of Kirchheimer and Neumann’s ideas are found long before the Nazis’ rise to power, in the intellectual debates surrounding the German Left and its political predicament after World War I. On the one hand, the revolution that ended Germany’s war in

1918 and led to the creation of the Weimar Republic marked a historic Socialist triumph. The Socialist party, long the outcast of German politics, was catapulted to power, which allowed it to expand substantially workers' rights and welfare around the country. On the other hand, the republic brought with it bitter disappointments. Unable to achieve a parliamentary majority, and facing violent uprisings from reactionaries on the right and communists on the left, the Socialists were forced to compromise with middle-class and nationalist movements, allowing many of the old elites—especially in the military and judiciary—to retain their privileged positions. Moreover, the Socialists refrained from implementing their key agenda, the nationalization of major industries. In the eyes of many, nothing symbolized Socialism's achievements and failures better than the Weimar Constitution, named after the town in which it was ratified in 1919. While it enshrined countless Socialist demands, from a minimum wage to broad-based health care, as basic legal rights, the constitution also upheld the supremacy of anti-Socialist principles, most importantly the sanctity of private property.

Over the following years, the legitimacy of the fragile compromise embodied in the Weimar Constitution stood at the center of vibrant intellectual debates. Most of Germany's leading political and legal scholars, who largely shared an anti-Socialist bent, heaped scorn on the constitution and sought to expose the dangers that its social legislation allegedly posed to the nation. Of these many attacks, two were particularly important for the evolution of Kirchheimer and Neumann's thought. The first line of critique, which drew heavily upon the work of the liberal sociologist Max Weber, regarded Socialism as an alarming threat to the rule of law, defined as a regime in which state power was limited by predictable, egalitarian, and universal laws. According to Weber and his followers, who considered the rule of law to be modernity's greatest achievement, the rise of modern law was profoundly tied to the emergence of capitalism. It was the proponents of free enterprise, who required the predictability and stability for their commerce, contracts, and investments, who pressured states to embrace the rule of law (Weber 1978a: 311–640). For this reason, Weber and other liberal scholars feared that Socialism's hostility to private property and free competition endangered the pillars of legal rationality and predictability. By making the state an arbiter of economic struggles, and enshrining the working class' demands as constitutional rights, the constitution's social clauses threatened the law's abstract universality. Weber went so far as to warn that such methods could resurrect feudalism's irrational structures, in which different laws applied to certain individuals or groups. In this dark world, modern "formal" law would mutate into a "deformalized" system (Weber 1978b: 641–901).

The second, and even more damning, intellectual assault on Weimar's socio-legal structure was led by the nationalist and authoritarian jurist Carl Schmitt. According to Schmitt's pessimistic ontology, modern politics was the stuff of inevitable and violent conflict between groups. The state's duty was to prepare for such struggles by moderating domestic tensions and achieving "homogeneity," a notion that for Schmitt referred to ethnic and national unity. In Schmitt's universe, the state's laws and institutions were not meant to curtail the power of rulers or to force them into negotiations with others. Rather, their sole legitimate function was to provide leaders with the means to suppress internal friction, to strengthen the national collective, and to establish a strong "total state" (Schmitt 1931, 1996a). Not surprisingly, Schmitt and his students viewed the social rights enshrined in the Weimar constitution as the epitome of the Republic's disastrous erosion of unity and a reflection of liberal democracy's weaknesses. The product of tedious compromises, these laws empowered workers and more generally transformed the state into a battleground between sectarian interests. Even worse, Schmitt decried what he saw as the Socialists' obsession with "material" and economic matters, which distracted their followers from the "spiritual" and transcendent

values that the nation embodied. Socialist laws, he scoffed, were dismembering the state and posed one of the greatest threats to Germany's homogeneity (Schmitt 1996b).

The work of Kirchheimer and Neumann emerged from an effort to craft a Socialist response to these two dominant theories. Their early publications in the late 1920s and early 1930s positioned them as young stars in the vibrant school of Socialist legal theory, which was led by University of Frankfurt professor Hugo Sinzheimer and University of Berlin jurist Hermann Heller. Thinkers of the Socialist school agreed with Weber that the rule of law was a noble accomplishment; constraining the state through predictable and rational rules was a cornerstone of any decent society. However, they disagreed with Weber in their understanding of history's development. While the rule of law had perhaps emerged under the influence of free markets, as time passed capitalism had begun to turn against it. Unprecedented wealth and power were concentrated in the hands of a few corporations, which threatened to undermine the rule of law's original quest for broad equality. Sinzheimer, Heller, and their students therefore argued that the state must embark on a mission to temper the liberal focus on universal and abstract legal equality by complementing it with economic and social parity. The state had to issue a wave of progressive legislation and court rulings that would mitigate capitalism's deleterious impact by expanding welfare, reinforcing workers' rights, and guaranteeing a more equal distribution of wealth (and, by extension, political power). The Weimar Constitution, in this view, was only the first step in a worthy effort to forge a new legal and political order. It was the first attempt to achieve what Heller famously called the "social rule of law" (Heller 1930).

After studying with both Sinzheimer and Heller, Neumann emerged as one of the most important thinkers to articulate this Socialist response to liberal legal theory. According to his 1931 "On the Preconditions and the Legal Concept of an Economic Constitution" (Neumann 1987a), for example, Weber and his followers may have been right to claim that capitalism helped foster the notion of equality under the law. They had, however, failed to recognize capitalism's dark transformation in the twentieth century, which turned it into a threat to this legal order. When liberal thinkers first crafted their theories of the rule of law, they did so envisioning a world of small and equal competitors, in which the free market could offer a genuine opportunity for social mobility. The twentieth century, however, had witnessed the rise of massive industrial monopolies and mammoth cartels, which had in practice neutralized the market's assumed capacity to spread prosperity. Impoverished workers could never hope to climb the economic ladder, while CEOs devoted most of their energy to suppressing any move toward wealth redistribution. In fact, monopolies frequently threatened to erode the very meaning of abstract and universal law. If, for example, a single corporation dominated the electricity market, all laws in this sphere were shaped with this particular organization in mind, and thus became the "deformalized" law that Weber so feared.

Neumann therefore claimed that in the modern era, it was Socialism that had emerged as the guardian of the rule of law so valued by Weber. If the concept of legal equality was to remain true to its original spirit, it must be complemented by a wide-scale redistribution of wealth. In several essays, Neumann translated these abstract claims into concrete institutional suggestions. Alongside the rights already guaranteed by the Weimar Constitution, such as the right to unionize, Neumann proposed further democratization of the workplace, the introduction of workers' representation on all public planning bodies, and the establishment of special labor courts (Neumann 1928, 1929, 1931). To be sure, Neumann never made clear whether such welfare programs were to become a permanent fixture or merely constituted a transitional step on the path toward the total abolition of private property, as Marxist orthodoxy demanded. Similar to others in Socialist legal circles, Neumann remained ambiguous on this point, and his writings contain conflicting statements on the matter

(Scheuerman 1994: 51). Nonetheless, whatever his ultimate political horizon, Neumann's conviction was that the most pressing political mission of the day was to demonstrate the legitimacy of Weimar's legal and political arrangements. They reflected both the enduring significance of universal and rational legality and its compatibility with socialism.

Equally important, the two legal theorists articulated a response to Schmitt's authoritarian critique of the Weimar Republic. Indeed, despite some scholars' claims that the Frankfurt School was heavily influenced by Schmitt and his terminology (Kennedy 1987), most historians agree that their work reflects a fundamentally different intellectual commitment to a pluralist and democratic, albeit a fiercely anti-capitalist, politics (Söllner 1986; Schale 2011; Olson 2016). This was true especially of Kirchheimer, who began his career as Schmitt's student and admirer (Kirchheimer 1969a), but who by the early 1930s had turned against his mentor. In several essays, Kirchheimer rejected Schmitt's claim that only "homogenous" groups could form functioning states. The modern world, he argued, was comprised of heterogeneous societies containing multiple communities, which states had to recognize and accept. More critically, states had the reasonability to promote social equality—as Socialists had always demanded—and to defend individual liberty and legal rights. As Kirchheimer put it, "the democratic socialist position... [is to] bring about [economic] 'equality of opportunity' while preserving the rights of citizenship" (Kirchheimer 1996b: 80). Ideologies that discarded the individual in favor of the collective, such as Communism and Fascism (which Schmitt admired), were thus illegitimate and dangerous. Democracy alone could peacefully expand social justice and enhance social cohesion without politically subjugating its citizens. Of course, as a Marxist, Kirchheimer insisted that the redistribution of wealth should be democracy's most urgent priority and conceded that Socialist laws would occasionally infringe on some individuals' property rights. But democracy was in the final analysis admirable because it was "the only political system that provides an institutional guarantee that even the most decisive transitions of power need not threaten the continuity of the legal order" (Kirchheimer 1996b: 82).

Even more solidly pluralist was Neumann, who passionately rejected Schmitt's claim that economic and social compromise necessarily curtailed the state's ability to rule. Cooperation between social and economic groups was not only legitimate but was, in fact, an integral part of the state's responsibilities to its subjects. In his short book *Union Autonomy and the Constitution*, Neumann maintained that the social rights established by the Weimar Constitution did not presage political disintegration, as Schmitt had warned (Neumann 1932). Rather, they were integral to the state's responsibility to furnish its citizens with economic and social independence. As he put it, "the economic constitution is the system of norms which orders state and social intervention into economic freedom, which is solely an enhanced legal freedom" (Neumann 1987a: 57). Importantly, as political scientist William Scheuerman shows, Neumann never believed that *all* social tensions should be resolved by the state (Scheuerman 1994: 53). In his vision, unions and other social groups had to engage in independent activity and struggles, and to utilize state institutions only occasionally, lest their autonomy be compromised. In Neumann's democratic and socialist order, the state was to provide citizens with the economic conditions for independence. In fact, the Weimar Constitution showed that even capitalist societies could legislate progressive laws, which, in turn, could open the door to future Socialist gains without state supervision (Neumann 1987b).

Even before the creation of the Third Reich, then, the Frankfurt School's legal scholars began crafting innovative legal and political theories of law, politics, and economics. At the same time that Horkheimer, Adorno, Erich Fromm, and others initiated their groundbreaking fusing of Marxist social science with cultural critique and psychoanalysis, Kirchheimer and Neumann rethought Socialism's relationship to the rule of law and theories of the state. To be sure, their Marxist commitment to the working class often stood in some tension with

their project of universal liberation under the abstract and rational rule of law. Their early writings often privileged workers as the agents of progress and occasionally conflated them with all of humanity, assuming that the empowerment of one class would seamlessly benefit all. Moreover, Kirchheimer and Neumann never fully explained how to resolve potential conflicts between individual and collective rights. If capitalism was so clearly the source of modern ills, curtailing it was a more urgent task than sketching the precise contours of a future Socialist order. Whatever its limitations, in years to come, this intellectual project of adapting Marxist thought would provide the basis for their assessments of Nazism. It would guide Kirchheimer and Neumann's terminologies, penetrating insights, and glaring shortcomings.

### Capitalism and Law in the Third Reich

The Nazi takeover of Germany in 1933 sent shockwaves through the Left's intellectual world. That the Great Depression had led not to a Socialist revolution, but to a brutal and fervently anti-Marxist regime, threw many Marxist assumptions about capitalism's inevitable demise into question. Of course, those who steadfastly adhered to the crude Marxist formula by which the economic "base" always shapes the political "superstructure" could simply dismiss Hitler as the puppet of large corporations. As Bulgarian Communist Georgi Dimitrov famously proclaimed in 1935, Nazism was "the open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic and most imperialist elements of finance capital" (Dimitrov 1935). Yet for more critical thinkers, understanding Nazism became the source of sustained intellectual efforts. From Paris to New York to Mexico City, Marxist intellectuals sought to explain the causes and consequences of Nazism's triumph. Kirchheimer and Neumann, who fled Germany and in 1937 joined the Institute for Social Research in New York City, were among the leading figures in this scholarly campaign. Alongside numerous essays in the Institute's journal *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* and its successor *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, Kirchheimer published a book on Nazi criminal law, *Punishment and Social Structure* (Kirchheimer 1939a), while Neumann produced *Behemoth*, a lengthy study of Nazi legal, political, and economic policy. In line with their previous interests, both authors continued to observe the Nazis through the prisms of law and economics, rarely deploying the cultural, psychological, or sexual explanations becoming popular among their Institute colleagues. Still, by the mid-1940s, these works had broken new ground and joined the vanguard of left-leaning writing on the Third Reich.

Unlike in Weimar, the most immediate interlocutors of the Frankfurt School's legal scholars were not liberals and nationalists like Weber and Schmitt, but other Marxists, specifically the Institute's associate director, Friedrich Pollock. In several essays, Pollock claimed that Nazism represented a new stage in capitalism's evolution that produced a system he termed "state capitalism." In this incipient era, governments around the world had abandoned the free market in favor of price and wage regulation and had assumed control over consumption and production. To Pollock's mind, this shift, in which Germany was only the vanguard, was epochal because it rendered economic subjugation secondary to political control. Investors and employers now no longer ruled the masses through employment and consumption, but had been pushed aside by politicians. "[T]he profit motive," Pollock asserted, had not disappeared, but had been "superseded by the power motive" (Pollock 1941a: 207). In this bleak assessment, which was shared by many others in the Institute (Gangl 2016), capitalism had emerged from the Depression more powerful and stable than ever. The antagonism it inevitably generated between classes, which Marxists believed would lead to its collapse, was largely muted by increased spending on military expansion and government-run employment. Nazism, then, was a "new order," which was likely to survive

for the foreseeable future (Pollock 1941b). In the words of Horkheimer, who agreed with Pollock, state capitalism provided “a new breathing space for domination” (Jay 1973: 155).

While Kirchheimer and Neumann shared Pollock’s conviction that capitalism was crucial to understanding the Third Reich, they believed that he fundamentally misunderstood the new regime. Drawing on their earlier writings, they claimed that Nazism embodied not the replacement of economics by politics, but rather an extreme legal chaos that capitalism was threatening to inflict on the world. According to one of Kirchheimer’s earliest essays in the Institute’s *Zeitschrift*, the Nazis had indeed gained unprecedented power over the heads of large corporations. Hitler and his clique were too powerful to be toppled or managed by industry mogul Fritz Thyssen or metal tycoon Gustav Krupp. It was nevertheless crucial that the regime allowed such corporations to maintain their independence and ownership of their property. “The concentration of economic power which characterizes the social and political development of the Nazi regime,” Kirchheimer wrote, “crystallizes in the tendency toward preserving the institution of private property both in industrial and agricultural production, while abolishing the correlative to private property, the freedom of contract. In the contract’s place the administrative sanction now has become the *alter ego* of property itself” (Kirchheimer 1969b: 108). Neumann was even blunter in his rejection of Pollock’s theory, claiming that “the very term ‘state capitalism’ is *contradiction in adiecto* [a contradiction in terms].” Quoting Socialist theoretician and former finance minister Rudolf Hilferding, he continued, “[o]nce the state has become the sole owner of the means of production, it makes it impossible for a capitalist economy to function, it destroys the mechanism which keeps the very processes of economic circulation in active existence” (Neumann 1942: 183).

The Third Reich, in this view, did not seek to forge a stable economic and political synergy, as Pollock believed. Instead, it had established an odd and hybrid system, which Neumann called a “monopolistic totalitarian economy.” According to Neumann, Germany contained two parallel economic structures. One was controlled by the capitalist corporations that had dominated the economy since the early twentieth century, while the other was operated by the Nazi party itself. In Neumann’s telling, the Nazis recognized that the growing dominance of large corporations increasingly destabilized the economy and exposed the masses to cyclical depressions. But instead of restricting the free market, the Nazis had undergirded it with their own large-scale industries, such as the munitions factories run by Hitler’s second in command, Hermann Goering. The result was a country in which free enterprise had neither disappeared nor declined. If anything, German capitalism was now able to operate with greater brutality against workers and consumers, who were no longer protected by the rule of law. Thus, even the Nazis’ bold forays into the economy did not spell the end of capitalism. “On the contrary, it appears as an affirmation of the living force of capitalist society. For it proves that even in a one-party state, which boasts the supremacy of politics over economics, political power without economic power, without a solid place in industrial production, is precarious” (Neumann 1942: 249–250).

If the Third Reich’s “new order” had turned out to be not particularly new in the economic sphere, Kirchheimer and Neumann believed that it signaled an alarming development, of which they had warned before 1933: the replacement of rational and universal law with the conditions of intentional and perpetual legal anarchy. Neumann underscored this claim by titling his book *Behemoth*, a reference to Thomas Hobbes’s work of the same name, in which the renowned political theorist studied the chaos brought on by the English civil war of the seventeenth century. According to Kirchheimer and Neumann, Germany was ruled by four autonomous power blocs: the Nazi party, the senior civil service, the army, and monopoly capital. These groups were locked in competition over wealth and power, each developing its own chains of command and internal ruling mechanisms. Yet in line with capitalism’s indifference to rational legality, Germany had now abandoned earlier efforts to govern such

different groups under one set of universal and applicable laws. Each bloc followed the path blazed by large corporations by developing its own legislative rules, courts, and judicial processes, which often contradicted those developed by the others. Kirchheimer, who was especially interested in criminal law, highlighted how lawyers and judges increasingly tended to ignore existing legal codes and resorted to using vague and unpredictable concepts such as “the feelings of the people” when crafting their verdicts. The legal establishment had become the servant of the most powerful rulers (Kirchheimer 1939b). Germany, in short, was witnessing the rise of Weber’s nightmarish “deformalized” and unpredictable order. As Neumann bluntly put it in his 1936 *The Rule of Law*, “the law does not exist in Germany” (Neumann 1986: 298).

What made this constellation so harrowing compared to earlier capitalist regimes was the nakedly opportunistic and sectarian impulses that it helped unleash. For, contrary to Schmitt’s claims that weaker legalism would enhance national cohesion and “homogeneity,” German elites displayed zero commitment to the general population and remained intent on furthering their own selfish interests. “Devoid of any common loyalty, and concerned solely with the preservation of their interests,” Neumann wrote, for the ruling groups “nothing remains but profit, power, prestige, and above all, fear” (Neumann 1942: 384). Both authors agreed that, for all its proclamations of “national revival,” the Nazi regime had done little to improve the lives of most citizens. It “provided no support for the independent middle classes in their struggle for survival, but, instead, actually hastened their final decline more than any other single factor in modern German history” (Kirchheimer 1969c: 155). If this loose ruling coalition of oppressive forces did not explode into an all-out civil war, this was mainly because of Hitler’s promise of imperialist conquest and sharing of future spoils. “It is this interdependence between the unquestionable authority of the ruling group and the program of expansion,” Kirchheimer determined, “which offers the characteristic phenomenon of the compromise structure of the fascist order” (Kirchheimer 1969c: 158–159).

Despite its pervasive gloom, this description of the Third Reich also contained a strong dose of optimism. For both Kirchheimer and Neumann assumed that the regime was not as popular as it claimed to be and, in fact, relied upon a growing antagonism between the German elites and the people they ruled. Abandoned due to their leaders’ competition over power and wealth, the masses were bound to see through the regime’s empty promises of prosperity and were likely unmoved by Hitler’s overall ideological message of racial purity and salvation. As Neumann put it,

The promises given by the regime to the masses are certainly sweet, but many of them have been broken... This antagonism must be felt by the masses, which are not simply babes in the woods but have a long tradition behind them, a tradition that imbued them with a critical spirit and made them aware that the primary fact of modern civilization is this very antagonism between an economy that can produce in abundance for welfare but that does so only for destruction.

(Neumann 1942: 378)

Falling back on traditional Marxist views, both Kirchheimer and Neumann remained convinced that most people recognized and were naturally enraged by their “true” position in capitalist society. As long as capitalism continued to exist, it would foster the resentment that could bring about its undoing. If the regime was violent and oppressive, this was at least in part because it recognized its own fragility. No amount of uplifting rhetoric or coercive violence could change this fundamental and potentially destabilizing tension.

In fact, much of the Frankfurt School’s legal scholars’ work was motivated by their desire not merely to understand Nazism, but to expose its weaknesses. Neumann was quite candid

when he explained his rejection of Pollock's theory of state capitalism. "[I]f we accept the assumptions of the state capitalistic theory," he wrote,

the choice is determined solely by political expediency. The rulers are completely free to determine the character of their rule: their system of mass domination is so flexible that it seems potentially invulnerable from within. The present writer does not accept this profoundly pessimistic view. He believes that the antagonisms of capitalism are operating in Germany on a higher and, therefore, a more dangerous level, even if these antagonisms are covered up by a bureaucratic apparatus and by the ideology of the people's community.

(Neumann 1942: 186)

There was more than a little willful self-deception in this sanguine observation. While the Third Reich was certainly violent and oppressive, Neumann ignored its remarkable ability to coopt many of its skeptical opponents, including workers, a feature which contemporary observers and historians alike have often noted was crucial to its success (Baranowski 2004). For Kirchheimer and Neumann, analyzing Nazism was meant at least in part to identify its weaknesses and craft an alternative to it. As Neumann commented in the conclusion to *Behemoth*, his study was meant in part to provide a blueprint for the regime that would replace Nazism with a Socialist and stable democracy (Neumann 1942: 388).

Yet for all their high hopes, the two thinkers' assessment contained a much darker and less traditionally Marxist element. Neumann in particular believed that Germany's descent into chaos revealed the Nazi regime's bizarre and truly unprecedented assault on the concept of the state itself. The Reich was neither the "total state" that Schmitt desired nor the "state capitalism" that Pollock described; rather, it was "a non-state, a chaos, a rule of lawlessness and anarchy" (Neumann 1942: 5). According to Neumann, modern states were "conceived as rationally operating machineries disposing of the monopoly of coercive power. A state is ideologically characterized by the unity of the political power that it wields." But in Germany, there was no individual or institution that functioned as a unifying and final authority. Far from being a supreme leader, Hitler was, in fact, a figurehead whose orders merely reflected decisions made by others. Thus, while the country's four ruling groups informally negotiated among themselves, they never bothered to codify their agreements in binding and universally applicable terms. "There is no need for a state standing above all groups; the state may even be a hindrance to compromise and to domination over the ruled classes" (Neumann 1942: 468–469). Taking a historical view, Neumann further claimed that "National Socialism has revived the methods current in the fourteenth century... It has returned to the early period of state absolutism where theory was mere *arcanum dominationis* [secret of domination], a technique outside of right and wrong, a sum of devices for maintaining power" (Neumann 1942: 380). The Nazis, according to Neumann, had rolled back the modern project of separating authority from specific individuals. Like gangsters, Germany's rulers viewed power and legitimacy as identical; there was nothing above or beyond raw domination.

For Neumann, nothing reflected the Nazis' ingrained and systematic hostility to the state more than their unprecedented competition with state bureaucracy. Ever since the eighteenth century, scholars such as Weber had considered efficient and impartial bureaucrats—police officers, state lawyers, or economic planners—to be the cornerstones of modern governance. Despite the deep-seated hostility between Socialists and the largely conservative bureaucrats during the Weimar period, Neumann shared this conviction and asserted that a robust bureaucracy would be necessary to build a healthy and just Socialist state (Scheuerman 1994: 145–149). The Nazis, however, had deliberately undermined state institutions by developing their own vast bureaucratic apparatus. Party treasurers engaged in economic planning,



Hitler Youth officials helped craft educational policies, and party engineers designed public projects, intentionally competing with state functionaries and limiting their influence (Neumann 1942: 71–72). But these Nazis activists did not operate according to clear and fixed guidelines. They obeyed only the charismatic authority of their leaders and encouraged other citizens, including non-party members, to disregard formal laws that contradicted Hitler's dictates. Similar to a cancerous tumor, the party machine had grown to such an extent that it now rendered state bureaucracy meaningless. The parallel existence of these structures was "a constitutional situation which is self-contradictory" (Neumann 1942: 72), and which intentionally fostered ambiguity and disorder.

According to Neumann, this anti-statist zeal laid bare Nazism's disturbing rejection of rationalism itself. In many ways, this was its most destructive and confusing characteristic. Neumann maintained that unlike any other modern political ideology, Nazism did not seek to tame violence or direct it toward the betterment of society. Instead, Hitler and his followers viewed the perpetual brutality of all against all as the natural state of human affairs. To be sure, rational planning still existed in spheres that required it, such as economic planning. And the regime very rationally crafted its propaganda and employed political terror against its opponents. Yet these were means to achieve goals that were essentially irrational. The Nazis' Darwinist ethos rendered the attempt to legitimize power superfluous because it tautologically assumed that those who held power were by definition superior to those over whom they ruled. In Neumann's eyes, this fetish for violence, and not merely material considerations, was the key to understanding the Third Reich's voracious appetite for expansion. "National Socialism," he wrote, was

incompatible with any rational political philosophy, that is, with any doctrine that derives political power from the will or the needs of man... [This explains the] fundamental antagonism between the productivity of German industry, its capacity for promoting the welfare of the people and its actual achievements.

Thus a "huge industrial machinery in continuous expansion," Neumann darkly concluded, "has been set to work exclusively for destruction" (Neumann 1942: 378).

In recent decades, many scholars have resurrected this line of thought and have portrayed Nazism as a radical departure from modern impersonal regimes toward the primitive worship of a "charismatic" leader. For some, this feature distinguished it as a unique case among all other modern regimes (Kershaw 1993). But for Kirchheimer and Neumann, Nazism was so important because it exposed how potentially destructive capitalism could be *everywhere*, not only in Germany's idiosyncratic case. Both authors never believed that the Nazis were simply the servants of capital. The large industries appeared in their works as only one of four key power blocs and usually as secondary in power to the Nazi party. Moreover, Kirchheimer and Neumann were well aware that the Nazi party itself was not motivated primarily by material economic considerations, despite the pervasive corruption that plagued the regime. Economic spoils were necessary to preserve its ruling coalition, but the party also took its racial ideology very seriously, as evident in its obsession with eugenics and its brutal crusade against Jews, Roma, and other "undesirables." Yet Germany's case was so alarming because it revealed the consequences of capitalism's growing hostility toward legal rationality. The Nazis showed what kind of bedfellows monopoly capitalism could bring together if left unchecked. Capitalism was far more dangerous than Socialists had previously recognized. Its triumph spelled not only economic exploitation but also potentially the collapse of modern civilization.

As was the case during the Weimar period, these theories of capitalism, law, and politics were not without tensions and omissions. Neither Kirchheimer nor Neumann fully

explained how monopoly capitalism facilitated legal and political anarchy *by its very nature*, nor did they elucidate how capitalism could do so outside Germany. After all, the United States at the time certainly operated in an advanced capitalist mode, but did not appear to be tilting toward such chaos. If there was “no specific German trait responsible for aggression,” and Nazi brutality was “inherent in the structure of... monopolist economy,” as Neumann claimed (Neumann 1942: 388), why did this same legal nightmare not afflict other capitalist countries, as his analysis suggested it would? Indeed, both Kirchheimer and Neumann joined the American intelligence establishment without hesitation in 1942, drafting plans for the future U.S. occupation of their former homeland, and remained appreciative of the United States long after the war was over, with Kirchheimer continuing to work for the State Department (Katz 1987; Kettler 2007). Their actions indicate that both believed there *were* regimes in which capitalism, for all its inequalities and injustices, operated quite well alongside state institutions. Nevertheless, their analysis was crucial in highlighting capitalism’s disturbing ability to survive under an irrational and chaotic legal regime. Not only did the free market bring about social and economic exploitation; much worse, it could bring about the denigration of rationality and any hope for peaceful politics.

### **Beyond Law and Economics: Racism and Anti-Semitism**

For all their insights, Kirchheimer and Neumann’s analysis displays its most serious shortcoming in its treatment of Nazi racism and anti-Semitism. Specifically, their tendency to view the Nazis’ vitriolic and intense hatred of “undesirable” minorities, and especially Jews, as ultimately secondary to the regime’s economic and legal character is the point at which their Marxist perspective exemplified its clearest limits. Of course, this perspective was far from unique during the war and the early postwar era. As historians have often noted, in the immediate aftermath of World War II, thinkers, politicians, and jurists almost universally observed the Third Reich’s toxic anti-Semitism and Nazi genocide as but one—and definitely not the foremost—example of the regime’s transgressions (Bloxxham 2001). It was not until the 1960s that scholars began to critically examine anti-Semitism’s fundamental role in Nazi ideology and to conclude that the Holocaust was the towering evil of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, several thinkers, such as Arendt and Adorno, had previously gone to great effort to understand the predatory nature of Nazi violence, viewing Auschwitz as the essence of Nazi politics. In comparison, Kirchheimer and Neumann’s assessment of Nazi racial policies seems like a crucial lacuna, which invites critical engagement.

To be sure, the Frankfurt School legal scholars never ignored Nazi racism and were deeply disturbed by the violence it unleashed. In early 1942, before news of the scope of Nazi atrocities began to reach the West, Neumann described Nazi racism as the regime’s most awful component. “The National Socialist population policy,” he wrote, “is, perhaps, the most revolting of National Socialist policies. It is so completely devoid of Christian charity, so little defensible by reason, so fully opposed to pity and compassion, that it appears as a practice of men utterly pagan.” Neumann decried the Nazi reduction of humans to nothing more than dispensable cells within the complete organism of society. Hitler’s orders revolved around two principles: for women, “[p]roduce as many children as possible so that the earth can be ruled by the master race”; for men, “kill the unhealthy so that the masters need not be burdened by the care of the weak.” Neumann recognized that the obsessive Nazi biologism rendered the Third Reich fundamentally different from other brutal regimes such as the Soviet Union (to which most commentators compared it at the time). “National Socialism and bolshevism are utterly divergent,” he wrote. “Not the persecution of political opponents—which is practiced in both countries [Germany and the Soviet Union]—but the extermination of helpless individuals is the prerogative of National Socialism” (Neumann 1942: 96).

Occasionally, Neumann portrayed Nazi anti-Semitism as a unique ideological force that could not be understood as a cover for other objectives. Devoid of any logic, like “magic,” it was part of the Nazis’ overall rejection of rationality (Neumann 1942: 85).

Such assertions, however, remained marginal to the legal scholars’ overall body of work. Far more frequently, they described Nazi racism and anti-Semitism as part of the regime’s cynical arsenal of distraction, a conscious lie designed to divert attention from its alliance with capitalism. “[T]he so-called non-rational concepts,” namely ethnic unity and racial enemies, Neumann wrote, “are devices for hiding the real constellation of power and for manipulating the masses.” Like the regime’s claim to lead “the struggle of a proletarian race against plutocracies,” racist ideas were “consciously applied stratagems,” carefully designed to mask the fact that wealth and power continued to flow upward from the masses to a small elite. Ultimately, alongside the inherent irrationality of anti-Semitism, there was a far more rational strand to the Nazis’ anti-Semitic ideology. And this rationality was above all else economic, a well-crafted plan to displace the aggressive “anti-capitalist longing of the German people” against invented enemies (Neumann 1942: 379). In light of his optimistic belief in the masses’ critical capacity to see through the regime’s rhetoric, Neumann could not admit anti-Semitism a spontaneously and widely held credence. “[P]aradoxical as it may seem,” he confidently asserted, “the German people are the least anti-Semitic of all” (Neumann 1942: 96), an opinion which was at the time widely shared by other members of the Institute (Jay 1980: 140).

Even in the less economic-centered parts of their analysis, such as Neumann’s discussion of the Nazis’ campaign against the state, anti-Semitism appeared as a tool for the achievement of other goals. As he put it in a secret 1943 report to his OSS superiors, and then a year later in *Behemoth*’s second edition, “anti-Semitic ideology and practice of the extermination of the Jews is only the means to the attainment of the ultimate objective, namely, the destruction of free institutions, beliefs, and groups” (Neumann 1944: 551; Laudani 2013: 28). It furthermore served to implicate countless Germans, especially from the military and the civil service, in the regime’s crimes and thus made it “impossible for them to leave the Nazi boat” (Laudani 2013: 30). Kirchheimer, too, viewed Nazi extermination as an expression of its despise for legal checks on power. In a 1945 memorandum on criminal responsibility (which he drafted in preparation for his participation in the Nuremberg trial), he addressed extermination as one of the many side effects of legal chaos, rather than a special category that demanded separate reflection (Laudani 2013: 464–474). From the perspective of twenty first century readers, it is remarkable how, despite possessing full knowledge of the Nazi genocide, both legal scholars remained committed to what Neumann called the “spearhead theory of anti-Semitism,” in which the Jews served as “guinea pigs in testing a method of repression.” Unable to differentiate between political persecution and full-scale genocide, Neumann speculated that what had been perpetrated against the Jews would soon befall “pacifists, conservatives, Socialists, Catholics, Protestants, Free thinkers and members of occupied peoples” (Laudani 2013: 28–29).

Recognizing how the effort to universalize Nazism’s lessons led to overlooking the uniquely predatory nature of its racism is important for understanding not only Kirchheimer and Neumann but also more recent assessments of Nazism. For a long period of time, historians such as Jürgen Kocka and Saul Friedländer gained much attention by portraying Nazi racism and the Holocaust as unparalleled phenomena, rooted in Germany’s unique history (Kocka 1993, Friedländer 1997). Over the last decade, however, scholars have begun to revive the postwar works of Arendt, Hayek, and Adorno and Horkheimer to claim that Nazism was ultimately an extreme version of broader historical trends in the industrialized world. While countries such as Britain and the United States may have fought Nazism to the death, these scholars argue, perhaps they were not as different as they imagined themselves

to be. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, for example, has maintained that the Third Reich is best understood as one version of the modern welfare state, which also evolved in United States in the 1930s (Schivelbusch 2006). Historians Mark Mazower and Eric Weitz have suggested that Nazism was but one manifestation of Western imperialism's obsession with ethnic cleansing, which also guided British, French, Dutch, and Belgian empire building (Weitz 2003; Mazower 2008). Most provocatively, political theorists Giorgio Agamben lambasted the United States and its "war on terror" as resurrecting the Nazis' legal anarchy. By making the "state of emergency" a permanent condition and detaining prisoners in Guantanamo Bay indefinitely, he claimed, Americans were no different from the Nazis who established concentration camps (Agamben 2005). These critical works have done much to expand contemporary interpretations of Nazism. They invested much energy in an effort to uncover troubling legacies that still influence Western politics. But like Kirchheimer and Neumann, they all downplay predatory anti-Semitism and the Holocaust as fundamental issues that distinguish Nazism from other regimes.

Alongside their many penetrating insights, then, Kirchheimer and Neumann's theories provide an important opportunity to reflect on the limits and problems inherent in any effort to draw broad lessons from Nazism, whether on capitalism or other social, economic, and political systems. The legal scholars' inability to grasp the centrality of racism and anti-Semitism in the Third Reich, or the scope of their toxic consequences, demonstrates how much one has to downplay and overlook in order to explain Nazism's relevance to contemporary politics. It was only by marginalizing anti-Semitism that Kirchheimer and Neumann believed they could expose Nazism's significance for modern economics and law. This is not to say that such a task is futile or meaningless. As long as the Nazi era continues to spark intense emotion as one of modernity's darkest hours, understanding its roots and pointing to its hidden legacies will remain a powerful tool in identifying current evils. But it is only by recognizing the profound limitations of such efforts that one can draw on the Nazis to better understand today's world.

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### Further Reading

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# THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL AND ANTISEMITISM

*Jack Jacobs*

Though certainly aware of antisemitism, the writers associated with the Frankfurt School wrote little about it in the Weimar era, or, for that matter, in the years immediately following the Nazi seizure of power. Horkheimer described fictional antisemitic incidents in sketches he wrote in 1917, long before he became director of the Institute for Social Research. But the first significant piece by any of the major thinkers of the Frankfurt School to attempt to provide a theoretical explanation of antisemitism – Max Horkheimer’s “The Jews and Europe” – was not written until 1938 (and was published in the issue of *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, the Institute’s periodical, dated 1939–1940).

In the opening lines of Horkheimer’s article, which was written in New York, Horkheimer proclaimed,

Whoever wants to explain anti-Semitism must speak of National Socialism. Without a conception of what has happened in Germany, speaking about anti-Semitism in Siam or Africa remains senseless. The new anti-Semitism is the emissary of the totalitarian order, which has developed from the liberal one. One must thus go back to consider the tendencies within capitalism.

(Horkheimer 1989: 77)

Horkheimer pointed out that Jews had obtained political equality in Europe in the wake of the French Revolution, which brought with it both the consolidation of the bourgeois relation of production and of liberalism. But liberal society “which set out as the progressive one in 1789 carried the germs of National Socialism from the beginning” (Horkheimer 1989: 89). Thus, Horkheimer insists “wer vom Kapitalismus nicht reden will, sollte auch von Faschismus schweigen” [“whoever is not willing to talk about capitalism should also keep quiet about fascism” (Horkheimer 1989: 78)].

This declaration forms the framework within which Horkheimer grappled with contemporary antisemitism. In the liberal societies of Europe, such as that which had existed in Germany before the Nazi era, Horkheimer argued, Jews had often been concentrated in “the sphere of circulation” (that is, had often made their living as merchants, in banking, or as middlemen). Horkheimer’s father had owned textile factories. Friedrich Pollock, a member of the Institute whom Horkheimer first met when both he and Pollock were teenagers, and who remained a close friend of Horkheimer for the rest of Pollock’s life, was the son of an industrialist. Both the Horkheimer family and the Pollock family were Jewish. In making the claim that the sphere of circulation “was decisive for the fate of the Jews,” Horkheimer

was reflecting the experiences of that portion of the German Jewish community in which he, and his closest associates, had been raised. But the sphere of circulation, the sector of the economy which had not only provided a livelihood to German Jews in an earlier era but also provided a foundation for bourgeois democracy, was, Horkheimer believed, losing its economic significance. Whereas markets were of crucial import in liberal societies, they were unimportant in those lands in which the state took direct control over distribution. Precisely because they had played such important roles in market economies, and the import of markets themselves had, in totalitarian countries, dramatically diminished, the position of contemporary Jewry in fascist Germany had become extremely precarious. "The Jews are stripped of power as agents of circulation, because the modern structure of the economy largely puts that whole sphere out of action" (Horkheimer 1989: 90). The now powerless Jews become "the first victims of the ruling group that has taken over the canceled function. The governmental manipulation of which, which already has robbery as its necessary function, turns into the brutal manipulation of money's representatives" (Horkheimer 1989: 90). In sum, Horkheimer's explanation for the rise of antisemitism in Germany in "The Jews and Europe" was one which rested on a dramatic alteration in the economic structure of Germany (a movement from one form of capitalism to another) and the emergence of fascist political forms in that country. If Horkheimer's perception, at the time that he wrote this article, of the historic position of Jews in society was one reminiscent of "On the Jewish Question," his understanding of antisemitism in 1938 owed a great deal to the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.

However, Horkheimer also argued in "The Jews and Europe" that *Judenhass*, hatred of Jews, "belongs to the ascendant phase of fascism ... It serves to intimidate the populace by showing that the system will stop at nothing. The pogroms are aimed politically more at the spectators than the Jews" (Horkheimer 1989: 92). Thus, Horkheimer predicted, "Anti-Semitism will come to a natural end in the totalitarian order when nothing humane remains, although a few Jews might."

Horkheimer's article is deeply pessimistic. The concluding paragraph noted that "the progressive forces have been defeated and fascism can last indefinitely" (Horkheimer 1989: 94). And yet, his wording also suggested that he anticipated that since fascist antisemitism was merely a tool of the ruling power, Nazi antisemitism would not continue indefinitely.

"The Jews and Europe" provoked strong reactions – both positive (from, among others, Walter Benjamin) and negative (from Gershom Scholem) (Jacobs 2015: 48–52). Benjamin gushed, after the Second World War had already begun, "the entire time I was reading this essay, I had the feeling of coming upon truths" (Adorno and Scholem 1994: 622). Scholem, on the other hand, described Horkheimer's article as "an entirely useless product... The author has neither any knowledge of nor any interest in the Jewish problem. It is obvious that at bottom no such problem exists for him" (Scholem 1981: 222).

In the period following publication of "The Jews and Europe," Horkheimer came to supplement, and, thereby, alter, the view of antisemitism he had propounded in "The Jews and Europe." However, the understanding of antisemitism in "The Jews and Europe" was not replaced, but rather *aufgehoben*.

Current events (that is, horrifying news of the brutal treatment of Jews in Europe), and the influence of Adorno on Horkheimer (which increased markedly beginning in 1938, at which time Adorno left Europe and joined other members of the Frankfurt School living in the United States), help to explain the differences between Horkheimer's analysis of antisemitism in "The Jews and Europe" and the far more impressive explanation of this phenomenon evident in "Elements of Antisemitism." This is not to suggest that Adorno disagreed, in 1938–1940, with the central thesis of "The Jews and Europe." He did not. In fact, Adorno put a great deal of effort into helping Horkheimer prepare that piece for



publication. However, by the time that Horkheimer's article appeared in print (if not necessarily earlier) Adorno seems to have believed that the economic approach evident in Horkheimer's piece should not stand alone: "Fascism in Germany," Adorno wrote to his parents in February, 1940,

which is inseparable from anti-Semitism, is no psychological anomaly of the German national character. It is a universal tendency and has an economic basis... namely the dying out of the sphere of circulation, i.e. the increasing superfluity of trade in the widest sense, in the age of monopoly capitalism. The conditions for it – and I mean *all of them*, not only the economic but also the *mass psychological* ones – are at least as present here [in the USA] as in Germany...

(Adorno 2006: 40–41)

Adorno's sense that not only the economic but also the other underpinnings of antisemitism ought to be explored and delineated lay at the heart of "Elements of Antisemitism." In the summer of 1940, Adorno wrote to Horkheimer that

I am beginning to feel, particularly under the influence of the latest news from Germany, that I cannot stop thinking about the fate of the Jews any more. It often seems to me that everything that we used to see from the point of view of the proletariat has been concentrated today with frightful force upon the Jews. No matter what happens to the project,

[a research project on antisemitism for which the Institute for Social Research was seeking funds at that time], I ask myself whether we should not say what we want to say in connection with Jews, who are now at the opposite pole to the concentration of power.  
(Wiggershaus 1994: 275)

Horkheimer wrote to Adorno that "I'm convinced that the Jewish question is the question of contemporary society – we're in agreement with Marx and Hitler on this but, in other respects, we are in no more agreement with them than with Freud" (Horkheimer 2007: 166). During this period, Adorno suggested to Horkheimer that the joint theoretical work they planned to write ought to revolve around antisemitism. Horkheimer did not merely assent, but repeatedly asserted that he was determined to write on that theme.

The bulk of "Elements of Antisemitism" (theses 1–5) was written, in 1943, by Horkheimer and Adorno and with input from Leo Lowenthal. Two components of "Elements" (theses 6–7) were added at later points in time.

"Elements" begins with a thesis which is fully consistent with "The Jews and Europe": the notion that fascism emerges from liberalism. The second thesis, however, heads off into new territory, for it argues that plausibly rational explanations of antisemitism, including economic and political explanations, "however correct their individual observations" – like, we can presume, Horkheimer's own explanation of antisemitism in 1938–1940 – do not suffice, because rationality itself is linked to the dominant social process, and thus "submerged in the same malady" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 139).

Horkheimer and Adorno clarify this point in their initial preface to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, dated May 1944:

The discussion ... of 'Elements of Anti-Semitism' deals with the reversion of enlightened civilization to barbarism in reality. The not merely theoretical but practical tendency toward self-destruction has been inherent in rationality from the

first, not only in the present phase when it is emerging nakedly. For this reason a philosophical prehistory of anti-Semitism is sketched. Its 'irrationalism' derives from the nature of the dominant reason and of the world corresponding to its image.

(Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: xix)

Several months before writing this preface, Horkheimer had begun to give a series of lectures at Columbia University. These lectures ultimately gave rise to *Eclipse of Reason*, and it is in this volume (not published until 1947) that we see Horkheimer's understanding of changes in reason spelled out and developed. Horkheimer described two kinds of reason in *Eclipse* – objective and subjective. Objective reason, Horkheimer tells us, "asserted the existence of reason as a force not only in the individual mind but also in the objective world" (Horkheimer 1974: 4). This was the kind of reason on which were founded the systems of Plato, Aristotle, and the German idealists. The emphasis in such systems is on ends, not on means. Subjective reason, on the other hand, "is essentially concerned with means and ends, with the adequacy of procedures for purposes more or less taken for granted and supposedly self-explanatory. It attaches little importance to the question whether the purposes as such are reasonable" (Horkheimer 1974: 1). Subjective reason has come to the fore, and has become the dominant form of reason, in capitalist societies – which is precisely why Horkheimer and Adorno depict the "rational" explanations of antisemitism in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as linked to the prevailing relations of production, and therefore insufficient.

In addition to explanations of antisemitism, infused, as Horkheimer would likely later have put it, by subjective reason, Horkheimer and Adorno propose in the second thesis in "Elements" that we consider the ways in which "the blindness of anti-Semitism, its lack of intention, lends a degree of truth to the explanation of the movement as a release valve. Rage is vented on those who are both conspicuous and unprotected" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 140). As the authors made clear in an earlier version of "Elements," Blacks and Mexicans were among those who were glaringly powerless in other contexts. In fascist Germany, on the other hand, Jews were an obvious target for the enraged.

This is not to say that antisemitism does not also have economic roots. The third thesis argues that "bourgeois anti-Semitism has a specific economic purpose: to conceal domination in production." But the emphasis placed by some – including Horkheimer himself just a few years earlier – on the sphere of circulation is misleading, for it deflects attention from non-Jewish power holders. To be sure, there were Jews who held considerable power in the German economy in the Wilhelmine and Weimar eras. But overemphasis on these individuals can distort the overarching distribution of power insofar as it underplays the many and varied roles of powerful non-Jewish Germans in other spheres.

Horkheimer and Adorno turn next to religious roots of antisemitism, underscoring that, the claims of the Nazis that they disregarded religion and focused on race notwithstanding,

the religious hostility which motivated the persecution of the Jews for two millennia is far from completely extinguished. Rather, anti-Semitism's eagerness to deny its religious tradition indicates that that tradition is secretly no less deeply embedded in it than secular idiosyncrasy once was in religious zealotry.

(Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 144)

Religiously based antisemitism lived on.

In the last of the original theses, Horkheimer and Adorno focused on the relationship between mimesis and antisemitism. Mimesis has existed since prehistoric times, during which humans attempted to become like that which they feared. So too in fascist Germany:

All the gesticulations devised by the Führer and his followers are pretexts for giving way to the mimetic temptation ... They detest the Jews and imitate them constantly. There is no anti-Semite who does not feel an instinctive urge to ape what he takes to be Jewishness. The same mimetic codes are constantly used: the argumentative jerking of the hands, the singing tone of voice, which vividly animates a situation or a feeling independently of judgment, and the nose ... which writes the individual's peculiarity on his face.

(Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 151)

In the first half of 1944, Horkheimer and Adorno added a sixth thesis and argued in it that antisemitism is based on pathic projection. Lowenthal contributed to this thesis by sending Horkheimer his ideas on this notion. Horkheimer, in turn, wrote to Lowenthal that “the projection of aggression or destruction is the most obvious psychological fact of Antisemitism” (Horkheimer 1996a: 549). The sixth thesis as ultimately written suggests that impulses within fascists which they are unable and unwilling to acknowledge are attributed by these fascists to Jews. False projection makes use of age-old mechanisms.

Those impelled by blind murderous lust have always seen in the victim the pursuer who has driven them to desperate self-defense, and the mightiest of the rich have experienced their weakest neighbor as an intolerable threat before falling upon him. The rationalization was both a ruse and a compulsion.

(Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 154)

“Elements of Antisemitism” was published as the final chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In the original preface to *Dialectic*, the authors explain that “Elements” “deals with the reversion of enlightened civilization to barbarism” – that is to say “Elements” explores, confirms, and clarifies a central contention of the book as a whole. Horkheimer and Adorno also explicitly declared in this preface that “the ‘elements’ are directly related to empirical research by the Institute for Social Research” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: xix).

The empirical studies to which Horkheimer and Adorno allude here include both studies undertaken over a period of years with the financial support of the American Jewish Committee, and a study on antisemitism among American workers conducted with the support of the Jewish Labor Committee (sometimes known in Frankfurt School circles as the labor study) (Jacobs 1997: 573–575, 2015: 66–74, 78–82). A final report submitted by the Institute to the American Jewish Committee underscored that antisemitism “appears as an expression of hostility which is an inherent trait of our particular civilization” (Institute for Social Research, “Studies in Anti-Semitism: A Report on the Cooperative Project for the Study of Antisemitism for the Year Ending March 15, 1944, Jointly Sponsored by the American Jewish Committee and the Institute for Social Research,” Max-Horkheimer-Archiv, IX 121: 24). Adorno, Lowenthal, Pollock, and Institute for Social Research affiliates Arkady Gurland and Paul Massing all contributed to one or another of the empirical projects. Adorno’s study (conducted in 1943) of the techniques used in radio addresses by the American fascist agitator Martin Luther Thomas, including Thomas’ use of antisemitism, was eventually published (Adorno 2000: 120–123), albeit decades after it had been written. Much of the research on antisemitism in the empirical studies conducted by other Institute associates, however, never appeared in print.

But there are short, published, pieces by Horkheimer and by Adorno which draw on the empirical studies – including revised versions of talks which each of these writers first delivered at a symposium on antisemitism held, in June of 1944, in California. Horkheimer began his talk by asserting that he had been aware of the seriousness of the problem of antisemitism as early as 1930, and that he had, at that time, attempted (unsuccessfully) to convince communal leaders in Germany, France, and elsewhere of just how serious a problem antisemitism had become. Horkheimer may well have engaged in such efforts. However, it is likely that he did so very quietly and, so to speak, under the radar.

Horkheimer went on to note, in his talk, that his understanding of antisemitism suggested that appeals to “the conscious mind” would not be efficacious “because anti-Semitism and the susceptibility to anti-Semitic propaganda spring from the unconscious” (Horkheimer 1946: 2). He added that though there were obvious differences between antisemitism in Europe and in the USA, the underlying psychological processes evident in both areas were very similar: “The basic features of destructive hatred are identical everywhere. Socio-political issues determine whether or not they become manifest” (Horkheimer 1946: 5–6). Horkheimer alludes to the argument he had made in “The Jews and Europe” while discussing the history of antisemitism in this talk, arguing that “the only time when destructive anti-Semitism remained more or less dormant was during the nineteenth century, the classical age of liberalism... But that liberal period has definitely come to an end in Europe, mainly for economic reasons” (Horkheimer 1946: 7–8). The reason this had occurred was “the disappearance of the intermediary sphere of circulation...” Centralized agencies had taken over the sphere which had formerly been occupied by independent entrepreneurs. They had not only eliminated much of the economic area previously employing Jews, but had also abolished the individual. Horkheimer’s argument here on alterations in the state of individuality is particularly noteworthy. It was a core contention of the Critical Theorists that individuality had markedly diminished in contemporary societies and that humans were increasingly manipulated. “The individual ... undergoes very profound changes under the impact of monopolization and standardization” (Horkheimer 1946: 8). The changes which had rendered Jews powerless were linked to changes transforming (other) individuals into members of masses – more easily swayed by antisemitic agitators.

Adorno’s talk at this same conference, based in part, as he explicitly stated, on work which had been done by Lowenthal and Massing as well as his own prior research, focused directly on the antisemitic propaganda by American fascist agitators and organizations. It emphasized that the agitators and organizations in question attempted to win adherents via unconscious mechanisms, not by advocating on behalf of positive political ideas. It also underscored that this tactic was conscious and planned (Adorno 1946). Both talks strongly suggest that the empirical studies of antisemitism conducted under the auspices of the Institute for Social Research were intertwined with the theoretical works of Horkheimer and Adorno.

Additional evidence in support of this contention is provided by a long memorandum by Adorno on the labor study written near the end of 1944. Adorno argues in this memorandum that antisemitism had an “essentially psychological, irrational nature ... The object plays but a minor role as compared to the tendency of the subject” (“Memorandum from T. W. Adorno re Evaluation of Participant Interviews (Labor Project)”: 16, November 3, 1944, P. F. Lazarsfeld Collection, Box 20, Columbia University). He also argues, among other matters, that “proof of the interconnection between antisemitism and ‘oppressed mimesis’ may be gleaned from the interviews” conducted in conjunction with the labor study.

The interconnections between the empirical work on antisemitism conducted by individuals associated with the Frankfurt School and the theoretical work on that theme written, primarily, by Horkheimer and Adorno are also apparent in the five book series “Studies in Prejudice,” sponsored by the American Jewish Committee. Horkheimer was a co-editor of

the series. The most influential volume in this series was and remains *The Authoritarian Personality*, a significant portion of which was written by Adorno. The section of this book credited to Adorno, "Qualitative Studies of Ideology," argued – as had "Elements" – that antisemitism is projective and "that anti-Semitic prejudice has little to do with the qualities of those against whom it is directed" (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, Sanford 1950: 607). Adorno pointed, in other words, to the ways in which antisemitic attitudes may be explained not by Jewish attributes or behaviors, but rather by the psychological needs and wants of antisemites. Adorno also noted that there is a link between antisemitism and anti-democratic ideas. Indeed, antisemitism often has antidemocratic consequences.

At a marginally later point in his contribution to *The Authoritarian Personality*, Adorno discussed so-called ticket thinking – the core notion of the seventh and final thesis in "Elements of Antisemitism," added to "Elements" sometime between the end of the Second World War and mid-1947. This thesis began with the provocative sentence "But there are no longer any anti-Semites" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 165). By this the authors meant that antisemitism was not, in the postwar era, a monistic ideology. It had, rather, become "a plank in the platform," part and parcel of a fascist orientation, alongside, for example, an anti-union stance and opposition to Bolshevism (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 166). The actual experience one may have had with Jews becomes irrelevant. When one accepts the ticket, one accepts its components.

The empirical studies assessed by Adorno in *The Authoritarian Personality* were reported by him to have found evidence of ticket thinking. These studies were also said to have pointed to a distinction between "what the subject professes to think about politics and economy and what he really thinks" (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, Sanford 1950: 671). This distinction was a crucial one in the work on antisemitism conducted by Adorno in the 1950s.

*The Authoritarian Personality* emphasized the subjective aspects of prejudice and antisemitism. However, in an unpublished piece, "Remarks on 'The Authoritarian Personality,'" which was most probably written in 1948 (and which reads as if it may have been intended to serve as an introductory chapter to the published book), Adorno took pains to underscore that

We are convinced that the ultimate source of prejudice has to be sought in social factors which are incomparably stronger than the 'psyche' of any one individual involved... Thus we fully realize that limiting the study to subjective patterns does not mean that, in our opinion, prejudice can be explained in such terms.

(Adorno, "Remarks on 'The Authoritarian Personality,' by Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, Sanford," Max-Horkheimer-Archiv, VI 1 D: 72)

Adorno's "Remarks" also noted that he did not see contemporary, totalitarian antisemitism as deriving from

a specific [historical] antisemitic tradition. Its historical roots are rather to be found in the general trend towards ever-increasing "integration" of the individual into the social totality and, concomitantly, the increasing sacrifices that civilization demands of its supposed beneficiaries. There is no unbroken historical continuity between older forms of anti-semitism and the present totalitarian brand ... Modern anti-semitic ideology is the antidote against the sufferings entailed by rational civilization rather than the immediate expression of either this civilization or the kind of irrationality boasted by the anti-semite.

(Adorno, "Remarks on 'The Authoritarian Personality,' by Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, Sanford," Max-Horkheimer-Archiv, VI 1 D: 73–74)

By the time *The Authoritarian Personality* was published, both Horkheimer and Adorno had moved back to Germany. Together with Pollock, they reestablished the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt. The first significant project organized by the Institute during this period was the study which was ultimately published under the title *Group Experiment*.

The subject of *The Authoritarian Personality* was rather different than of the *Group Experiment* – the former focused on links between the personality traits of those (Americans) studied and their prejudices during the course of the Second World War; the latter looked at psychological legacies of Nazism among Germans after the end of that war. The methodologies used in these two books were also quite different from one another. The *Authoritarian Personality* was rooted, in part, in a questionnaire which was intended to identify attitudes toward Jews and other themes indirectly, that is without explicitly asking questions about Jews. Adorno informed Horkheimer in 1944 that he had distilled a number of these questions “through a sort of work of translation from the ‘Elements of Antisemitism’” (Adorno to Horkheimer, November 9, 1944, Max-Horkheimer-Archiv, VI 1 B 194). *Group Experiment*, on the other hand, was based not on a questionnaire, but rather on a series of meetings with small groups, each of which had a moderator and each of which was presented with a stimulus intended to provoke revelations about relevant views. But these differences notwithstanding, the understanding of antisemitism in these two works was broadly consistent.

Even before the end of the Second World War, Adorno already believed, as he wrote to Lowenthal, that

unconsciously every German knows what happened to the Jews but ... they repress this knowledge for the sake of their own psychological comfort. In the first years of the Hitler regime I heard again and again whenever the atrocities were mentioned people say ‘but the Führer does not know that’. I think they use the very same pattern for psychological self-excuse.

(Adorno to Lowenthal, September 25, 1944, Max-Horkheimer-Archiv, VI 17 223)

This sense of the matter, also implicit in *Group Experiment*, sheds light on the meaning of the empirical studies on antisemitism for the Critical Theorists. The empirical studies were not so much raw material on the basis of which theoretical explanations were created. They were, rather, often seen as ways to test and confirm ideas and theories which had already crystallized. As Adorno once put it, “sometimes social psychology and sociology are able to construct concepts that only later are empirically verified” (Adorno 1998b: 198).

The empirical research discussed in *Group Experiment* was conducted in 1950 and 1951. A number of small groups of Germans, of varying generations, classes, and occupations – such as a group of unemployed women, one of high school students, members of a youth group, a group of local Bavarian dignitaries, and a group made up of self-employed merchants – were constituted. Each of these groups was told of a letter, purportedly written by a soldier who had served with the occupation forces in Germany. The letter presented this fictional soldier’s impressions of the Germans who he had allegedly encountered, and noted, among other matters, that these Germans “have the feeling that the world did the greatest injustice to them” and that these Germans “are still hostile to the Jews.” Having been exposed to this document, the groups of Germans gathered by those conducting this experiment proceeded to discuss relevant matters in the presence of a moderator and in a context in which, the Critical Theorists believed, participants would expose not only their manifest opinions but also those of their opinions which were latent. Horkheimer conceived of these conversations as emulating those among passengers who happen to encounter one another on a train.

Much of Adorno’s qualitative analysis of a sample of the results of these experiments revolved around the defense mechanisms evident among German participants in the group

experiments through which these participants coped with feelings of guilt, often unconscious, for actions by Germans during the Nazi years. Those participants in the group experiments who were, in Adorno's terms, most open minded were most likely to concede guilt and least likely to manifest strong defense mechanisms against admitting such guilt. Those who were "nationalistic," on the other hand, rationalized and repressed their latent guilt. Adorno's analysis led him to explore (among other matters) German attitudes toward Jews in the era following the Holocaust.

Adorno discussed, for example, projection of guilt from the perpetrators to the victims. Certain participants in the group discussions insisted that Jews were "themselves to blame for everything that happened to them. The legend of ritual murder, Jewish unscrupulousness, the shirking of physical work – no anti-Semitic accusation against the Jews" was "too absurd to not be repeated" (Adorno 2010: 153). He also comments that antisemitism, which transfers negative stereotypes to a whole group, would be unthinkable without the method of false generalization (Adorno 2010: 104).

*Group Experiment* was published in 1955 – and was greeted, by some, with skepticism. The methodology of *Group Experiment* was particularly harshly criticized by Peter F. Hofstätter, who published a review in the *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* in which he argued that the study in question was attempting to unmask and accuse the entire German nation (Adorno 2010: 189–196). Adorno, however, strongly defended the Institute's work and responded to Hofstätter – who actually had good reason to feel guilty about his own relationship to the Nazi regime – by bitingly commenting that "in the house of the hangman, one should not mention the noose; otherwise one might be suspected of harboring resentment" (Adorno 2010: 208, 32).

Max Horkheimer shared the views on antisemitism propounded by Adorno in *Group Experiment*. In a letter to Franz Spelman (a correspondent for *Newsweek*) written in mid-1956, Horkheimer noted that one of the key sources of the antisemitic passion in Germany stemmed from "unmastered, repressed, guilt feelings" (Horkheimer 1996b: 351).

Both Horkheimer's attitude toward antisemitism in the 1950s and that of Adorno were affected by their own experiences in Germany during that decade. At a faculty meeting in 1956 which had been called in order to discuss the promotion of Adorno to the rank of professor, a historian, Helmut Ritter, proclaimed that such a step would be an example of favoritism. "To make a career in Frankfurt," Ritter asserted,

you had only to be a Jew and a protégé of Horkheimer. Horkheimer was present at the meeting. He accused Ritter of anti-Semitism and left the room, slamming the door. He then applied to the ministry in Wiesbaden for early retirement.

(Müller-Doohm 2005: 368–369)

This incident was not merely infuriating for Horkheimer, but all but certainly humiliating for Adorno.

Adorno expanded upon the Institute's approach to the study of antisemitism in "The Meaning of Working Through the Past," first presented in 1959. He argued in this piece that "National Socialism lives on" (Adorno 1998a: 89) and that he considered "the survival of National Socialism *within* democracy to be potentially more menacing than the survival of fascist tendencies *against* democracy" (Adorno 1998a: 90). Referring to the antisemitic notion that the Jews had furnished an instigation of some kind or another for their treatment at the hands of the Nazis – the same phenomenon as that which he had described in *Group Experiment* – Adorno proclaimed "the idiocy of all this is truly a sign of something that psychologically has not been mastered, a wound, although the idea of wounds would be rather more appropriate for the victims" (Adorno 1998a: 91). Adorno's piece contains explicit ideas

as to how to grapple with antisemitism – and as to proposed or potential tactics that would not be likely to help:

Attention to the great achievements of Jews in the past, however true they may be, are hardly of use and smack of propaganda. And propaganda, the rational manipulation of what is irrational, is the prerogative of the totalitarians... Panegyrics to the Jews that isolate them as a group already give anti-Semitism a running start. Anti-Semitism is so difficult to refute because the psychic economy of innumerable people needed it and, in an attenuated form, presumably still needs it today.

(Adorno 1998a: 101)

Organized encounters between Jews and non-Jewish Germans would, likewise, not have a significant impact:

All too often the presupposition is that anti-Semitism in some essential way involves Jews and could be countered through concrete experiences with Jews, whereas the genuine anti-Semite is defined far more by his incapacity for any experience whatsoever, by his unresponsiveness. If anti-Semitism primarily has its foundation in objective society, and derivatively in anti-Semites, then – as the National Socialist joke has it – if the Jews had not already existed, the anti-Semites would have had to invent them.

(Adorno 1998a: 101–102)

Ultimately, Adorno pointed out in closing, because of the objective power underlying anti-Semitism,

subjective enlightenment will not suffice... the past will have been worked through only when the causes of what happened then have been eliminated. Only because the causes continue to exist does the captivating spell of the past remain to this day unbroken.

(Adorno 1998a: 102–103)

It was clear to Adorno in 1959 that “working through of the past” had not been successful and that this was so because “the objective conditions of society that engendered fascism” continued to exist (Adorno 1998a: 98).

Adorno returned to the subject of antisemitism in a talk dating from 1962, “Zur Bekämpfung des Antisemitismus heute.” Adorno admiringly mentioned in this work the phrase “secondary antisemitism,” which had been coined by Peter Schönbach and which Adorno used here when referring to attempts in the postwar era by onetime active Nazis to defend to their own children the positions they had held in the era of the Third Reich. In the course of so doing, these individuals “rewarmed” their antisemitism (Adorno 1986: 362). This was itself a symptom of the defense mechanisms used by Germans after the war. More generally, Adorno was concerned, in this piece, to suggest that a dangerous crypto-antisemitism remained present in the Federal Republic of Germany. He described antisemitism as a medium which manipulates and strengthens unconscious conflicts and tendencies, linked the origins of antisemitism in the individual to an authoritarian character structure created in early childhood, and recommended, as a long-term program, that educators who encounter young children with ethnocentric (antisemitic or racist) attitudes establish contact with the parents of such children, discuss issues directly with the children concerned, and “in some manner” or another attempt, if necessary, to “give the children what they lack at home” – by



which Adorno meant provide such children with warmth and understanding if their parents did not (Adorno 1986: 374). Adorno ends this piece by pointedly noting that antisemitism was not a phenomenon first introduced into German culture from the outside by Hitler. German culture, he writes, was saturated with antisemitic prejudices [“mit antisemitischen Vorurteilen durchsetzt”] (Adorno 1986: 382–383).

As in the exile era, so too in the 1950s and 1960s, Horkheimer shared Adorno’s concern with antisemitism and with how it ought to be combatted. This continuing concern is evident in Horkheimer’s essay of 1961, “The German Jews.” In a passage devoted to the roots of Zionism, Horkheimer noted,

Anti-Semitism may have religious origins but it is no longer essentially a religious phenomenon; it is rather a means of manipulation in an age when every economic weakness can be a weak point open to attack by any foreign nationalism that happens to be more vigorously and thoroughly organized. The striking power of the military depends ever more fully on that of the population as a whole, and anti-Semitism is a means of assuring the latter.

(Horkheimer 1994: 110)

The key to this passage – the notion that antisemitism is a means of manipulation – was in full accord with the studies of fascist agitators which had been conducted by Adorno and other writers associated with the Institute while in the USA.

Horkheimer’s ongoing interest in grappling with antisemitism after his return to Europe is also evident in an article by him published in 1963, in which he discusses the phenomenon directly, and in which he makes use both of the notion of projection and of the need to ascribe negative qualities to others rather than grapple with the negative within (Horkheimer 1963: 66), and in scattered notes by Horkheimer, written over a period of years. In one such note, for example, Horkheimer writes,

Eine psychologische Erklärung für den Fanatismus, der für viele antisemitische Bewegungen charakteristisch ist, liegt in dem Umstand, daß hier wie in vielen anderen Fällen (Hexenverfolgung, Religionskriege) der Fanatiker weiß, daß der andere, zum mindesten in weitem Maß, recht hat und er selbst unrecht.

(Horkheimer 1988: 362)

Antisemitism and its implications remained of special interest to the key theorists of the Frankfurt School in later years, even in works in which they do not explicitly mention either Jews or hatred of Jews (or mention one or the other only in passing). In *Negative Dialectics*, the manuscript of which was completed in 1966, Adorno argued that “A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen” (Adorno 1994: 365). Can there be any doubt that Adorno used the term “Auschwitz,” in part, as shorthand for the mass murder of millions of Jews? His essay “Education after Auschwitz” (an early version of which was delivered as a radio lecture in 1966) begins from the same point as does the passage just cited: “the premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again” (Adorno 1998b: 191). Auschwitz made it impossible to simply go on thinking as one did before (Müller-Dooch 2005: 309). There is rupture, not continuity, between the pre-Auschwitz and post-Auschwitz worlds. And yet, at some points, “Education after Auschwitz” makes use of notions and positions also evident in the empirical studies of antisemitism which had been done under the auspices of the Institute for Social Research during the 1940s and of ideas propounded in “Elements of Antisemitism.” “It is not the victims who are

guilty...” Adorno writes in his lecture on post-Auschwitz education, “Only those who unreflectingly vented their hatred and aggression upon them are guilty” (Adorno 1998b: 193). On this point, Adorno remained in full agreement with Massing, who had argued, in reporting on his contribution to the empirical studies of antisemitism, that antisemitism simply has no relationship to whatever the Jews might do or have done. Another passage from “Education after Auschwitz” reads,

A pattern that has been confirmed throughout the entire history of persecutions is that the fury against the weak chooses for its target especially those who are perceived as societally weak and at the same time – either rightly or wrongly – as happy.  
(Adorno 1998b: 193)

Adorno and Horkheimer had pointed to the image of the Jews as having happiness without power, and the relationship of this image to the hatred directed against them, in thesis six of “Elements.”

And yet Adorno takes pains in “Education after Auschwitz” to point out that the personality types of what he calls “the world of Auschwitz” are not simply one and the same as the authoritarian personality which the Frankfurt School had described years earlier. On the one hand, the personality types produced by Auschwitz “epitomize the blind identification with the collective. On the other hand, they are fashioned in order to manipulate masses, collectives...” (Adorno 1998b: 197). Moreover, he concludes this essay by pointing out that if there was a revival of nationalism, the factors which had made Auschwitz possible might well lead to the victimization of groups other than Jews – such as the elderly, intellectuals, or “simply deviant groups” (Adorno 1998b: 203). The techniques and psychological roots of antisemitism are paralleled by those of other hatreds.

The members and associates of the Institute for Social Research did not, by and large, feel themselves to have been deeply affected by antisemitism either in their youth or in the Institute’s founding years. Writing about the childhood of Siegfried Kracauer (that is, about the end of the nineteenth century) Adorno, who was himself raised in Frankfurt, acknowledged that Kracauer had suffered antisemitic abuse while a pupil in the Klinger Upper School, but also noted that antisemitism had been “quite unusual” in Frankfurt in that era (Adorno 1991: 161). Horkheimer did not remember any of his teachers as having been antisemitic, and dismissed “as a sign of their envy” prejudiced remarks he heard from time to time from other students (Abromeit 2011: 21). When asked by an interviewer when he first came “physically” into contact with antisemitism, Lowenthal replied “personally, we hardly experienced it at all” (Lowenthal 1987: 27). Decades after the end of the Weimar Republic, Friedrich Pollock informed Martin Jay that “All of us, up to the last years before Hitler, had no feeling of insecurity originating from our ethnic descent” (Jay 1986: 81). Felix Weil, similarly, insisted, in another letter to Jay, and probably referring to the heyday of the Weimar era, “Discrimination against Jews” in Germany “had retreated completely to the ‘social club’ level” (Jay 1986: 81). Herbert Marcuse, who was raised in Berlin and who did not begin working for the Institute until 1933 (and who, like Lowenthal, Weil, Pollock, and Horkheimer, was of Jewish origin), repeatedly said that though he had known about antisemitism in his earlier years, he had seldom been “directly victimized by it” (Lowenthal 1987: 27).

To be sure, not all of those most closely associated with the Frankfurt School completely escaped being subjected to antisemitism before the Nazi era. Horkheimer encountered antisemitism in the military during the First World War. Lowenthal, in turn, was subjected to what he described as “the potential anti-Semitism and anti-intellectualism of the German proletariat and peasants” after he was drafted into the German military in 1918 (Lowenthal 1987: 45). His experience was so awful that he volunteered for a front-line unit in order to

attempt to escape from those who were tormenting him. Adorno may also, retrospectively, have been interpreting an incident which occurred when he was a boy as arising from anti-semitism when he wrote, in *Minima Moralia*,

In a real sense, I ought to be able to deduce Fascism from the memories of my childhood... children already equipped with Christian names like Horst and Jürgen ... enacted the dream before the adults were historically ripe for its realization.

(Adorno 1974: 192)

The experiences of Horkheimer and Lowenthal during the First World War notwithstanding, none of the writers of the Frankfurt School studied antisemitism in a sustained manner during the 1920s, or, for that matter, at virtually any point in the 1930s. Indeed, the lack of attention to antisemitism is quite noticeable in *Studien über Autorität und Familie* – a massive volume published under the auspices of the Institute in 1936 and devoted, as the title suggests, to studies of the family and the authoritarian character structure, reflecting five years of work by Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, and Marcuse, among others (Horkheimer et al. 1987: 1–940). During the course of the Second World War, on the other hand, under altogether different circumstances, the Frankfurt School's leading theorists repeatedly attempted to come to grips both with antisemitism per se and with the significance of that phenomenon. Horkheimer and Adorno in particular, I have argued, devoted sustained attention to antisemitism in the 1940s. Antisemitism was a major theme of both *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *The Authoritarian Personality* – among the most important books of the exile era. The latter work, covering some of the same topics as did *Studien*, by no means ignored hatred of the Jews. Adorno's role is once again of import. Adorno, who was not yet a full member of the Institute in the period during which *Studien* was produced, had not contributed to that volume. On the other hand, as we have seen, Adorno wrote a significant portion of *The Authoritarian Personality*, including the section of that volume focused on qualitative analysis.

The mass murder of European Jewry and evidence of antisemitic attitudes among post-War Germans had a great and ongoing impact on the most important theorists of the Frankfurt School. Horkheimer and Adorno were manifestly concerned about antisemitism not only during the Second World War, but also throughout the remainder of their lives. In the period after they moved to “the house of the hangman,” these Critical Theorists repeatedly condemned and attempted to combat hatred of Jews. That is to say, in the wake of the Holocaust, their attitudes toward antisemitism and their interest in the subject were – appropriately – notably different than they had been in pre-Nazi Germany.

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# THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL AND THE EXPERIENCE OF EXILE

*Thomas Wheatland*

## **The Consequences of Exile for the Development of Critical Theory**

While the experience of exile may not be the formative event in the history of Critical Theory, it may be one of the most important “re-formative” events. The original formulations and preoccupations of Critical Theory were products of the German Revolutions of 1918 and 1919, as well as the Weimar Republic. Max Horkheimer and his early associates in Frankfurt had been traumatized by their experiences of the Great War, inspired by the hopes raised by the Council Movement and frightened by the Freikorps’ repression of that same movement. In fact, it was largely this dramatic succession of events that led nearly all of the Frankfurt School’s eventual members to abandon organized politics and to situate themselves among the ranks of the Weimar Republic’s independent, non-aligned Left. When they came together under Horkheimer’s directorship at the *Institut für Sozialforschung* in 1931, a sense of disillusionment with the failed promise of the Weimar Republic animated their efforts to develop a comprehensive theory of contemporary society. Toward this end, they followed Karl Korsch and Georg Lukács in a wider effort to re-examine and reassess some of Karl Marx’s central assumptions, particularly regarding class consciousness and false consciousness. Thus, the early Frankfurt School participated in the rediscovery of the Young Marx, the re-examination of Marx’s debts to Hegel, and the innovative use of Freudian psychoanalysis to grapple with a Weimar working class that seemed to undermine hope in a revolutionary subject guided by reason (Abromeit, 2011; Jay, 1973; Wiggershaus, 1994).

The Frankfurt School’s exile in the United States did not end any of these investigations that remained central to the aims of Critical Theory. Rather, the experience of exile sharpened their perspectives and led them to recognize greater breadth and depth to the original problems that they had begun to investigate in Germany. Recognizing that the United States had its own problems with authoritarianism (Adorno, et al., 1950; *Institut für Sozialforschung*, 1936; Komarovsky, 1940; Löwenthal and Guterman, 1949; Munroe, 1942), bureaucratization (Pollock, 1941), racism (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1947; Institute for Social Research, 1945), conformity (Fromm, 1941), and mass society (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1947; Marcuse, 1964), such experiences inspired them to expand their understanding of these phenomena and to begin contemplating the deeper historical, psychological, political,

and socioeconomic roots of such transcontinental problems—eventually leading to some grim critiques of modernity culminating in “totally administered” and “one-dimensional” societies. Similarly, alienation, one of the oldest subjects of the Frankfurt School’s work, was also understood and conceptualized in new ways. In this case, however, the change came from the actual experience of exile, as opposed to a dynamics that could be observed in the United States. Exile was traumatically alienating for every member of the Frankfurt School, but it also granted an intensified awareness and understanding of one of the most pervasive phenomena in the late capitalist world (Adorno, 1951).

While many students and historians of Critical Theory have been tempted to take members of the Frankfurt School at their word regarding their isolation and marginality in the United States, more recent research has uncovered numerous attempts at participation within American intellectual life, as well as attempts at assimilation to the expectations of American scholars and intellectuals. While the *Institut für Sozialforschung* had incorporated empirical work with its theoretical analyses of contemporary society since its inception, they had never been forced to contend with the kind of inductive positivism that shaped the methods and techniques of most American sociologists or, for that matter, to conduct limited investigations aimed at practical solutions to social problems. With time they eventually were not only able to partially adapt themselves to these new epistemological assumptions, but they also were able to successfully find and collaborate with American sociologists more open to their qualitative and critical methods. This eventual compromise between Critical Theory and American sociology enabled the Frankfurt School to achieve its first notoriety and academic recognition in the United States, and also equipped the *Institut für Sozialforschung* with the reputation and scholarly tools for their successful return and postwar work in Germany.

### Coming to America

Little mystery surrounds the Frankfurt School’s motivations for relocating to America—they were a small part of a larger wave of émigrés and refugees fleeing Nazism. The strategies and manner by which the *Institut für Sozialforschung* secured academic support for their transatlantic move is another story. For Cold Warriors (Feuer 1980, 1982) and their contemporary conservative offspring (Jay, 2010), the Frankfurt School preyed on liberals and “fellow-travelers” at Columbia University to infiltrate America and to spread “Cultural Marxism.” Such conspiracy theories lack any credibility, because they ignore Horkheimer’s strict ban on political activism in America (or even intellectual engagement regarding political issues) and more importantly disregard the actual reasons for Columbia University’s interests in the *Institut für Sozialforschung*.

During the late 1920s, members of Columbia’s Sociology Department were becoming increasingly alarmed by their declining prestige. Columbia, with the appointment of Franklin Giddings, had been the birthplace of academic sociology in the United States (Davids, 1968; Hoxie, 1955), but many feared that the department’s towering reputation was being surpassed by Robert Park and the other pioneers of community studies at the University of Chicago. The reason attributed to this change in fortunes was the funding and practice of empirical research at Chicago. For years, sociologists had been struggling to emulate the natural sciences, but Chicago had led the way in making this breakthrough in the United States (Turner and Turner, 1990). While Columbia’s sociologists were determined to compete, this would require generous funding from the university and outside sources to attract empirical researchers and to pay for empirical studies. As the department began to set their plan in motion, first by enticing Robert Lynd to join the faculty, the Depression hit and forced all future expenditures to be postponed. The years following the Crash of 1929 proved

to be counterproductive for the department. Instead of being able to set higher sights for themselves, the sociologists struggled in vain to defend their budget and faculty. The department actually shrank during the early 1930s because the university refused to replace the members who had died or retired. Consequently, when a request arrived from the *Institut für Sozialforschung*, Columbia's Sociology Department viewed it as an opportunity that could not be passed up (Wheatland, 2009: 37–43).

The Institute's request for affiliation with Columbia University must have looked very enticing. Lewis Lorwin, one of Columbia's most recent success stories in the field of social science, was one of their strong backers. Lorwin, who became one of the chief architects for the New Deal, worked at the Brookings Institute and regularly visited Geneva's International Labor Office, where he contemplated a study of international labor that was not to begin until 1935. The Institute also had strong connections to the International Labor Office and probably came to Lorwin's attention in this way. A formal connection was not made until Horkheimer had begun considering a move to the United States. The Frankfurt School's one associate fluent in English, Julian Gumperz, sought Lorwin's advice and received his enthusiastic support. Because Lorwin would only have known about the Institute for Social Research through the International Labor Office, he was only aware of their empirical studies of unemployment. This work overlapped with his own interests at that time, and he must have viewed Horkheimer's group as kindred spirits. Lorwin suggested that the Institute pursue an affiliation with the University of Chicago, the Brookings Institute, or Columbia University. Based on his knowledge of Columbia's troubles and perhaps out of loyalty to his old school, Lorwin recommended Columbia most strongly. Lorwin then made Robert MacIver and Robert Lynd—the two leading figures in Columbia's Sociology Department—aware of the *Institut für Sozialforschung* and his enthusiasm for their work (Wheatland, 2009: 43–60).

MacIver and Lynd were excited about the Institute's credentials. They petitioned the university to offer housing and a loose affiliation for the Institute, which would have satisfied both entities simultaneously. An affiliation with the *Institut für Sozialforschung* cost Columbia nothing except for access to a rundown building on 117th Street. Because the Institute had its own financial resources, Horkheimer was willing to pay for the restoration of the building, the moving costs, and to continue financing the salaries of the Institute's members. In return, Horkheimer was guaranteed that the group's organizational and intellectual autonomy would be preserved; Columbia would not interfere in the Frankfurt School's affairs.

### Working among American Sociologists

The Institute for Social Research, as part of the larger “intellectual migration,” participated in a crucial moment in the history of transatlantic ideas (Coser, 1984; Fleming and Bailyn, 1969; Heilbut, 1997; Hughes, 1977). Prior to 1933, the sociological discipline was largely divided by the Atlantic Ocean into Continental and Anglo-American traditions. Although both approaches shared common origins in the social scientific ideas of the Enlightenment, they grew apart during the nineteenth century and remained largely autonomous until the Second World War (Calhoun, 2007; Callinicos, 1999; Swingewood, 1984). Generally speaking, Continental sociology remained focused on the speculative and historical issues that marked the discipline's birth, while its Anglo-American sibling developed an early confidence in evolutionary models of social development and concerned itself with the methodological quest to model itself on the natural sciences (Neumann, 1953). When Hitler and the Nazis seized power in Germany and then began to threaten the rest of Europe, they forced many of Continental sociology's leading figures into exile. Although some remained



at home and only underwent an interior retreat, the majority fled to the last bastions of political and intellectual freedom—Great Britain and the United States. By electing to uproot themselves through physical emigration, the social scientific refugees physically united the formerly divided world of sociology and enabled the rise of a hybrid approach that combined the two traditions.

By the early 1930s, when the “intellectual migration” began, most American social scientists had acquired a great deal of experience with large-scale social surveys and were striving to model their discipline more closely on the natural sciences. Many of the country’s leading figures were increasingly interested in statistics, empiricism, and the conquest of increasingly complex social problems. The theoretical assumptions of Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer were widespread in the United States, and the impact of more speculative thinkers was minimal. Marx, Durkheim, and Weber were largely unknown, and Simmel’s work, which had received a very limited and idiosyncratic reception, only affected Chicago and other Midwestern schools of sociology that emulated the community studies pioneered by the University of Chicago (Hinkle and Hinkle, 1954). Meanwhile back in Europe, Continental sociology had its own share of Positivists, but the majority of its practitioners remained preoccupied with grand speculative issues. Most Continental social scientists therefore remained unaware of the empirical innovations that were being pioneered by Anglo-American sociologists. The discipline on the Continent was beset by internecine theoretical feuds, which limited efforts to professionalize, and without the same abundance of financial support from both public and private sources, Continental sociologists were unable to carry out research investigations on the same scale as Americans (Ringer, 1997; Swingewood, 1984). The “intellectual migration” changed all of this by bringing both traditions together, but the synthesis formed a sociological canon that became tied to America’s postwar hegemony. Anglo-American and Continental sociology were reunited, but the resulting merger served as a tool of American diplomacy and ideology during the Cold War (Park and Turner, 1990: 167–171; Seidman, 1994; Szacki, 1974: 502). The legacy of the “intellectual migration,” however, did not end with the ascendancy of American empiricism and Parsonian Functionalism. In a complicated turn of events, many of the same refugee sociologists that had helped bring the two sociological traditions together also provided the ammunition that shattered the postwar amalgamation (Wheatland, 2009: 199–203).

Before exploring the Frankfurt School’s role in this series of transformations, we must specify what we are referring to when we speak of the “intellectual migration” and its impact on the field of sociology. In some respects, the term can be misleading because it conjures up the image of European ideas being imported into the United States. When it comes to the history of sociology, however, the migration of ideas was definitely a two-way street. Anglo-American ideas had as great an impact on the European immigrants as the speculative Continental tradition had on Americans. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, there were Americans who played leading roles in the unification of sociological thought. The term “intellectual migration” in no way minimizes their impact. In fact, Talcott Parsons, the leading American architect of postwar sociology, began his efforts to merge the two traditions before Hitler ever came to power. The presence of Continental refugees in the United States aided such work and perhaps created the conditions for Functionalism’s successful reception after the war.

The Continental sociologists who fled to America functioned largely as ambassadors and translators for their branch of the discipline. The hurdles that these exiles faced in the United States were enormous, and few thinkers, consequently, were able to enjoy notoriety and success in America. Language barriers, cultural differences, and a tight job market represented some of the obstacles that the refugees faced. They left their families and secure professional positions behind in Europe, and they entered a foreign environment that

required professional savvy and careful diplomacy. It's not surprising that such pressures made some of them excessively defensive and protective. Nevertheless, these European émigrés provided many American social scientists with their first intimate introductions to the works of Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, Tönnies, and Mannheim, as well as to other related social thinkers such as Marx and Freud.

The Frankfurt's School's first years at Columbia University provided Horkheimer and his colleagues with a "splendid isolation" that they initially sought in exile. For nearly five years, the Institute was able to concentrate much of its attention on its journal—which increasingly became the dominant vehicle for the kinds of interdisciplinary work that Horkheimer had envisioned since the beginning of his directorship. While these articles were developed and then arranged in ways to reflect on the key historical and sociological trends of the interwar era, they generated limited interest among Columbia's sociology faculty who shared neither the philosophical, nor the sociological orientations of early Critical Theory.

Columbia's social scientists were, by contrast, keenly interested in the empirical work being directed in the United States by Erich Fromm. During its first five years on Morningside Heights, the Institute continued and even expanded research on authority, the family, and unemployment. Fromm busily collaborated on these American projects with members of Columbia's Sociology department, their graduate students, and gradually with a network of social psychologists across the United States. Rapidly, Fromm became the most prominent figure from the Frankfurt School at Columbia. This notoriety was not a problem for the Institute for Social Research as long as Fromm remained a trusted member of Horkheimer's inner circle. But once Fromm and Horkheimer had a falling-out over serious intellectual and material concerns, the Institute for Social Research found itself in a precarious position. Once Fromm was gone, all hopes that the Frankfurt School might establish itself as a cutting-edge, empirical research organization at Columbia seemed unlikely to its former supporters angered by Fromm's acrimonious departure (Friedman, 2013: 63–96; McLaughlin, 1998, 1999; Wheatland, 2009: 64–94).

Worsening the Institute's situation on campus was a bitter feud that erupted within the Sociology Department between its two leading figures, Robert MacIver and Robert Lynd. Lynd, who fancied himself a radical and sought to utilize empirical sociology for political purposes, had published a short treatise entitled *Knowledge for What?* on the aims and promise of social science. MacIver reviewed the book and attacked Lynd's ambitions, as well as his veneration for empiricism. The two fired responses back and forth to one another, and their department became split. On the one hand, MacIver rallied the department's social theorists and political conservatives, while on the other hand, Lynd attracted fellow Progressives and others sharing interests in empirical research. This atmosphere was extremely precarious for the members of the Institute for Social Research. As the group's finances shrank in the Recession of the late 1930s, Horkheimer struggled to improve relations with Columbia. Politically, the Institute for Social Research was a natural ally for Lynd and his camp, but intellectually their sociological orientation was closer to MacIver. Instead of choosing sides, Horkheimer attempted to navigate between the two and unintentionally alienated both himself and his colleagues from each of the two factions (Wheatland, 2009: 89–90).

At the same time that the Frankfurt School's star was fading at Columbia, the fortunes of their former colleague, Paul Lazarsfeld, were on the rise. Lazarsfeld came to America on a Rockefeller fellowship in 1933. For political reasons, he decided to stay in the United States and had little trouble finding a position at the University of Newark, where he established his own center for empirical social research. Lazarsfeld was one of the visionaries who revolutionized the field of empirical sociology. In fact, Horkheimer, who was already familiar with Lazarsfeld, contacted him soon after the arrival of the Institute in America.

A friendly relationship was re-established between the Frankfurt School and Lazarsfeld's group in Newark. Fromm even hired Lazarsfeld to handle the empirical research and interviewing connected with the Institute's Newark study. In a reciprocal gesture, Lazarsfeld hired members of the Horkheimer group to assist his research team when a grant was received for the study of radio in 1937 (Wheatland, 2005).

The radio study, sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation, was a major coup for Lazarsfeld. It gave his group at Newark instant credibility and placed them at the forefront of empirical social research in the United States. Soon after work began, Princeton lured the Lazarsfeld group away from Newark, but Robert Lynd, a long-time friend of Lazarsfeld, managed to top Princeton a few years later by offering Lazarsfeld space in Manhattan. The arrangement was remarkably similar to the Frankfurt School's arrangement with Columbia's Sociology Department. Although members of Columbia were invited to serve on the board of directors overseeing the radio project, Lazarsfeld remained autonomous and was permitted to use one of the university's old buildings.

From the moment of its conception, the radio project made great strides. Lazarsfeld developed a myriad of methods for evaluating and measuring the listener's reception of the medium. The empirical nature of these methods, however, became a strain for members of the Horkheimer group working on the project. In fact, Theodor W. Adorno's objections are well known to students of Critical Theory and serve as an anticipation of later critiques of Positivism in the social sciences. Lazarsfeld, being the guiding force behind the project, remained undeterred, and members of the Frankfurt School were politely requested to conform to his wishes or leave the research team.

Soon after their self-imposed banishment from Lazarsfeld's team, the Frankfurt School managed to find funding for a research project that could showcase their methods and ideas. The large grants came from the American Jewish Committee and the Jewish Labor Committee, and they led to the publication of the famous *Studies in Prejudice*. Although the books received a vigorous reception in the United States for years after their publication, many observers on Morningside Heights felt that *Studies in Prejudice* was too little too late. Columbia had waited a long time for the Institute to fulfill its perceived potential (over fifteen years from the arrival of the Frankfurt School in the United States until the publication of the *Studies in Prejudice*). And although members of the Sociology Department frequently entertained plans of incorporating the Frankfurt School and its staff into the faculty, the Institute failed to produce the collaborative empirical work that everyone had expected. In the meantime, Paul Lazarsfeld had proven himself to be one of the most important and productive empirical sociologists in the world. Once Columbia had the financial ability to make an offer to an empirical research team, their choice was to incorporate Lazarsfeld's Bureau of Applied Social Research into the university (in 1944). This meant adding Lazarsfeld to the faculty, but the rest of the Bureau paid for itself through outside grants and contract work. In retrospect, it seems clear that Columbia's sociologists had expected the Frankfurt School to accomplish Lazarsfeld's feat (Wheatland, 2009: 81–94).

The Frankfurt School's reception among American sociologists during the "intellectual migration" fits somewhere between the prominent contributions to the rise of a postwar sociology made by Paul Lazarsfeld and the more isolated, interlocutory roles played by figures such as Hans Gerth or Kurt Wolff. During its first years in America, the Institute for Social Research pursued its marriage of social philosophy and empirical research in relative isolation. The Institute's members feared the political repercussions of academic notoriety, and they had the financial resources to enjoy the autonomy that accompanied obscurity. The impact of financial setbacks on the group's aims necessitated a shift away from this "splendid isolation." At the same time that the Frankfurt School introduced its American reading public to Critical Theory, which was presented as an alternative to Anglo-American empiricism and

Positivism, the Institute for Social Research adopted many of the same techniques that they were attacking. When their first speculative and qualitative research proposals were rejected for their lack of scientific rigor, the Frankfurt School altered their approach and adopted a greater compromise between Continental Theory and Anglo-American empiricism. At the same time that the Institute's social philosophy stridently rejected accommodation with Anglo-American Positivism, the Frankfurt School recruited numerous American advisors to help them amend their own work on anti-Semitism in order to assimilate to the expectations of potential US supporters. Although their synthesis (*Studies in Prejudice*) did not enjoy the same degree of influence in the United States as Robert Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld's marriage of Functionalism and empirical research, the *Institut für Sozialforschung* returned to Germany as ambassadors of American social science (Jacobs, 2015; 43–110; Wheatland, 2009: 257–263; Ziege, 2009).

### Living among the New York Intellectuals

Nostalgia for home and the accompanying fears of political persecution caused members of the Frankfurt School to enter New York warily—and such anxieties were entirely warranted. Like other German exiles of the early 1930s, the Institute was investigated both by the FBI and German-speaking detectives from the New York City police, first as possible fifth-columnists and later as Marxists (Wheatland, 2009: 73 and 272). Under other circumstances, the staff of the *Institut für Sozialforschung* might have been able to recognize the unique environment and opportunities that existed in New York City. For years, New York served as the primary point of entry for European immigrants arriving in America. As a consequence, New York also became the central passageway for European ideas entering the United States. Europe's intellectual traditions, however, were not simply assimilated by the inhabitants of the city. Instead, a unique process of cultural blending took place. The result was an unusual atmosphere unlike any in the “New World.” Manhattan became a mixing bowl and an intellectual battleground for ideas, culture, and intellectuals. The Institute for Social Research, therefore, entered an environment that potentially was more open to their legacy than perhaps any location outside of Europe. Furthermore, the Frankfurt School arrived in an urban landscape that was teeming with vitality. New York's intellectuals shared similar interests—they were captivated by modernism, as well as innovative approaches to the culture and politics of the left. The Institute for Social Research, therefore, overlooked an enormous number of potential allies that their new home offered. By choosing to remain silent about some of the major political questions of the day and by concealing their Marxism almost completely, the Frankfurt School unwittingly abandoned the opportunity to play a larger role in New York's intellectual universe. The intellectual atmosphere in New York may have held great promise for the group—but Horkheimer remained unwilling to risk the possible repercussions of political activism or even political engagement with the major topics of the era (Bender, 1987).

As the members of the Institute attempted to prove their worth at Columbia University, a remarkably similar coterie of writers took shape among the “little magazines” of Greenwich Village—the so-called New York Intellectuals. Although they diverged more sharply with the passing of time, there is a surprising correspondence between the two groups during the 1930s and early 1940s. The New York Intellectuals and the Frankfurt School inhabited a strikingly similar intellectual terrain employing their “dialectical imaginations” to symmetrical sets of interconnected issues such as Marxism, alienation, conformity, mass culture, aesthetic theory, modernism, and totalitarianism. Sharing such a vast array of resemblances, the question of influence is not only reasonable but also essential (Brick 1986; Jay, 1986: 28–61; Jumonville, 1991; Sumner, 1996; Teres, 1996; Wald 1987; Wilford, 1995).

The Frankfurt School and the New York Intellectuals embraced both the modernist avant-garde and the socialist vanguard (similarly rejecting Marxian Orthodoxy). The key difference between the outlook of both groups involved their relationship to Marxian theory. While the Frankfurt School's inspiration was drawn from the tradition of Western Marxism, the New York Intellectuals embraced Trotskyism and the Pragmatic Marxism of Sidney Hook. Meanwhile, the Frankfurt School's relationship to modernism was completely integrated within their intellectual worldview. Modernism was not simply the most advanced stage of artistic endeavor (as most of the New York Intellectuals initially saw it), but it was a reaction to advanced capitalism, commodity fetishism, and reification. For some members of the Institute, modernist aesthetics functioned as a negation of the social status quo and evoked Stendahl's notion of "*une promesse de bonheur*." For others (particularly for Adorno), modernism represented the last vestiges of autonomous subjectivity struggling against the omnipresent reification of the totally administered society. Although these insights about modernism attracted some of the New York Intellectuals, the majority of the New York Intellectuals grew to view the institute with suspicion as they underwent a process of deradicalization during the Second World War and the Cold War.

Relations between the two communities arose from necessity. With the increasing pressure of American acceptance, the Institute sought collaborators and translators. They turned to New York's ranks of graduate students and bohemian intellectuals. Many of those recruited to assist them were major figures within the community of New York Intellectuals, and these initial contacts functioned as interlocutors for other figures from the world of the New York Intellectuals. Meyer Schapiro and Sidney Hook were among the first to meet with members of the Institute in a series of discussions regarding dialectics and pragmatism (Wheatland, 2009: 101–134). Moses Finkelstein (later M.I. Finley), Benjamin Nelson, George Simpson, Daniel Bell, Lewis Coser, Nathan Glazer, and Irving Howe all worked with members of the Frankfurt School as translators, research assistants, and editors. They collaborated on articles for the temporary English editions of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, they aided with grant applications, and they assisted members of the Institute on the five-volume *Studies in Prejudice*. These contacts, in particular, led to numerous introductions between the Frankfurt School and the New York Intellectuals (Wheatland, 2009: 142–153).

*Studies in Prejudice* also led to substantive contacts with the writers and editors at *Commentary*. The magazine, which was sponsored by the American Jewish Committee, became one of the first nonacademic venues to promote the Frankfurt School's AJC-sponsored research regarding anti-Semitism. Such promotion is perhaps not surprising, but the relationship expanded to include other shared topics of interest. Thus, Leo Löwenthal published a translation of an essay on Heine that had been written prior to his exile, while Franz Neumann and Arkady Gurland wrote articles contemplating the future of postwar Germany (Wheatland, 2009: 153–158).

More significantly, Dwight Macdonald and the group that became connected with the magazine *Politics* were initially so captivated by the Institute's approach to the topic of mass culture that Macdonald sought to translate as much of the Institute's work as Horkheimer would allow. Horkheimer refused to accept the offer due to his distaste for Macdonald's Trotskyism, but Macdonald, Clement Greenberg, and many others connected with *Politics* became major promoters of the Institute's writings on mass culture. Through their exposure to the writings of the Frankfurt School, Macdonald and his colleagues at *Politics* began to see mass culture less as a form of propaganda and more as a distinctly new development in the history of art and culture. The Frankfurt School equipped the *Politics* circle with a more nuanced understanding of both the constitution and reception of mass culture. Thus, it functioned as an effective propaganda tool for the same reason that it had been commercially embraced. Late capitalist audiences, ironically, found escape from the tedium of their daily lives by

seeking distraction in mass culture. Thus, the new mass art forms represented a regression for the receptive audience, as well as a regression by its producers (Wheatland, 2009: 158–188).

In the end, only the most stubborn radicals within the community of New York Intellectuals continued these flirtations with Critical Theory. Although writers such as Macdonald, Howe, and Coser began experimenting with the Institute's Western Marxist emphasis on negation, they could not entirely accept the tragic conception of history that became the central assumption of Critical Theory's late period. The majority of the New York Intellectuals, by contrast, grew to increasingly reject and oppose the thought of the Institute. To young radicals of the anti-Stalinist left, the Horkheimer Circle was one of many new curiosities in New York. Anyone interested in Central European social theory spent time attending the Institute's Tuesday seminars on Morningside Heights, as well as the lectures offered through the emerging New School's University in Exile. While such contacts were invaluable to the cosmopolitan mind-sets of figures such as Philip Rahv, William Phillips, Elliot Cohen, Will Herberg, Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, and Seymour Martin Lipsett, the war represented a crucial impetus for change. Much has been written about the New York Intellectuals' conversion to neoconservatism. Despite the objections voiced by many figures within this coterie and in spite of such protestations, the relations of this group to the Frankfurt School do illustrate this political transformation. The war caused many New York Intellectuals to rethink their relationships to the United States, aroused patriotism among many in the group, and led most to equate Nazism and Communism through the concept of totalitarianism. As a result of these transformations, the majority of the New York Intellectuals grew suspicious of the Frankfurt School and the Institute's silence regarding Stalin. For those not put off by such concerns, the Frankfurt School remained an important inspiration because of their continued thought and writing on modernism, mass culture, conformity, and alienation in the contemporary world.

### Teaching among the New Left

The 1960s was the most important and confusing moment in the history of the Frankfurt School in America. Embraced by the New Left of both Europe and the United States, the *Flaschenposte* that had been written with little hope of reaching any audience arrived in the hands of an entirely new generation searching for answers to the problems of a nuclear age and expanding globalization. To most members of the Frankfurt School, the unexpected fame that they experienced in later life was soon overshadowed by disappointment with the movements with which their reputations had become entwined. The New Left was short lived, and its self-destruction was as disturbing as it was shocking. The same generation of students who had rejected the apathy of the 1950s by embracing the antinuclear and civil rights movements transformed into a counter-culture, became, more disturbingly, violent, urban guerillas in the span of only a decade.

Despite the fact that most of the Frankfurt School's writings were precipitated by the threat of Nazism, the Institute's vision of totalitarianism provided the student movement with conceptual frameworks for dissecting contemporary society. Thus, the Critical Theory of society that was fashioned in the Weimar Republic was taken up by the New Left throughout Europe and the United States to construct a comprehensive theory of the Cold War landscape. To meet this aim, young scholars beginning in the late 1960s began to publish, translate, promote, and comment on the writings of the Frankfurt School. Ironically at the very moment that the *Institut für Sozialforschung* achieved the highest point of recognition and reception in the United States, its identity and coherence was highly problematic. In 1968 at the height of the student movement, the Institute existed as only a shadow of its former self. The consequent rise of Critical Theory that began in the 1960s was a theoretical

reconstruction. As the historical record was assembled into a comprehensive picture of the group as it had existed in the 1930s and 1940s, the notion of a “Frankfurt School” was born. Ironically, it bore little more than a historical relationship to the institution existing in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

By the late 1960s, only Adorno remained formally connected to the *Institut für Sozialforschung*. Horkheimer and Pollock had retired, Neumann and Kirchheimer were deceased, Fromm had been away from the Institute for nearly thirty years, and Löwenthal and Marcuse were teaching in the United States. Furthermore, the views of most of the Institute’s members had changed over the years. They clearly foresaw the rise of globalization, and their attitude toward contemporary society grew increasingly tinged with nostalgia for the simpler world of Europe’s *grand bourgeoisie*. While some have been tempted to label this shift in the Frankfurt School’s postwar outlook as conservative, their rejection of the emerging New Left had more to do with the shallowness and anti-intellectualism of New Left radicalism. Most members of the original Frankfurt School saw little political content behind the angry rhetoric of late-1960s activists. The one notable exception among the former members of the Institute was Herbert Marcuse, and Marcuse’s support of the student protesters would temporarily transform the image of the entire Frankfurt School (Wheatland, 1990: 267–280).

Marcuse’s relationship to the US student movement is exceedingly complex. The late 1960s was a confusing time, and Marcuse, like so many other observers of his generation, was prone to waffle. Unlike his former colleagues from the Institute, Marcuse viewed the New Left as a highly significant development. In his eyes, the student activists represented an alternative to the repressive anthropology of late capitalist civilization that he had explored in his interpretations of Freud. At times, the “counter culture” appeared to manifest promising examples of non-repressive existence—a revolution of joy, play, and freedom. At other times, however, he grew discouraged by the lack of political commitment, seriousness, and intellectual rigor. As the war in Vietnam incited increasingly fervent discontent among the youth of America, Marcuse became a proponent of “repressive tolerance” and “counter-violence.” Although he never explicitly condoned the tactics of the Black Panthers and the Weathermen, he consistently emphasized the systemic violence of the American state (which he openly compared to Nazi Germany) and suggested that this justified a myriad of student reactions. Such statements were and continue to be provocative. Although he generally remained pessimistic about the prospects for the future, Herbert Marcuse, to speak in the language of the time, had come a long way over the course of the 1960s. He remained loyal to his concept of the anthropological transformation of man and he continued to see the intellectual adoption of a “new sensibility” as the chief goal of revolution. But he had made an important shift from social theory to political opposition. Marcuse did not lead the student movement down this path. Rather, they led the way for him. In the final analysis, this touted “guru” of the New Left was a better student than he was a teacher.

Such a major conceptual shift—from pure theory to radical practice—cannot be taken lightly. Marcuse must have had compelling reasons for making such a departure from his previous thought. In part, one of the reasons was obvious. Like so many other opponents of the Vietnam War, Marcuse began to identify with the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese. In joining so many other anti-war intellectuals and activists, however, Marcuse demonstrated the impact of the New Left on him. The American SDS (student for a democratic society) and the other radical organizations that he associated with in Western Europe influenced him. In the process, they became evidence for the intellectual and cultural transformation that he had imagined. At the same time and perhaps more importantly, they became his utopian ideal (Wheatland, 2009: 296–334).

While Herbert Marcuse may not have had as large or substantial impact on the New Left, he had a profound and productive impact on the graduate students and professors who

taught during the Vietnam era. Marcuse's co-option by the American mass media of the 1960s made him a celebrity and simultaneously marginalized his message by depicting him in the guise of a "guru." Nevertheless, celebrity is not created without numerous unintended consequences. Fame has the ability to both empower and disempower those caught up in its dynamism. It is important to keep in mind that if Marcuse's name had never been splashed across the pages of newspapers and glossy magazines and if he had never been interviewed on television, his work might not have gained as much attention as it did within the US academy—which was much better equipped to comprehend it, to criticize it, and to build upon it.

The academic reception of the Frankfurt School took place amid the ruins of the New Left. While the student movement imploded, the intellectuals allied with it generated widespread scholarly interest in the Frankfurt School. In the same way that the members of the Institute found inspiration in the writings of Hegel and the young Marx to sift through the wreckage of the failed revolutions of 1918–1919, young American intellectuals gravitated to Critical Theory to make sense of the ruins of the New Left.

The contributions to intellectual history, philosophy, and sociology were substantial. Young, American scholars surveyed the intricate terrain of Continental thought and accomplished a task that no members of the Frankfurt School were able to achieve in their lifetime—equipping a US audience with the tools necessary to appreciate Critical Theory on its own terms. Members of the Institute had transcended their isolation in the United States, but the results were assimilated versions of Critical Theory. The US scholars of the Frankfurt School, by contrast, generated a renaissance in the Institute's forerunners and Critical Theory by providing Americans with new appreciations of Kant, Hegel, Marx, Weber, Freud, and Lukács. In the transatlantic history of ideas, perhaps no period was as fruitful for the importation of German social, philosophical, and cultural thought into the United States as the period following the demise of the New Left. Unlike the intellectual migrants of the 1930s and 1940s, the conditions were ideal and the interlocutors were abundant for the transatlantic passages of the 1970s and 1980s.

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# CRITICAL THEORY AND THE UNFINISHED PROJECT OF MEDIATING THEORY AND PRACTICE

*Robin Celikates*

Critical theory in the Frankfurt School tradition can be, very roughly, characterized by four features that are meant to distinguish it from other types of philosophical and social theorizing. (1) It is *self-reflexive*, in that it questions its own presuppositions and systematically takes into account the social and historical conditions of theory formation, including its own; (2) it is *interdisciplinary*, in that it opposes any desire for philosophical purity and integrates philosophical analysis with social theory and empirical social research; (3) it is *materialist*, in the sense that it is anchored in social and political struggles and the oppositional experiences and forms of consciousness they express, from which it takes its cue, but which it does not uncritically follow; and (4) it is *emancipatory*, i.e. guided by the goal of social emancipation, whose obstacles it seeks to analyze based on social research and whose possibilities it seeks to expand in connection with political and social movements. It is especially critical theory's claim to be materialist and emancipatory that situates it in the Marxist tradition, taking up that tradition's commitment to overcoming the division between theory and practice.

As part of its Marxist heritage, critical theory turns the value systems, conceptions of human nature, and allegedly scientific discourses that traditional theories treat as sources of – or as providing a firm standpoint for – critique into objects of critique. Since, e.g., normative principles are not accessible in abstraction from historically concrete social contexts and often fulfill an ideological function – being “so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests” (Marx/Engels 1978 [1848]: 482) – critique cannot proceed by confronting an allegedly deficient reality with an abstractly derived ideal or norm. The same holds for assumptions about human nature or presumably scientific insights. Instead of focusing on “simplistic questions of conscience and clichés about justice,” taking “refuge from history in morality” and relying on the “armoury of its moral indignation” (Marx 1976 [1847]: 322, 325), critique has to be based in an analysis of social reality and its contradictions, and can only find its criteria in the social practices, struggles, experiences, and self-understandings to which it is connected (see also Celikates 2012).

Those who engage in social critique within the Marxist and Frankfurt School tradition have long been challenged to make explicit and justify the normative basis of their approach. In what follows, however, I will not trace the well-documented and controversial

debates about the normative foundations of critique (see, e.g., Finlayson 2007); rather, I will reconstruct the different ways in which the theorists of the Frankfurt School conceptualized the relation of theory to practice and their own role as critical theorists. After the loss of confidence in an identifiable direction of history and a privileged collective subject whose struggle leads the way, critical theorists were confronted with the problem that, on the one hand, they had to uphold the link to pre-theoretical experiences, oppositional forms of consciousness, and actually existing practices of critique and resistance, while, on the other hand, it became increasingly unclear how they were supposed to identify the social struggles and movements that their theory was meant to connect to and whether the conditions for them to emerge were given in the first place. This challenge takes on an existential dimension insofar as it is true that, as Axel Honneth (2007 [1994]: 66) argues,

without some form of proof that its critical perspective is reinforced by a need or a movement within social reality, Critical Theory cannot be further pursued in any way today, for it would no longer be capable of distinguishing itself from other models of social critique in its claim to a superior sociological explanatory substance or in its philosophical procedures of justification.

To many, including later generations of critical theorists, relying on the link between theory and practice while claiming that the latter is increasingly blocked necessarily leads into a theoretical and political dead end. To avoid, or at least reduce, the risks of oversimplification such judgments run into, it helps to take seriously an implication of the claim to link theory and practice, namely that critical theory can itself only be properly understood in relation to the intellectual and political practice of its representatives (see Demirović 1999, e.g. 14). As the following brief – and necessarily selective – survey of attempts to bridge the gap between theory and practice throughout the different generations of the Frankfurt School underlines, instead of being easily overcome, the division between theory and practice has proven obstinate, resulting in a number of complex mediations and tensions that characterize critical theory – in its different strands and voices – until today.

### **The Original Project and the Closure of Political Space**

In his influential programmatic articles published in the Frankfurt Institute's *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in the 1930s, Max Horkheimer famously sketches the contours of critical theory's project to transcend the limitations of traditional theory. When in his 1931 inaugural address as the new director of the Institute Horkheimer focuses on the link between theory and empirical research – and thus on the essentially interdisciplinary character of what he here calls “social philosophy” – the link between theory and practice appears in methodological guise as “the idea of a continuous, dialectical penetration and development of philosophical theory and specialized scientific praxis” (Horkheimer 1993 [1931]: 9). This commitment to interdisciplinarity acquires its transformative and emancipatory twist in his 1937 article “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in which Horkheimer (1972 [1937]: 206) identifies a “critical’ activity [...] which has society itself for its object” as the pre-theoretical anchoring point for critical theory. “Although it itself emerges from the social structure,” this activity does not have as its purpose “the better functioning of any element in the structure” (ibid.: 207), but it is transformative and emancipatory. Critical theory, then, is not related to practice in an external manner, as this “would yield only an application of traditional theory to a specific problem, and not the intellectual side of the historical process of proletarian emancipation” (ibid.: 215) – nor can it subscribe to a simplistic understanding of “a division of labor [...] between men [Menschen] who in social conflicts affect the course of history

and the social theoreticians who assign them their standpoint” (ibid.: 222). Rather, theory has to enter into a “dynamic unity” with practice, so that it is “not merely an expression of the concrete historical situation but also a force within it to stimulate change” (ibid.: 215). As Herbert Marcuse notes in an early comment on Horkheimer’s article, critical theory, in contrast to an “idealistic” understanding of protest and critique, is thereby linked to a “materialist protest and materialist critique [which] originated in the struggle of oppressed groups for better living conditions and remain permanently associated with the actual process of this struggle” (Marcuse 2009 [1937]: 104).

In the course of the following years, however, the political and social context afforded less and less opportunities for critical theorists to identify “struggles of oppressed groups” which could serve as their point of reference in practice. The closure – or destruction – of political space, first in fascism, then in what Adorno would famously come to call the “totally administered world,” seemed to throw critical theory back upon itself, raising new questions about the relation between theory and practice and the role of the critical theorist under conditions in which social struggles, if they have not turned regressive, seemed to have been neutralized by being preempted, integrated, or co-opted. As is well known, in response to the paradoxes, or dead-ends, presumably resulting from these incompatible methodological and diagnostic commitments – to link theory to practice in a situation in which practice is foreclosed – later generations of the Frankfurt School, especially Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth, turned to developing more openly normative programs of justification with the aim of safeguarding the critical *and* orienting function of critical theory (see Finlayson 2007).

There are, however, at least two complicating factors which make it difficult to reduce the first generation’s post-1940s conceptualization of the link between theory and practice to one of hyper-pessimistic withdrawal, let alone to Georg Lukács’s sardonic diagnosis that Adorno et al. had installed themselves in the “Grand Hotel Abgrund.” The first of these factors is socio-theoretical and well expressed in Adorno’s claim that although society has to be understood as totality, it would be a mistake to conceptualize existing society as a perfectly closed and functionally integrated self-reproducing totality without any contradictions, experiences, or forms of resistance that critical theory could build on. Rather, insofar as society is a totality, it has to be understood not in terms of homogeneity but in terms of structural antagonisms (Adorno 1976 [1957]: 77), not in terms of frozen stability but in terms of conflict and process (Adorno 1969 [1965]), i.e. as riddled with contradictions. As Adorno underlines, in a seemingly paradoxical formulation, it is “only through these contradictions that it is possible for us to break open the universal system of delusion [totaler Verblendungszusammenhang], within which we are positioned” (Adorno 2012 [1960]: 155; my translation). Instead of a complete displacement of politics, this possibility of “breaking open” the system enables a “dialectical” interpretation according to which “politics is, on the one hand, a façade, ideology, and society the primary reality, but on the other hand transformative social practice has the form of politics: politics with the aim of abolishing politics” (Adorno 1996 [1957]: 399; my translation). In one of his last texts written shortly before his death, Adorno therefore concludes that “critical theory is not aiming at totality, but criticizes it. This also means, however, that it is, in its substance, anti-totalitarian, with the utmost political determination” (Adorno 2003 [1969]; my translation). Even – or especially – in the face of the closure of political space, the political significance of critical theory thus seems to consist in safeguarding the link between theory and (the possibility of a radically different) practice.

This could seem like a merely abstract theoretical commitment without much practical relevance, were it not for the second complicating factor which concerns the actual historically situated intellectual practice of first-generation critical theorists. Herbert Marcuse

is usually cast as the exception, the engaged radical public intellectual who inspired, and responded to the call of, the student movement both in practice and in theory with a revolutionary optimism that will now seem somewhat quaint, and that did indeed provoke some skepticism among the colleagues in Frankfurt (see, e.g., Marcuse 1969; Adorno/Marcuse 1999 [1969]). It is true that Adorno and Horkheimer, as well as later Habermas, had a much more complicated relationship with the student movement (for extensive documentation see Kraushaar 1998) – symbolically culminating in Adorno’s decision to call the police to clear the Institute of protesting students and the break with student leader and former protégé Hans-Jürgen Krahel, who accused Adorno of “complicity with the ruling powers,” “inability [...] to deal with the question of organization,” and blindness to “the historical possibilities of liberating praxis” (Krahel 1975 [1969]: 832–833). Nevertheless, it would be wrong to conclude that Adorno and Horkheimer had withdrawn from political practice and public engagement altogether. If one takes Adorno’s work as a whole into account and includes his many university and public lectures, radio addresses, interviews, and public interventions, the picture becomes more complicated (see Müller-Doohm 2005 [2003]: Part IV; Hammer 2005: ch. 1). After Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s return, they both had quite a significant influence on the emergence of a democratic public sphere in Germany, an influence that was not only due to their writings but also, maybe even more, due to their institutional engagement (Horkheimer became rector of the Goethe University in Frankfurt, Adorno served as president of the German Sociological Association), their teaching, and their interventions in public debates through talks, journal articles, interviews, and radio lectures. These activities have been said to amount to an “intellectual foundation of the Federal Republic” (see Albrecht et al. 1999), although they are probably better described as attempts to institutionalize the practice of the “nonconformist critical intellectual” (Demirović 1999) – a project very much at odds with the dominant intellectual climate of postwar Germany.

Of course, the precise status of Adorno’s intellectual practice of critique remains troubled as he can neither simply presuppose an immediate addressee with a practical interest in overcoming the status quo nor do without any anchoring point in the experience or consciousness of those whose suffering his theory tries to give voice to. Adorno himself attempted to articulate and defend the resulting complex and deferred relation between theory and practice against what he saw as the “actionist” ideology of “pseudo-activity” by arguing that

praxis without theory, lagging behind the most advanced state of cognition, cannot but fail, and praxis, in keeping with its own concept, would like to succeed. False praxis is no praxis. [...] The hostility to theory in the spirit of the times, the by no means coincidental withering away of theory, its banishment by an impatience that wants to change the world without having to interpret it while so far it has been chapter and verse that philosophers have merely interpreted—such hostility becomes praxis’s weakness.

(Adorno 1998 [1969]: 265, 2001 [1963]: lecture one; see also Hammer 2005: 3; Freyenhagen 2014)

As a result, by the turbulent end of the 1960s, critical theory seemed to have undergone its own process of radicalization, moving toward a more and more negativistic diagnosis that left only marginal, if any, possibilities for a critical form of consciousness to emerge, let alone coalesce into social struggles that would be able to fundamentally question the current system and its attempts to coopt and neutralize any form of divergence, critique, and opposition. Instead, social integration, the pacification of class conflict, and the closure of the political space seemed to have robbed critical theory of its pre-theoretical anchoring point

despite its attempts to save the relation between theory and practice – even at the cost of seeing it as one of contradiction instead of unity (Adorno 1998 [1969]: 277).

### A Normativist Way Out?

Against this background, Habermas's break with the first generation concerns not only their "pessimism," i.e. his rather different diagnosis of the historical moment, but also the basic methodological and substantial premises of critical theory. However, even this break can only be understood as resulting from a series of attempted mediations between theory and practice over time that Habermas ultimately judged to have failed.

In his early attempts to determine the methodological status of critical theory between traditional philosophy and positivist social science – in *Theory and Practice* (1963), *On the Logic of the Social Sciences* (1967), and *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968) – Habermas emphatically rearticulates Horkheimer's claim that critical theory's *differentia specifica* resides in a dual reflexivity: it reflects both on the context of its own emergence, i.e. the social conditions of possibility of critique, and its context of application, i.e. the possibilities of social transformation and emancipation in the present. In this context, he differentiates between three different tasks that are essential aspects of any attempt to mediate between theory and practice but that should be kept separate, namely

the formation and extension of critical theorems, which can stand up to scientific discourse; the organization of processes of enlightenment, in which such theorems are applied and can be tested in a unique manner by the initiation of processes of reflection carried on within certain groups toward which these processes have been directed; and the selection of appropriate strategies, the solution of tactical questions, and the conduct of the political struggle.

(Habermas 1973 [1963]: 32)

As Habermas goes on to argue, against traditional Marxist attempts at a unified approach which suffer from the false certainties of a philosophy of history no longer available to us, addressing these tasks presupposes recognizing that they follow different principles:

a theory can only be formulated under the precondition that those engaged in scientific work have the freedom to conduct theoretical discourse; processes of enlightenment (if they are to avoid exploitation and deception) can only be organized under the precondition that those who carry out the active work of enlightenment commit themselves wholly to the proper precautions and assure scope for communications on the model of therapeutic 'discourses'; finally, a political struggle can only be legitimately conducted under the precondition that all decisions of consequence will depend on the practical discourse of the participants – here too, and especially here, there is no privileged access to truth.

(ibid.: 34)

In order to avoid the authoritarian and paternalist risks associated with reductivist attempts to unify theory and practice, Habermas argues that instead of being on principle superior to the agents, the theorist has to be seen as being located at the same epistemic level, even if he or she does – at least temporarily – have a better view of the terrain. This potential temporary superiority is owed to a methodical view of the "object," which "distinguishes a reflective understanding from everyday communicative experience" (Habermas 1990 [1967]: 167). But if theory is to avoid "the misunderstanding of itself as a science" (Habermas 1973

[1963]: 238), it needs to assume that agents will at least be able to appropriate this methodological view. After all, facilitating this appropriation is exactly the aim of the theoretical intervention. The result is the seemingly paradoxical position of critical social theory:

The vindicating superiority of those who do the enlightening over those who are to be enlightened is theoretically unavoidable, but at the same time it is fictive and requires self-correction: in a process of enlightenment there can only be participants.  
(Habermas 1973 [1963]: 40)

Following up on these claims, in *Knowledge and Human Interests* Habermas presents a meta-theoretical analysis of the intertwining of theoretical reflection, self-understanding, and critique specific for critical theory. He argues that the latter can find a paradigmatic role model for strengthening its still underdeveloped methodology of reconstructive critique in psychoanalysis. For Habermas, the conception of *self-reflection* plays a decisive role in the characterization of both the process of reconstructive critique and its aim, that is, the situation that is to be brought about by this procedure. In dialogue with the analyst or critical theorist, the addressee experiences the “emancipatory power of reflection” (Habermas 1971 [1968]: 197), triggered by the analyst’s or theorist’s attempts at reconstruction. For the goal of these attempts is “setting in motion a process of enlightenment and bringing the patient to self-reflection” (ibid.: 244) – a process in which the self-reflective effort has to be made by the subjects themselves. On this picture, critique and self-reflection can be turned neither into a science nor into a technique nor can they be delegated in any other way. The addressees must therefore be engaged in the process in such a way that they can describe it from their own perspective as a process of self-reflection in which they are agents, not mere objects.

Habermas himself, however, did not remain convinced by his own methodological approach for very long. As early as 1973, in a postscript to the second edition of *Knowledge and Human Interests*, he introduced a crucial distinction that was to clear up a supposed confusion – the distinction between “reconstruction” (for which he now uses the German term “Nachkonstruktion”) and “self-reflexion” in a critical sense (which is an essential aspect of what “reconstruction” [“Rekonstruktion”] means in *Knowledge and Human Interests*). “On the one hand,” Habermas writes, the term “reflexion”

denotes the reflexion upon the conditions of potential abilities of a knowing, speaking and acting subject as such; on the other hand, it denotes the reflexion upon unconsciously produced constraints to which a determinate subject [...] succumbs in its process of self-formation.

(Habermas 1973: 182)

As is well known, Habermas subsequently devoted himself to the project of rational reconstruction (“Nachkonstruktion”) in the form of a “quasi-transcendental” universal or formal pragmatics, in which the aim is to reconstruct the normative structures of all action and speech in order to provide critical theory with a solid normative foundation.

The final step in this attempt to move beyond the perceived limitations of the first generation – whose members were, in Habermas’s view, wedded to an untenable philosophy of history and still constrained by the metaphysical commitments of traditional philosophy of consciousness – took the form of a communicative turn in which the critique of ideology was transformed into a critique of the conditions of communication. As Habermas points out in the context of his analysis of the colonization of the lifeworld, the intrusion of system-specific mechanisms of action coordination (power and money) into the lifeworld (in the guise of its bureaucratization and monetarization) can result in “reification – that is, in a



pathological de-formation of the communicative infrastructure of the lifeworld” (Habermas 1987 [1981]: 375). If this occurs, the dominance of one-sidedly cognitive-instrumental forms of rationality prestructures how subjects relate to the world and to themselves in ways that incentivize strategic interactions. In this context, Habermas identifies “a structural violence that, without becoming manifest as such, takes hold of the forms of intersubjectivity of possible understanding. Structural violence is exercised by way of systemic restrictions on communication” (ibid.: 187). Systematically distorted communication is thus “systematic” in the dual sense of being systemic or structural rather than contingent, and rooted in the system as opposed to the lifeworld.

In order to take this kind of distortion into account, the internal perspective of the participants has to be complemented with the external perspective of an observer who has the theoretical means to suspend the counterfactual pragmatic presuppositions speakers necessarily have to make, and to diagnose how systems overreach and undermine the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld through communicative action. Against this background, it can be seen as one of the main tasks of critical theory to analyze and bring to the agents’ attention the distortions that block them from addressing and overcoming obstacles to emancipation.

Habermas’s critique of the first generation was that they had navigated themselves into a dead end, in which their totalizing diagnosis of an all-encompassing state of delusion dominated by instrumental rationality and the exchange principle robbed them of any standard of critique. The result is one massive performative contradiction: if reason is totalitarian and enlightenment equals domination, the very conditions of possibility of critique are undermined. In order to provide firm normative foundations and avoid the risk of having to invoke pseudo- or cryptonormative vocabulary, Habermas positions his own theory of communicative action as being able to “ascertain for itself the rational content of anthropologically deep-seated structures by means of an analysis that, to begin with, proceeds reconstructively that is, unhistorically” (ibid.: 383). Reconstruction in this sense still involves reference to a pretheoretical anchoring point; only now it is not struggles and oppositional forms of consciousness or experience that Habermas has in mind but “the pretheoretical knowledge of competently judging, acting, and speaking subjects” (ibid.: 399).

Struggles, however, are not altogether absent from the picture Habermas develops. On a diagnostic level, continuing affluence and welfare-state policies of redistribution seemed to contribute to the further integration of the (former) working class and the marginalization of economic struggles, leading to a displacement of conflicts onto the terrain of culture and forms of life. In this context, social struggles still play a certain role but are reprogrammed, as in Habermas’s view a new type of conflict arises “along the seams between system and lifeworld” (395). These so-called new social movements were situated precisely at the increasingly porous and contested borders between system and lifeworld, opposing the “colonization of the lifeworld” and responding to the impression that the claims to redistribution articulated by the remnants of the workers’ movement – labor unions and parts of the Social Democratic Party – had been successfully coopted into the system. As Habermas notes,

these new conflicts arise in domains of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization; they are carried out in subinstitutional – or at least extraparlimentary – forms of protest; and the underlying deficits reflect a reification of communicatively structured domains of action that will not respond to the media of money and power.

(ibid.: 392)

Rather than having a theoretical or practical significance in their own right, however, these conflicts seem to primarily serve an epistemic function in signaling the shortcomings of a

process of social rationalization and modernization that is selective in a problematically one-sided way.

For Habermas, the liberal-democratic capitalist welfare state provides a contradictory but ultimately unsurpassable institutional context in which the “anarchic” potential of communicative action can unfold itself in the public sphere even though it is confronted with powerful forces and obstacles. The latter appear in the form of the colonization of the lifeworld, the distortion of communicative interaction through power relations, the lure of a technocratic displacement of politics – including, increasingly, at the supranational level as in the case of the European Union – and the fragmentation and narrowing of public discourse – a tendency much exacerbated by the rise of the Internet. In this context, it is no surprise that Habermas thinks of his own very prolific intellectual engagement – from the student movement, via the so-called Historians’ Debate (“Historikerstreit”) in the 1980s and German unification to the future of the European Union – in terms that are significantly different from Adorno’s (see Müller-Doohm 2005, 2016 [2014]: esp. chs. 5, 9, 10, 12). His increasingly Kantian orientation, his theoretical elaboration of the model of deliberative democracy, and his interest in the latter’s institutionalization not only on the national but also on the transnational level and especially within the European Union have led to an increasing disconnect from struggles and “practice” in the institution-transcending sense of early-to-mid critical theory.

Starting in the 1970s and 1980s, however, an alternative strand within critical theory started to develop which aimed at recovering the link between theory and practice in a more substantial way by connecting the development of theory itself to social conflicts and social movements. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge’s *Public Sphere and Experience* (2016 [1972]) is an early example of a critique of the bourgeois (i.e. hegemonic) public sphere that invokes proletarian or plebeian non-state forms of the public and the divergent critical experiences they articulate – as well as the blockades, e.g. in the form of the “consciousness industry” or the pacification of social conflicts through “pseudo-publics,” they have to face – as alternative sources of normativity. In a more explicit vein, Nancy Fraser introduces her own contribution to the feminist turn in critical theory – for which the work of Seyla Benhabib, Jean Cohen, and Amy Allen has also been decisive – by building on Marx’s famous “definition of critical theory” as “the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age.” In her view, critical theory therefore “frames its research program and its conceptual framework with an eye to the aims and activities of those oppositional social movements with which it has a partisan, though not uncritical, identification” (Fraser 1985: 97). As Fraser notes, against this background, critical theory in general and the Habermasian approach in particular have failed to theorize one of the most significant struggles against domination, namely the feminist movement. It is, however, in the work of Axel Honneth – according to whom both Adorno and Habermas ultimately fail to live up to the task of “identifying empirically experiences and attitudes that give a pre-theoretical indication that [critical theory’s] normative standpoints have some basis in social reality” (Honneth 2007 [1994]: 69) – that the link between struggles and theory development has gained the most prominent role in what is often referred to as the third generation of the Frankfurt School.

### **The Return to Struggles and Movements**

Honneth’s attempt to renew the tradition of critical theory involves moving beyond Habermas in a variety of ways that are meant to open access to more deeply seated and not communicatively mediated expectations, experiences, and pathologies of recognition. At the same time, experiences of misrecognition are taken to lead to social struggles for recognition that in turn serve as a pretheoretical reference point for Honneth’s left-Hegelian renewal of critical theory. Already early on, Honneth underlined that it is the reference to “the

pretheoretical resource (*vorwissenschaftliche Instanz*) in which its own critical viewpoint is anchored extratheoretically as an empirical interest or moral experience” that distinguishes critical theory from other normative enterprises (Honneth 2007 [1994]: 63–64). Beyond the relatively narrow cognitivist focus on communication, the theory of recognition zooms in on more fundamental and often prelinguistic experiences and intersubjective relations – which are supposed to furnish precisely that pre-theoretical anchoring point and those resources that Honneth identified as desiderata in earlier versions of critical theory. At the same time, his approach further broadens the theoretical focus by incorporating and reformulating two Marxist topoi: the importance of the sphere of work and labor, now understood as a space in which recognition is both enabled and denied, and of class struggle, which reappears in the guise of struggles for recognition that social groups engage in in reaction to their experiences of social suffering produced by misrecognition.

As the struggle for recognition feeds on negative personal and collective experiences of systematic misrecognition, it can take more or less radical, i.e. more reformist or more revolutionary, forms:

All struggles for recognition [...] progress through a playing out of the moral dialectic of the universal and the particular [...] each principle of recognition has a specific surplus of validity whose normative significance is expressed by the constant struggle over its appropriate application and interpretation. Within each sphere, it is always possible to set a moral dialectic of the general and the particular in motion: claims are made for a particular perspective (need, life-situation, contribution) that has not yet found appropriate consideration by appeal to a general recognition principle (love, law, achievement).

(Honneth/Fraser 2003: 152, 186)

At least on an optimistic view, experiences of misrecognition are articulated in social struggles for recognition that, in appealing to partially institutionalized principles of recognition, set in motion a progressive dynamic that leads to ever more inclusive and differentiated relations of recognition.

More recently, however, and especially in *Freedom's Right* (2014 [2011]), Honneth turns to the ways in which modern society attempts to institutionalize freedom in different social spheres, notably in its legal, moral, political as well as social and economic practices and institutions. Against both revolutionary and conservative approaches, he aims to show that the structure of this institutionalization allows for a progressive, ever more adequate realization of the value of freedom as social actors appeal to the constitutive idea of freedom to challenge the concrete forms of unfreedom that remain characteristic of our social reality. Democratic ethical life – *demokratische Sittlichkeit* – is that set of dynamic practices and institutions which both already realizes freedom and enables its own transformation from a partial toward a more comprehensive realization of freedom. In this process, a one-sided, e.g. overly individualist and negative understanding of freedom is overcome in the direction of a social order that can be regarded as just to the extent that it adequately institutionalizes freedom in its comprehensive sense. Despite Honneth's emphasis on the dynamical development of society, however, *Freedom's Right* does not contain a detailed theoretical explanation of how historical change occurs, of how social learning processes unfold on the basis of certain experiences, and of their interpretation and translation into collective action and struggle.

From Honneth's more institution-centered vantage point, power and struggle now appear as external and temporary phenomena rather than as constitutive aspects of relations of recognition. To put it differently, by treating struggles and conflicts as mere occasions for the development of particular attempts to institutionalize freedom and recognition, as reactions

to perceived deficits in the social realization of the ideal of recognition, neither the intertwining of relations of recognition and individual and collective capacities for conflict, nor the constitution and tenuous maintenance of relations of recognition precisely in conflicts are adequately taken into account. As a result, conflict and struggle now seem secondary with regard to the unfolding of institutionalized achievements and incremental learning processes, and the latter take on the role of a pretheoretical anchoring point for the now largely backward-looking reconstructive work of the critical theorist (see Bertram/Celikates 2015; for an alternative account of social learning processes, see Jaeggi 2018 [2013]).

In response to objections that painted his approach as overly reformist or even conservative, Honneth's next book, *The Idea of Socialism* (2017 [2015]), asks how, in the case of socialism, we should rethink the relationship between theory and practice. In this context, he makes the following, maybe somewhat surprising, claim that is nevertheless in line with his previous approach: "not rebelling subjectivities but objective improvements, not collective movements, but institutional achievements should be regarded as the social bearer of those normative claims [to freedom] which socialism articulates in modern societies" (Honneth 2017 [2015]: 73–74 [translation modified as the sentence from p. 117 of the German original has no equivalent in the English version]). With this claim Honneth attempts to go beyond one of the three "birth defects" he ascribes to the socialist project, namely its self-referential assumption that there already exists within society an oppositional force which emancipatory theory can claim to express and in turn inform.

While Honneth points out that the reference to oppositional forces and movements is part and parcel of the reflexive structure of any emancipatory theory that is not free-standing, in his view socialists tended to apodictically presuppose the existence of such a movement, simply engaging in the sociological ascription of interests in a way that is theoretically arbitrary (Honneth 2017 [2015]: 38–39). In this way, they elevated the existence of the kind of social movement required by the theory in order to become practical into a "transcendental precondition" (ibid.: 40).

If the link to actually existing social struggles or movements is dropped, however, the question arises what remains of the claim that socialism – and by analogy: critical theory – is not just another political theory indistinguishable from mainstream liberalism. If socialism wants to avoid becoming simply another normative theory, it has to replace the lost link with the proletariat with something more convincing. Accordingly, Honneth makes it clear that if this tradition is to retain its distinctiveness vis-à-vis liberal political philosophy, i.e. in order to avoid collapsing into just another normative approach that confronts reality with a mere ought, it has to find an alternative form of historical anchoring. This anchoring, however, is supposed to be located on a "higher level of abstraction" (ibid.: 64, 71) which Honneth identifies with the institutional achievements of modern liberal democracies. Honneth sees no alternative to this shift from struggles to institutions, as otherwise he thinks one would unjustifiably privilege certain group-specific experiences of heteronomy and exclusion over others. In addition, as social movements "come and go" according to the contingencies of historical developments and fluctuating media attention, they can no longer be regarded as reliable indicators of heteronomy and exclusion (ibid.: 72). For these reasons, Honneth concludes, socialism today should locate the horizon of future emancipation where "the expansion of social freedoms can already be found in existing institutions, in altered legal structures and shifts in mentality that can no longer be rolled back" (ibid.: 73).

This reconceptualization of the link between emancipatory theory and practice, however, raises several questions. To start with, there is the increasingly pressing question of how strong the notion of quasi-irreversibility behind the claim that certain achievements "can no longer be rolled back" is intended to be and how it could be defended socio-theoretically and empirically. More importantly, one could argue that the relation between institutional

achievements and collective movements is more complex than Honneth's dichotomy suggests. Struggles and institutional achievements seem to be internally connected in at least three ways – (i) in terms of their genesis: how institutional achievements come about (usually not by institutional self-learning or self-correction alone); (ii) in terms of their functioning: how institutional achievements are integrated into the everyday functioning of institutions (usually not exclusively thanks to the institution's internal structure but also to external pressure); and (iii) in terms of stabilization: how institutional achievements are secured (usually not just through practices and habits, but also through struggles and movements in which those affected defend the outcomes of their struggles).

The methodological abstraction from collective movements and rebellious subjectivities and the relocation of the emancipatory potential in the normative achievements of the existing institutional order risks underestimating how, in the three dimensions of the genesis, functioning and stabilization of the institutional order, institutional dynamics and social struggles are inextricably intertwined. Finally, there are also methodological and epistemological problems concerning the status of critical theory and the standpoint from which it reconstructs the supposed achievements of the institutional order (while running the risk of downplaying the functional reliance of these achievements on forms of domination, exploitation, and exclusion) that the uncoupling of the latter from emancipatory movements gives rise to.

A more promising route, in this respect, is taken by Honneth in his recent Mark Sacks lecture in which he advances the claim that

critical theory is nothing but the continuation, by means of a controlled scientific methodology, of the cognitive labor that oppressed groups have to perform in their everyday struggles when they work to de-naturalize hegemonic patterns of interpretation and to expose the interests by which these are motivated.

(Honneth 2017: 919)

In this way, he reaffirms the link between theory and struggles, animated by an emancipatory interest, so central for Horkheimer's original project.

### Challenges and Perspectives

The difficulties with which Honneth grapples in his most recent work exemplify that the link between critical theory and social struggles has become problematic for a variety of reasons. At the same time, critical theory is not able to easily rid itself of these problems as it would then risk losing its methodological specificity. In this context, three challenges can be distinguished.

*First*, and most obviously, for Horkheimer (but, arguably, also already for Marx) there is no automatic translation of social position into epistemic privilege, and of epistemic privilege into political progressiveness. Although the oppressed are in a unique social and epistemic position, their actual practices and worldviews can be distorted, and it is one of the tasks of critical theory to contribute to overcoming these distortions. However, this is not a huge problem for critical theory, since the clearing away of distortions can still be seen as a process of self-clarification and self-emancipation, in which, to return to Habermas's memorable phrase, "there can only be participants."

*Second*, there is the more fundamental challenge that in certain situations there are no struggles to latch onto for critical theory. How could critical theory respond to a situation in which domination is more or less total and has managed to suppress any critical consciousness and practice? To this scenario, to which some of Marcuse's descriptions of contemporary

society might come closest, one can respond, following Raymond Geuss (1981: 83–84), that “a society of happy slaves, genuinely content with their chains,” a society in which domination is not even experienced as domination but as freedom, might be the critical theorists’ nightmare, but it “is a nightmare, not a realistic view of a state of society which is at present possible.” Nevertheless, the challenge should also not be dismissed too easily since it points to a problem or a dilemma critical theory faces. On the one hand, critical theory requires a starting point in the forms of consciousness, experience, and practice of its addressees, but, on the other hand, critical theory is supposed to respond to and address distortions and blockades of precisely these forms of consciousness, experience, and practice. As Honneth (2009 [2004]: 29–30) argues, the explanatory task of critical theory – and this is another reason why it cannot be reduced to a purely normative enterprise – focuses on the workings of ideology and false consciousness, explaining why there is little or no critical counter-conduct, although the suffering and restrictions on agents’ rational capacities are presumably such that agents cannot remain indifferent to them. Again, one could argue, however, that the possibility of more or less total delusion does not pose such a pressing problem, because these distortions and blockades will in most cases turn out to be partial rather than total and thus allow for some form of problematization to emerge (Celikates 2018 [2009]: Part III). At the same time, it is important to avoid what Honneth calls the “abstractive fallacy” involved in tying critical theory to already existing social movements and thus to “goals that have already been publicly articulated insofar as [this] neglects the everyday, still unthematized, but no less pressing embryonic form of social misery and moral injustice” (Honneth 2003: 113–114). As Honneth (2007 [1981]: 82) pointed out early on, critical theory must always also refer to “forms of existing social critique not recognized by the political-hegemonical public sphere” as strategies to preserve the hegemonic order by, e.g., desymbolization (or what has come to be called “epistemic injustice”) and individualization that can effectively block, or distort, the expression of experiences of injustice and their translation into collective forms of mobilization and struggle (see also Renault 2004; Fischbach 2009).

The *third* challenge critical theory has to face in this regard might turn out to be even more pressing. After the demise of the kind of philosophy of history that identified the proletariat as the revolutionary subject and the workers’ movement as the emancipatory oppositional force to which critical theory could and should attach itself, it has become unclear how critical theorists can determine with which of the different emancipatory movements to enter into the kind of alliance envisaged by Marx and Horkheimer and which “forms of existing social critique” or “experiences of injustice” to pick up on. This difficulty is not only due to the plurality – or intersectionality – of movements, practices of critique, and experiences of injustice, but also due to the fact that these are often far from perfectly aligned and can operate at cross-purposes, in the case of movements with regard to both their aims and their methods or means. Analogous to the problem of “theory choice” discussed in the philosophy of science, critical theory seems to be confronted with what we could call the problem of “movement choice.” In answering this challenge, which at least those critical theorists have to face who are not “organic intellectuals” of existing movements, two extreme options seem unattractive: neither can the correct “choice” be derived from some overarching laws of historical development (the pole of determinism), nor does it seem satisfactory to simply claim that the theorist has to decide which struggle or movement to link her theory to (the pole of voluntarism).

As these challenges and the foundational problems they stem from – that of the methodological status of critical theory, its relation to practice, and the corresponding role of the critical theorist – are still with us today, one hopes they will no longer be pushed into the background by the dominance of the debate on the normative standards of critique but be discussed in their own right. The question concerning normative foundations is clearly of

central importance, but it cannot replace the at least equally central question – one even more important for the self-understanding of early critical theory – of how the relation between theory and practice or between theorists and their addressees should be understood, if it is not to be construed in line with the epistemological dogma that the self-understanding of agents is irrelevant for the empirical verification of the theory and only complicates the data. This suggests that the emancipatory orientation of critical theory is internally linked to its double reflexivity: only reflection on the context in which a theory emerged and in which it is used – a twofold dependency of theory on practice – enables an adequate understanding of the practical character of theory itself, and thus a break with the dogma of scientism and objectivism. Next to its practical interest in emancipation, reflection on its own methodological status and its self-understanding as part of social practice are supposed to distinguish critical theory from “traditional theories.” For “in contrast to what is the case for empirical-analytical theories, the metatheory of method is part of critical theory itself” (Wellmer 1977 [1969]: 13; my translation), and as Wellmer adds, “The unity of theory and metatheory is nothing but a different expression of the unity of theory and practice.”

While the dependence on practices and on the real-life “critical activity” of social actors “which has society itself for its object” (Horkheimer 1972 [1937]: 206) has always been part of the way in which critical theory positions itself methodologically (see also Nobre 2015), it cannot be denied that there is a parallel tendency to neglect actually existing social practices of critique and struggle. This tendency can be found both in traditional and in current forms of critical theory and is partly due to the assumption of an asymmetry between the theoretically informed (and critical or objective) perspective of the observer and the naive (and excessively subjective) participant perspective, along with the corresponding assumption of the necessity of a break with the self-understanding of agents. If, in contrast, we understand critical social theory itself as a social practice, placing it – regarding the contexts of its emergence and use, as well as its subject matter – in a constitutive relation to the social practices of critique and the reflexive capacities of agents that are expressed in these practices, then the dogma of asymmetry and of the break loses its appeal and can be recognized as a relic of a traditional understanding of theory. First and foremost, however, critical theory will have to recognize its addressees as equal partners in a dialogical struggle for appropriate interpretations and the realization of transformative potentials – partners that are capable of assuming the perspective taken by critical theory (see Bohman 2003; Cooke 2005; Celikates 2018 [2009]). Arguably, the tensions that these often conflicting commitments give rise to are part and parcel of the “dynamic unity” in which Horkheimer thought critical theory stands in relation to practice and actually existing struggles, without denying “the ever present possibility of tension between the theoretician and the class [struggle, movement, experience] which his thinking is to serve” (Horkheimer 1972 [1937]: 214–215). Giving up this aspiration to a “dynamic unity” between theory and practice would face critical theory with the unacceptable choice between a “theory that bears no relation to any conceivable practice [and becomes] a piece of dead scholarship, a matter of complete indifference to us as living minds and active, living human beings” and “a practice that simply frees itself from the shackles of theory and [... sinks] to the level of activity for its own sake [...] stuck fast within the given reality” (Adorno 2001 [1963]: 6).

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# THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL AND THE WEST GERMAN STUDENT MOVEMENT

*Hans Kundnani*

Although the Frankfurt School had a huge influence on the West German student movement, its influence was complex and contradictory. In the first place, the student movement was inspired by the Frankfurt School and in particular drew its sense of itself as an “anti-authoritarian” movement from the Frankfurt School’s wartime and post-war work on the authoritarian state and authoritarian personality. But the student movement also increasingly turned against the Frankfurt School as it radicalized after the shooting of Benno Ohnesorg by a police officer in West Berlin on June 2, 1967. Eventually, it would accuse the Frankfurt School itself of “authoritarianism.” As a result, the story of the student movement and the Frankfurt School is often told as one of intellectual “patricide.”

At the same time, however, the confrontation with the student movement also exposed differences between members of the Frankfurt School – in particular, between Theodor W. Adorno, Jürgen Habermas, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse, whose relationships with the student movement are explored in this chapter. In other words, while the leading figures in the Frankfurt School clashed with the student movement, they also clashed with each other. In particular, a rift opened up between Adorno, who had returned to Frankfurt and taken over from Horkheimer as the director of the Institute of Social Research in 1959, and Marcuse, who had remained in California. The two men had not resolved their differences by the time Adorno died in the summer of 1969.

The differences between the student movement and the Frankfurt School also had their origins in ambiguities and tensions in the Frankfurt School’s thinking and how it evolved over time. In that sense, the story is not only one of how the student movement distorted the thinking of the Frankfurt School as they sought to apply it in the Federal Republic, but also one of how different members of the student movement selectively read the Frankfurt School. The students were inspired above all by Marcuse, who of all the members of the Frankfurt School had the most sympathy to them. But they were also inspired by Horkheimer’s early aphorisms, which they daubed on the walls of university buildings – and yet he was most critical of the student movement.

The differences between the Frankfurt School and the student movement, and within the Frankfurt School itself in relation to the student movement, revolved around three key questions. First, there was the vexed question of the relationship between theory and praxis. Adorno would famously say that the students had misunderstood critical theory if

they thought they could make immediate practical use of it. In an interview with *Spiegel* in 1969, he said, "I developed a theoretical model. I could not have imagined that people would seek to make it a reality using Molotov cocktails" (Spiegel 1969). But here there were also differences within the Frankfurt School: it was above all on the question of theory and praxis that Adorno and Marcuse disagreed.

Second, the Frankfurt School clashed with the student movement in their analysis of the political situation in the Federal Republic and in particular on the question of the extent to which a revolutionary situation existed in West Germany in the late 1960s. Especially after the killing of Ohnesorg, the student movement saw the potential for action by a vanguard to create a revolution in West Germany. But even Marcuse, who was the most sympathetic member of the Frankfurt School towards the student movement, told Adorno that he agreed with him that the situation was not even a pre-revolutionary one, let alone revolutionary one (letter from Marcuse to Adorno, April 5, 1969), though he nevertheless remained closer to the students than Adorno.

Third, the Frankfurt School and the student movement disagreed about the relevance of the Nazi past and Holocaust to the Federal Republic and the student movement. The student movement tended to see the Federal Republic as a continuation of the Third Reich. In this, they drew on the work of the Frankfurt School and in particular Horkheimer's dictum that "he who does not wish to speak of capitalism should also be silent about fascism" (from "The Jews in Europe," quoted in Jay 1973: 156) and on his later work on the authoritarian state, which they sought to apply to the post-war Federal Republic. Yet Adorno and Horkheimer also came to see alarming echoes of Nazism in the student movement itself. In particular, they became increasingly troubled by the use by the student movement of the "thoughtless violence that once belonged to fascism" (letter from Adorno to Marcuse, May 5, 1969).

### The Emergence of the Student Movement

The student movement initially mobilized in the mid-1960s to protest against conditions at West German universities, which had grown rapidly and become overcrowded as they struggled to accommodate the post-war generation. It opposed what it perceived as the authoritarian nature of West German university system, in which a handful of *Ordinarien* (senior professors) determined virtually every aspect of university life – hence the famous slogan, first used by students in Hamburg in November 1967: "Unter den Talaren – Muff von tausend Jahren" ("under academic gowns – the musty smell of 1000 years"). But gradually the students' critique of the university radicalized and broadened to include West German society as a whole.

The post-war generation gravitated towards Marxism, Norbert Elias has argued, because it was a "contrary creed" to that of their fathers and grandfathers that enabled them to distance themselves from the atrocities of the past – an "antitoxin to Hitler's teachings" (Elias 1996: 230). Marxism was a uniquely liberating ideology for the post-war generation in Germany: by making capitalism responsible for the emergence of Nazism, Marxism also exonerated the post-war generation and its parents. Thus, Marxism was "the only ideological framework that provided them with an explanation of fascism and at the same time gave them the feeling that they had nothing to do with the past and that they were free of all guilt" (Elias 1989: 537).

The student movement was particularly drawn to the Frankfurt School's explanation of Nazism. "They gave us the language to analyze the Nazis," as Tilman Fichter, a leading figure in the student movement in West Berlin, put it (interview with Tilman Fichter). In particular, "anti-authoritarianism," which became the central idea around which the student movement mobilized, was derived from the work Adorno and Horkheimer had done on the

authoritarian state and the authoritarian personality while in exile in the United States. But the radical students also wanted to develop the work of their intellectual mentors. “Our idea was to attempt to develop the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* further, that is, we wanted to find a theoretical basis for a world beyond capitalism and also beyond socialism as it existed in the GDR,” says Detlev Claussen, a philosophy student at Frankfurt University, who had come to Frankfurt specifically to study under Adorno (interview with Detlev Claussen).

However, before this ambitious theoretical project could be completed, many of the students came to adopt a simplified, distorted version of the work of Adorno and Horkheimer. Horkheimer’s work on the authoritarian state had been written with Nazism and the Soviet Union in mind. He argued that in a system of “integral étatism,” the state took on the functions of a monopoly capitalist and completely dominated society through a mixture of terror and manipulation by the mass media (Jay 1973: 166). But the students believed the theory of the authoritarian state could also be applied to the Federal Republic. “Our idea was that the Federal Republic had never freed itself from the model of the authoritarian state,” says Claussen (interview with Detlev Claussen). In other words, it was not just that authoritarian attitudes had persisted in post-war Germany, as Adorno had argued. To the students, the Federal Republic was itself also, like the Third Reich, an authoritarian state (Kraushaar 1997: 272).

In May 1965, with West Germany entering its first recession since the end of World War II, the three main political parties in parliament agreed to amend the Basic Law – the provisional West German constitution – in order to pass to the government the emergency powers for use in times of severe internal unrest which until then had been held by the Allies. In effect, the transfer of these emergency powers to the West German government was a step towards full sovereignty. But much of the left, including the most powerful trade unions such as the metalworkers’ union IG Metall, vehemently opposed the “emergency laws,” which they saw as a restriction of democratic rights. To some in the student movement, they were even reminiscent of the Enabling Law passed by the Nazis in 1933. They referred to the emergency laws, or *Notsstandsgesetze*, as the “NS-Gesetze” (“NS” was also the abbreviation for *Nationalsozialismus*, or National Socialism).

From 1965 onwards, the Vietnam War also became a key issue around which the student movement mobilized. In 1966, two students at the Free University in Berlin, Jürgen Horlemann and Peter Gäng, produced an exhibition and book, entitled *Vietnam – The Genesis of a Conflict*, that played a major role in changing the students’ perception of the war. It was, the authors argued, not a war for freedom at all, as the Americans and the West German establishment had argued, but an imperialist war waged by the United States against an exploited Third World colony. To some it was even “genocide.” Moreover, by failing to oppose the war, the Federal Republic was complicit in it.

In 1966, Ludwig Erhard’s government collapsed and the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats agreed to form a grand coalition. The new chancellor was Kurt-Georg Kiesinger, who had been a member of the Nazi party from 1933 to 1945 and was a senior official in Josef Goebbels’s propaganda ministry. This seemed to many of the students to provide further confirmation that the Federal Republic was becoming an authoritarian state as they feared. It left almost no opposition within the Bundestag, the lower chamber of the West German parliament. From then on, the student movement increasingly saw itself as the core of an *Außerparlamentarische Opposition* (APO) or “extra-parliamentary opposition.”

The motor of the APO was the Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund (Socialist German Student League, SDS), the leading left-wing student organization in West Germany. It had been created in 1946 as the student organization of the German Social Democrat party (SPD). Students who joined the SPD were automatically members of it. However, in 1961, after the SPD moved to the centre ground of West German politics and in particular dropped

its commitment to Marxism at the Bad Godesberg conference in 1959, the SDS disaffiliated from the SPD and the SPD responded by banning its members from joining the SDS. The SDS ceased to be a mass organization. Instead, linked to the banned Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (German Communist Party, KPD), it saw itself as the intellectual vanguard of a socialist revolution in West Germany.

With the emergence of the new “anti-authoritarian” faction in the SDS in the late 1960s, however, a split opened up between it and the “traditionalists,” who had dominated the organization until then. The “traditionalists” took more orthodox Marxist positions and were linked to the KPD. It was above all through the new “anti-authoritarian” faction in the SDS that the Frankfurt School came to influence the student movement. But the specific influence that the Frankfurt School had on the “anti-authoritarian” faction of SDS varied from place to place. The two key centres of the movement were Frankfurt and West Berlin.

In Frankfurt itself, where the SDS had its national headquarters, Adorno was a kind of pop star. In fact, many of the students in Frankfurt had come there specifically to study under him. “We loved him,” says Arno Widmann, a philosophy student and member of the SDS in Frankfurt who later became a critic of Adorno (interview with Arno Widmann). The Frankfurt students considered themselves theoretically more sophisticated than the West Berlin students, who in turn thought the “Frankfurters” were *too* theoretical. “We thought they weren’t revolutionary enough and they thought we weren’t intellectually avant-garde enough,” says Tilman Fichter, a leading figure in the West Berlin SDS (interview with Tilman Fichter).

In West Berlin, where the action was, the leading figure in the “anti-authoritarian” faction was Rudi Dutschke. He had grown up in East Germany and moved to the city before the Berlin Wall was erected in 1961 – and it was at this point that he became politicized. He initially became involved with Subversive Aktion, a spin-off of the West German branch of the Situationist International, and had joined the SDS as part of a strategy of “entryism.” The charismatic and telegenic Dutschke would become the *de facto* leader of the student movement and its figurehead. He was largely responsible for its preoccupation with national liberation movements in the Third World and with US imperialism, and for its experimentation with new forms of direct action.

The “Dutschkists” were less interested in Adorno and Horkheimer and more interested in Marcuse – whom the Frankfurt students did not consider intellectually serious. In particular, they were drawn to his description in *One-Dimensional Man* (Marcuse 1964) of the way post-war capitalist society, with its increased affluence and new techniques of manipulation, particularly through the mass media, had created societies with totalitarian tendencies and without opposition – which was precisely how West Germany looked to the students after the formation of the grand coalition.

They were also attracted to Marcuse’s description of the new revolutionary vanguard of “outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors, the unemployed and the unemployable” that alone could challenge the new forms of domination (Marcuse 1964: 256). Marcuse was thinking of the American students who had stood alongside African Americans in the civil rights struggle. But to students in West Germany it provided a *raison d’être* for their own movement. If Marcuse was right, they no longer had to defer to the proletariat as the revolutionary subject.

These marginalized groups, Marcuse suggested, offered new ways of challenging capitalism from outside:

Their opposition hits the system from without and is therefore not deflected by the system; it is an elementary force that violates the rules of the game and, in doing

so, reveals it as a rigged game. When they get together and go out into the streets, without arms, without protection, in order to ask for the most primitive civil rights, they know that they face dogs, stones, and bombs, jail, concentration camps, even death. Their force is behind every political demonstration for the victims of law and order. The fact that they start refusing to play the game may be the fact that marks the beginning of the end of a period.

(Ibid.)

Such opposition was radically different from traditional forms of protest, which the totalitarian tendencies of advanced industrial society had rendered ineffective and perhaps even dangerous because they created an illusion of real democracy. In other words, even protest could now be tolerated, recuperated and turned into a repressive force. It was what Marcuse, in an essay that was published in English the following year, termed “repressive tolerance.”

In his conclusion to the essay, Marcuse wrote that it was absurd to demand that marginalized groups in society protest lawfully. There was, he wrote,

a natural right of resistance for oppressed and overpowered minorities to use extralegal means if the legal ones have proved to be inadequate. Law and order are always and everywhere the law and order that protect the established hierarchy; it is nonsensical to invoke the absolute authority of this law and this order against those who suffer from it and struggle against it – not for personal advantages and revenge, but for their share of humanity. There is no judge over them than the constituted authorities, the police and their own conscience. If they use violence, they do not start a new chain of violence but try to break an established one. Since they will be punished, they know the risk, and when they are willing to take it, no third person, and least of all the educator and intellectual, has the right to preach them abstention.

(Woolf/Moore Jr./Marcuse 1965: 116–117)

“Repressive Tolerance” was published in German in 1966 and instantly became essential reading among left-wing students in West Germany. The conclusion and in particular Marcuse’s claim that minorities had a “natural right of resistance” would become a kind of manifesto for the student movement. It seemed to justify extralegal means in the students’ struggle. If they used violence, it would be, in Marxist terms, not reactionary violence but progressive violence. The essay was thus a key catalyst in the student movement’s transition from discussion to action or, to put it another way, from protest to “resistance.” As Dutschke and several other leading figures in the SDS wrote in the summer of 1967, it had

clarified our feeling of uneasiness about the fact that our constant discussions had no practical consequences. We realized that the bourgeoisie, the ruling class in every country of the “free world”, can afford to have critical minorities discussing about the problems in their own and in foreign societies, that they are prepared to allow any discussion as long as it remains theoretical.

(Bergmann/Dutschke/Lefèvre/Rabehl 1967: 73)

To the “Dutschkists,” the recession that hit in 1966 showed that West Germany’s post-war economic miracle was coming to an end and that capitalist society was on the verge of collapse. In fact, the formation of the grand coalition seemed to be “the last desperate attempt of the ruling oligarchies to resolve the structural difficulties of the system” (Bergmann/Dutschke/Lefèvre/Rabehl 1967: 88). West Germany was now in the middle of a transitional

phase of “cultural revolution” that would precede the actual revolution. In short, it was a pre-revolutionary situation. It was therefore time for the vanguard of the revolution to take the initiative, to move beyond mere protest to the “resistance” that Marcuse had talked about.

The question of what form that “resistance” should take, and in particular what role violence should play in it, would be the single biggest question for the West German left for the next decade. The orthodox Marxist–Leninist answer was that violence was to be used only during a revolutionary situation. But Marx and Lenin were not writing about a “one-dimensional society.” In this context, Dutschke advocated what he called a “strategy of escalation” (Kraushaar 2005: 41). The crucial thing was to “violate the rules of game,” thus setting up an “ever more effective dialectic between enlightenment and mass action” (Bergmann/Dutschke/Lefèvre/Rabehl 1967: 89). Through “systematic, controlled, and limited confrontation” with it, the APO could expose the West German state’s real character as a “dictatorship of violence” (ibid.: 82).

### The Climax of the Student Movement

The shooting of Benno Ohnesorg by a police officer at a protest against the visit by the Shah of Iran in West Berlin on June 2, 1967 – which the SDS said showed there was now “an undeclared state of emergency” in West Germany – transformed the student movement. Suddenly, there were young people all over the Federal Republic who sympathized with the “anti-authoritarian” students’ view of the society they lived in. Until then, the West Berlin SDS had only around thirty or forty active members. Now there were suddenly several hundred, and thousands at its teach-ins. By the end of the year the SDS had 2,000 members around West Germany. Exhilarated by the surge of support, it began to think seriously about the *Machtfrage* or “question of power” – in other words, how they might overthrow the West German state.

After the shooting, the SDS also immediately organized a conference to debate how to respond. The conference took place directly after the burial of Ohnesorg in Hanover, his hometown, on June 9, 1967. Around 7,000 students from around West Germany attended the conference. They were joined by Jürgen Habermas, who had taken over Horkheimer’s chair in philosophy and sociology at Frankfurt University in 1964 and had been one of the most outspoken supporters of university reform among German professors. Habermas also shared the students’ anxiety about the direction in which West German democracy was heading, especially after the formation of the Grand Coalition and what he called the “legal terror” in West Berlin, where demonstrations had now been banned. Under these circumstances, the protest movement, he said, temporarily provided a much-needed opposition (Vesper 1967: 44).

At the same time, however, Habermas was troubled by the kind of direct action that Dutschke wanted the student movement to use to create a revolutionary situation. There were no signs that there was any objective prospect of a revolution in West Germany, however much the students wished it. Therefore, in the long term, Habermas worried, the students could regress into “actionism” – in other words, action for action’s sake. The students, Habermas said, were making the mistake of thinking that the revolution depended on their will alone: voluntarism. In these circumstances, to systematically provoke violence by the state as Dutschke seemed to be suggesting was to “play a game with terror that has fascistic implications” (Vesper 1967: 75).

Dutschke, who had been in Hamburg when Ohnesorg had been killed on June 2 and returned to Berlin the following morning, passionately defended the student movement’s use of provocation, which he said was not irrational at all. In advanced capitalist societies

such as the Federal Republic, he argued, the forces of production had advanced to such a point that emancipation did, in fact, depend only on the will of the vanguard. "History has always been made by men," he said. "It all depends on the conscious will of the people to finally consciously make it, to control it, to subject it to their will" (Vesper 1967: 78). Habermas, he said, had made the classic philosopher's mistake of merely interpreting the world and not changing it: "objectivism." Dutschke called for students across West Germany to organize demonstrations. If the authorities would not permit them, they should undertake "Kampfaktionen" (Vesper 1967: 82). Dutschke received rapturous applause.

Habermas left. But as he drove home after midnight and turned over Dutschke's comments in his head, he became anxious at the reaction of the audience to Dutschke's speech, and particularly his use of the word *Kampf*, which seemed to confirm exactly what he feared might happen to the student movement. He returned to the conference, hoping to force Dutschke to explain his position on the use of force, but arrived just as the congress was finishing. The hall was half-empty and Dutschke had already left. To boos and whistles from what remained of the audience, Habermas attempted to clarify what he said earlier. He said Dutschke's calls for the systematic, deliberate provocation of state violence represented a "voluntarist ideology" that in 1848 would have been called "Utopian Socialism" and now could be called *Linksfaschismus*, or "left-wing fascism" (Vesper 1967: 101).

In Dutschke's absence, it was left to other members of the student movement to respond to Habermas's accusation. One – the last to speak at the conference in Hanover – was Horst Mahler, a thirty-one-year-old lawyer who had represented members of the APO, including Dutschke himself, and was leading the students' own investigation into the events of June 2. Mahler said there was "a right to resistance in a democracy" and that "we have to ask ourselves whether we are now in a situation in which the question of resistance seriously arises" (Vesper 1967: 104). He went on,

After 1945, people often asked what kind of accusations we could make of our parents' generation. Was it right to hold it against them that they did not resist the fascist dictatorship? Very quickly they raised the objection that it was a dictatorship of absolute terror in which control was all encompassing, and no one could be expected to commit suicide. But perhaps we can hold it against them that they did not resist at a time when resistance was still possible and had a point.

(Ibid.)

Mahler said his generation was determined to act differently and not wait until it was too late. "And that means," he concluded, "that in this situation we are prepared to take risks and offer resistance." A few days later in West Berlin, Dutschke heard an audio tape of Habermas's criticism of him. He said he was "honored" to have been accused of "voluntarism." "Habermas does not want to grasp that it is only carefully-planned action that can prevent deaths, not only in the present but even more so in the future," he wrote in his diary. "Organized counter-violence is the best way for us to protect ourselves" (Dutschke 1996: 45). At this point, according to Habermas, the leadership of the SDS "stopped talking openly" with him (Habermas 1981: 519 ff., quoted in Wiggershaus 1986: 687).

The clash between Dutschke and Habermas at the congress in Hanover set the tone for the estrangement between the student movement and the Frankfurt School that followed. The confrontation that took place as the students radicalized in the weeks after June 2, 1967 was epitomized by the relationship between Adorno and his doctoral student and teaching assistant, Hans-Jürgen Krahl, alongside Dutschke the leading figure in the "anti-authoritarian" faction of the SDS. As an undergraduate at Göttingen University he had been influenced by Heidegger and was a member of a right-wing duelling fraternity.



Unlike Dutschke, Krahel, a pale figure with a glass eye, was far from a gifted speaker, but he was considered an even more brilliant theoretician.

Adorno had initially been sympathetic to the student protests. He agreed with the students that the authoritarian and hierarchical structures that existed in Germany needed to be changed, especially within the university system. He too saw the emergency laws as a threat to democracy and had spoken at protests against them (see Adorno 1968). He was disturbed by the campaign against the protests by the right-wing press and even remarked during one of his sociology seminars that “the students have taken on something of the role of the Jews” (Kraushaar 1998: Vol. 1, 254) – a confirmation, in effect, of the way many members of the protest movement thought of themselves as the “new Jews” (Enzensberger 2006: 160).

The killing of Ohnesorg had particularly disturbed Adorno. He began his lecture on aesthetics on June 6, 1967 by asking his students to stand in memory of the dead student, “whose fate, whatever the reports, is so disproportionate to his participation in a political demonstration” (Müller-Dooch 2005: 452). Unlike Horkheimer, who thought West Germans should be grateful towards the United States because it had liberated Germany from totalitarianism, Adorno also sympathized with the protests against the Vietnam war, which he said was proof of the persistence of the “world of torture” that had begun in Auschwitz (Müller-Dooch 2005: 451). But like Habermas, he also became increasingly alarmed by the students’ use of direct action – and at how they used the Frankfurt School’s theories to justify it. He wrote to Marcuse in California that the students’ leaders tended to “synthesize their practice with a non-existent theory, and this expresses a decisionism that evokes horrible memories” (Müller-Dooch 2005: 456).

Led by Krahel, the students in Frankfurt put increasing pressure on Adorno to publicly support them. In particular, they wanted his support in the trial of Fritz Teufel, a member of Kommune 1, an experimental commune linked to the student movement. Teufel had been charged with distributing a leaflet that seemed to celebrate a recent fire at a department store in Brussels, in which 300 people had died. Kommune 1 claimed the leaflet was satire and wanted Adorno to write an affidavit in support of this claim, which he refused to do. During a lecture Adorno gave on Goethe’s play *Iphigenia in Tauris* at the Free University in West Berlin on July 7, 1967, a group of students marched up to the lectern and unfurled a banner that, referring to Habermas’s comments at the congress in Hanover, read: “Berlin’s left-wing fascists greet Teddy the Classicist” (Müller-Dooch 2005: 454). Adorno refused to abandon his lecture and discuss the current political situation.

Following this disruption, Adorno remained supportive of the student movement’s political demands and continued to meet with representatives of the SDS, but at the same time began to publicly distance himself from their tactics, criticizing their use of direct action and the disruption of lectures. For him, the university was not part of the “administered world” but a refuge from it. Above all, he rejected the students’ characterization of the Federal Republic as a fascist state. He warned them not to make the mistake of “attacking what was a democracy, however much in need of improvement, rather than tackling its enemy, which was already starting to stir ominously” (Müller-Dooch 2005: 456).

Marcuse, meanwhile, who would later write to Adorno that he regarded Habermas’s idea of “left-wing fascism” as a “contradiction in terms” (letter from Marcuse to Adorno, April 5, 1969), believed the student movement could function as a “catalyst of rebellion” within the population as a whole (Marcuse 1969: 80). In July 1967 – in other words, a month after the killing of Ohnesorg – he came to West Berlin to give several lectures and take part in a four-day congress on “The possibilities for the APO in the Federal Republic” at the Free University (Marcuse 1980). Yet he too disappointed the students. Dutschke had told the *Spiegel* shortly before Marcuse’s arrival that they wanted him to elaborate a “concrete

Utopia" (Wiggershaus 1986: 690). Instead he made clear that they were neither an oppressed minority nor a revolutionary subject and said confrontation for confrontation's sake was irresponsible (*ibid.*: 691).

However, this did not deter the student movement. At the SDS congress in September 1967 – the biggest since 1958 – the "anti-authoritarian" faction had a majority for the first time and succeeded in getting a member of the faction, Karl-Dietrich Wolff, elected as chairman. At the congress, Dutschke and Krahls delivered a joint paper on the *Organisationsfrage* or "organization question." Explicitly applying Horkheimer's theory of "integral étatism" – intended to explain Nazi Germany – to post-war West Germany, they argued that in an authoritarian state like the Federal Republic in which the masses were manipulated, the opposition could no longer organize itself like a bourgeois political party. Instead, they proposed a decentralized movement of "urban guerillas." The so-called *Organisationsreferat* provided the theoretical basis for the left-wing terrorism in West Germany in the 1970s.

The student rebellion reached its climax in the spring of 1968. It had increasingly focused its activities against the Springer press, which the student movement regarded as manipulating the masses against the revolution and against them. The students felt as if the Springer press had created a "pogrom atmosphere" directed against them (Enzensberger 2006: 248). They began an "Expropriate Springer!" campaign and also sought to create a *Gegenöffentlichkeit* or "counter-public sphere." (Dutschke had actually spent a year working as a reporter for the *B.Z.*, Springer's West Berlin tabloid, though this was not widely known within the student movement.)

On April 11 – a week after the assassination of Martin Luther King in Memphis – Dutschke was shot three times as he came out of the SDS headquarters on the Ku'damm. That evening, as it seemed as if Dutschke's chances of surviving were slim, students marched on the Springer building overlooking the Berlin Wall in Kreuzberg, smashed the windows and threw Molotov cocktails. During the Easter weekend, violence swept across West Germany as students sought to prevent the delivery of Springer newspapers, leading to clashes with police on a scale that had not been seen since the street battles of the Weimar Republic. Dutschke ultimately survived the shooting but left the country soon afterwards to recuperate.

Meanwhile, inspired by the *événements* in Paris in May, the student movement in West Germany hoped that it could bring the country to a halt. On May 27, students at universities all over West Germany went on strike. In West Berlin, German literature students at the Free University decided to seize the "means of production" and occupied the department and renamed it the "Rosa Luxemburg Institute." Frankfurt University was also occupied and renamed "Karl Marx University." The students created their own "political university," with seminars on subjects like "revolutionary theory" and "the history of right to resistance." Two thousand students led by Krahls blockaded the main building and occupied the rector's office. The occupation lasted for three days until the university was cleared by the police (Wiggershaus 1986: 695).

However, the decisive difference was that, unlike in France, the students received only sporadic support from the West German proletariat. The trade unions had mobilized against the emergency laws and in early May, thousands of workers joined students in demonstrations across West Germany. But after the laws were finally passed on May 30, the basis for a mass movement of students and workers disappeared – and with it the possibility of revolution in West Germany. "Democracy in Germany is at an end," Krahls had declared in a speech in Frankfurt a few days earlier (Krahls 1971: 149). He said that the students and workers must now begin a "new phase" of resistance against "a development that could end in war and concentration camps" (Krahls 1971: 151).

## The End of the Student Movement

In the winter semester of 1968, after the students returned to university, the break between the student movement and the Frankfurt School became complete. After the disappointments of 1968, the Frankfurt SDS was at a loss about what to do next and was worried about losing the support it had gained the year before. In a desperate attempt to keep the momentum going, it decided to once again attempt to stimulate revolt within the university. They organized an “active strike,” which meant disrupting lectures and preventing the university from functioning. For most of the next year, the university was in chaos, with student-led teach-ins replacing professor-led seminars.

At the Frankfurt book fair in September 1968, Krahel confronted Adorno during a panel discussion on “Authority and Revolution,” which also included Günter Grass and Jürgen Habermas. Krahel accused his intellectual mentor of having deserted the student movement – and the revolution. “On the threshold of praxis,” Krahel declared, “he retreated into theory” (Müller-Dooch 2005: 461). Günter Grass said afterwards that Adorno seemed to be afraid of his own students (Kraushaar 1998: Vol. 2, 471). Adorno replied privately to Grass that he had “nothing in common with the students’ narrow-minded direct action strategies which are already degenerating into an abominable irrationalism” but did not wish to join “the platform of the German reactionaries in their witch-hunt of the New Left” (letter from Adorno to Grass, November 4, 1968, quoted in Müller-Dooch 2005: 461).

The students, on the other hand, now became still more aggressive towards Adorno and the Frankfurt School. In December, the Institute for Social Research was itself “re-functioned.” “Critical theory,” the students’ strike committee wrote in a leaflet:

has been organised in such an authoritarian manner that its approach to sociology allows no space for the students to organise their own studies. We are fed up with letting ourselves be trained in Frankfurt to become dubious members of the political left who, once their studies are finished, can serve as the integrated alibis of the authoritarian state.

(Müller-Dooch 2005: 464)

With that, the student movement’s critique of its intellectual ancestors had come full circle: those who had developed the critique of authoritarianism on which the student movement was based were themselves now dismissed as authoritarian.

A few days later, Adorno and Habermas took part in an open discussion with a group of students in an attempt to find common ground. The more militant among the Frankfurt students had started wearing leather motorcycle jackets and became known as the “leather jacket faction.” The strike leaders called on the students to “smash the bourgeois academic machine.” Adorno and Habermas left and the dialogue was over (Müller-Dooch 2005: 464). Horkheimer noted among the students a clear “affinity to the mindset of the Nazis” and thought many of the radicals would be at home in a far-right government (Kraushaar 1998: 531).

On January 31, 1969, seventy-six students led by Krahel occupied the sociology seminar at the institute. The institute’s directors, Adorno among them, called in the police. The students were arrested but only Krahel was charged with trespassing. Adorno wrote to Marcuse that “Krahel only organized the whole stunt in order to get taken into custody, and thereby hold together the disintegrating Frankfurt sds group” (letter from Adorno to Marcuse, February 14, 1969). But in his reply, Marcuse criticized Adorno’s decision to call the police. Adorno had invited Marcuse to come to Frankfurt to speak at the

Institute, but Marcuse felt he could not accept the invitation unless he also spoke with the students.

I believe that if I accept the Institute's invitation without also speaking to the students, I will identify myself with (or I will be identified with) a position that I do not share politically. To put it brutally: if the alternative is the police or left-wing students, then I am with the students – with one crucial exception, namely, if my life is threatened or if violence is threatened against my person and my friends, and that threat is a serious one. Occupation of rooms (apart from my own apartment) without such a threat of violence would not be a reason for me to call the police.

(Letter from Marcuse to Adorno, April 5, 1969)

Thus, Marcuse refused to cut his ties to the students.

We cannot abolish from the world the fact that these students are influenced by us (and certainly not least by you) – I am proud of that and am willing to come to terms with patricide, even though it hurts sometimes.

(Ibid.)

He wrote that “We know (and they know) that the situation is not a revolutionary one, not even a pre-revolutionary one” (ibid.). But he still sympathized with them. The situation, though not pre-revolutionary, was

so terrible, so suffocating and demeaning, that rebellion against it forces a biological, physiological reaction. One can bear it no longer, one is suffocating and one has to let some air in. And this fresh air is not that of a “left-wing fascism” (*contradictio in adjecto!*). It is the air that we (at least I) also want to breathe some day, and it is certainly not the air of the establishment.

(Ibid.)

Adorno, who had been on sabbatical during the winter semester, had resumed teaching in April 1969. His first lecture was immediately disrupted. Two students stormed the podium, shouted “Down with the informer!” and wrote on the blackboard, “If Adorno is left in peace, capitalism will never cease!” (Müller-Doohm 2005: 475). A group of three female protestors then came up to the podium, scattered rose and tulip petals on him and bared their breasts in front of him in what they called a *Busenaktion* or “breast action.” Adorno left embarrassed and humiliated. Students subsequently circulated a flyer that declared, “Adorno as an institution is dead.” He resumed lectures in June, but, after further disruption, cancelled them for the remainder of the semester.

The relationship between Adorno and Marcuse worsened over the next several months as they continued their correspondence and sought to make plans to meet in person to discuss their disagreements, which Adorno said required “unlimited discussions” (letter from Adorno to Marcuse, May 5, 1969). Adorno said he had been “hurt” by Marcuse’s last letter to him and sought to persuade Marcuse that he underestimated the threat from the student movement and had to call the police in order to protect “our old Institute” (ibid.). In a reply written from London in June, Marcuse replied that he now felt “the need to speak honestly more urgently than before” (letter from Marcuse to Adorno, June 4, 1969). He went on to criticize Adorno’s leadership of the institute and, which he said was no longer “our old Institute” because it had lost the “inner political content” it had had in the 1930s (ibid.).

A couple of weeks later, Adorno wrote to Marcuse that he was now “in a phase of extreme depression” (letter from Adorno to Marcuse, June 19, 1969, quoted in Müller-Dooch 2005: 477). In the same letter, he rejected Marcuse’s accusation that he had depoliticized the institute. The student movement, he said, had become increasingly irrational and did not have “even the slightest chance of having any impact on society” (ibid.). Because of this, there was a chance that authoritarian attitudes could come to prevail within it. “I take the risk that the student movement may turn to fascism much more to heart than you” (ibid.). At the end of July, Adorno and his wife Gretel travelled to Switzerland, where, on August 6, he had a heart attack and died.

In a densely theoretical obituary for Adorno published in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, entitled “The political contradiction of Theodor Adorno’s critical theory,” Krahel wrote that Adorno had been unable or unwilling to apply critical theory to develop a praxis that could liberate the oppressed. Referring to Adorno’s 1959 essay, “What does working through the past mean?” he wrote that Adorno’s

social theoretical insight that the continuation of National Socialism within democracy was more dangerous than the continuation of fascist tendencies against democracy led his progressive fear of a fascist stabilization of restored monopoly capital to change into a regressive fear of the forms of practical resistance against this tendency of the system.

(Krahel 1971: 285)

However, by this time, the student movement was itself disintegrating. Some of the students, for example those who had occupied the German literature department at Frankfurt University, thought the movement had been insufficiently organized and now wanted to organize highly disciplined groups. Others felt that the movement had failed because at the decisive moment, it had failed to mobilize the masses: they now moved from the university to the factories, focusing on creating new links with the proletariat. Others still wanted to form underground cells and wage a guerrilla campaign against the West German state. Some of the traditionalists within the SDS wanted to try to enter parliament or even join the SPD and its youth organization, the Young Socialists, and “radically reform” them from within. Others still had simply become apathetic.

On February 14, 1970 – shortly after Willy Brandt had become the first Social Democrat chancellor in the history of the Federal Republic and, partly in response to the student movement, urged West Germany to “dare more democracy” – Hans-Jürgen Krahel was killed in a car accident on an icy road near Marburg. A week later, he was buried in Hanover. After the burial, around eighty SDS delegates from around West Germany met in the café in the architecture faculty at Hanover’s Technical University and agreed to dissolve the SDS. A month later in Frankfurt, the decision was formalized at the last general meeting of what was probably the most politically important student organization in German history.

### **The Afterlife of the Student Movement**

The story of the West German student movement and the Frankfurt School is thus a more complicated one than the idea of intellectual “patricide” suggests. Neither the student movement nor the Frankfurt School was a homogenous bloc. Rather, the fault lines in the fraught debates prompted by the events of 1967–1969 were almost as much between members of the student movement and between members of the Frankfurt School as between the student movement and the Frankfurt School. The story is complicated even further by what might be called the afterlife of the West German student movement. Over time, as the former

rebels grew older and reassessed their own actions and beliefs, some of them rediscovered, and re-engaged with, the Frankfurt School.

Perhaps the best example of this rediscovery of and re-engagement with the Frankfurt School was Joschka Fischer, who had been a member of the SDS in 1968, though he was not at that time a prominent figure within it. In the 1970s, he joined a “spontaneist” group called Revolutionary Struggle and took part in battles with the police on the streets of Frankfurt (Kraushaar 2001). But in the years after the so-called German Autumn of 1977, Jürgen Habermas – who in 1967 had accused the student movement of “left-wing fascism” – was to become an important influence on him. In particular, Dolf Sternberger’s concept of “constitutional patriotism” – popularized by Habermas – provided Fischer with a theoretical basis for a reconciling with the Federal Republic that he had once seen as an authoritarian state.

Fischer was also importantly influenced by Adorno. In *Negative Dialectics* – a book that, though it was published in 1966, had little influence on the student movement at the time – Adorno had written that, after Auschwitz, Man now had an obligation “to arrange one’s thoughts and actions so that it will not be repeated, so that nothing similar will happen” (Adorno 1966: 358). Fischer sought in particular to apply this imperative to German foreign policy. As a Green politician in 1985 he wrote: “Only German responsibility for Auschwitz can be the essence of West German *raison d’état*” (Fischer 1985). Finally, as German foreign minister during the Kosovo War in 1999, he famously declared, “I didn’t just learn ‘never again war.’ I also learned, ‘never again Auschwitz’” (Fischer 2007: 185).

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Part III

AFFINITIES AND  
CONTESTATIONS





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# LUKÁCS AND THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

*Titus Stahl*

The work of the Hungarian Marxist Georg Lukács is a constant source of controversy in the history of the Frankfurt School. All leading thinkers of that theoretical tradition have struggled with Lukács's theory. On the one hand, it was an inspiration for their attempts to come to terms with the oppressive features of capitalist modernity. On the other hand, both its political conclusions and Lukács's actual philosophical submission to Soviet orthodoxy seemed to show that his theoretical framework was deeply flawed in one aspect or another.

Lukács's pre-Marxist work on art and literature, and in particular his essay *Theory of the Novel*, his essay collection *History and Class Consciousness*, and his later work on literature and philosophy, exhibit an underlying deep continuity in thinking but are nonetheless separated by breaks of a political and theoretical nature (Stahl 2016). His work from all of these periods was read and commented on by Frankfurt School theorists. There are two questions which have to be separated: the historical question regarding the extent to which theorists of that tradition explicitly engaged with parts of Lukács's work and the systematic question as to what extent the Frankfurt School is indebted to the philosophical insights that Lukács developed. There is evidence that the *Theory of the Novel* deeply impressed Adorno and Benjamin, and Adorno critically commented on Lukács's later aesthetic work. The relatively few explicit references to *History and Class Consciousness* in the main works of that tradition are surprising, however, given the importance of Lukács's theory. It is hard to deny that Lukács's systematic arguments, especially the concept of reification, are closely connected to central motives in Adorno's theory. The systematic influence of Lukács's social thought on a critical theory of society was only explicitly examined by later critical theorists, who engage with it from their own, mostly skeptical perspective.

To understand this complicated intellectual history, I will focus on the systematic issues, outlining Lukács's conceptual innovations that influenced the Frankfurt School (Section "Lukács's Contributions to Critical Theory"), before turning to the explicit and implicit engagement of the first generation with Lukács's thought (Section "Lukács and the First Generation of the Frankfurt School"). This allows us to understand the significance of Habermas and Honneth's respective critical engagement with Lukács's social theory (Sections "Habermas's Critique of Lukács" and "Honneth's Reconstruction of the Reification Thesis").

## **Lukács's Contributions to Critical Theory**

Two of Lukács's early works accounted for his fame in the intellectual circles of Europe: *Soul and Form*, a 1911 collection of essays, and his 1916 *Theory of the Novel*. The former

introduced the idea that specific literary genres, such as the essay, are particularly adequate for late modernity. This is because they problematize the relationship between form and life on the aesthetic level and thereby reflect a dissonance of these elements in the very lives that are the material of writing, a dissonance which is in turn rooted in the condition of life no longer being able to acquire a distinct form. The latter develops similar arguments with a historical dimension, arguing that in earlier ages people could understand their lives as integrated into a meaningful “totality” (Lukács 1971 [1915]: 33). Modernity, by contrast, is a condition of “transcendental homelessness” (Lukács 1971 [1915]: 40) that is reflected in the novel as a distinctively modern genre.

These writings are important not only for the Frankfurt School, but also for any theory that assumes that aesthetic forms have a social and historical dimension. Lukács’s most famous work, *History and Class Consciousness*, has a more wide-ranging political and philosophical significance. Much of the Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory can only be adequately understood in the light of a number of groundbreaking conceptual and socio-theoretical innovations that this work presents in a highly condensed form.

The most important arguments are contained in Lukács’s essay “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat.” In this essay, Lukács advances the social-theoretical claim that the dominance of the value form in modern capitalist societies is not restricted in its effects to the sphere of market exchanges, but that it becomes the decisive factor behind the dynamics of modern capitalist societies in their entirety. In particular, it subjects all social spheres to norms of formal, instrumental rationality, and thereby colonizes first the work process, then the state apparatus and finally all scientific, social and cultural spheres and thereby human relations to the objective world in general. A second, perhaps even more important claim is that this colonization process entails, wherever we encounter it, the dominance of a form of thinking and of relating to the world that reduces the original fullness of human experience to quantitative, abstract categorization and that recommends a disengaged, contemplative stance toward the world. This change is not only largely unaffected by the subjects’ class positions (and thus more than merely an ideology), but also reflected in philosophical attempts to understand the nature of the relationship between subjective experience and objective reality that take the “reified” stance to be the natural form of this relationship. Because of this, they not only elevate that stance to the level of an ideal of rationality and thereby contribute to reproduction of capitalist social domination, but also become unable to ground a radical critique of society. A successful critique of capitalist reification therefore requires not only a correct analysis of the economic and social relationships constitutive of that mode of production, and an appreciation of the human costs that it generates, but also a decisive break with modern scientific and philosophical thinking – a break that Lukács himself tries to accomplish in the “Reification” essay.

The reification critique connects motives from Marx and from Weber. In Marx’s *Capital*, the “value form,” i.e. the fact that commodities appear to be comparable to other commodities in regard to an abstract property called “value” is a socially real, but epistemically misleading feature of commodity exchanges. Marx claims that it leads to apparent contradictions in economic theory that find their solution only when one also analyzes the sphere of production. The secret behind the seeming equality of things and of people within the market sphere is the domination and the exploitation in the productive process. However, for Marx, the “fetishism of the commodity form” (Marx 1976 [1867]: I: 163) – the misleading appearance of exchange value as a property of things, rather than as a social relation – seems to be primarily a problem for economic theory and, perhaps, for everyday economic consciousness. Lukács, however, argues that the “value form” has a much deeper impact. The formal rationalization of production that is induced by the dominance of the commodity form over economic life leads not only to a destruction of integrated experiences on the side

of workers who can no longer understand their activities in qualitative terms but instead have to adopt an instrumentalist, calculating stance toward their own capacities and a disconnected, “contemplative” attitude of passivity toward the greater social context (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 89). It also leads to increased rationalization pressures on other social systems, in particular the state bureaucracy and the legal system, that have to reorient their constitutive practices to conform to standards of efficiency, predictability and formal coherence. This is because rational calculation in the sphere of industrial production is only possible if the influences of these systems on the productive sphere are predictable in their effects. Lukács not only explicitly endorses Weber’s analysis of modern bureaucracy and of the rationalization of legal and political power, but also shows how the rationalization processes that it describes is an indirect effect of the dominance of the commodity form. Finally, Lukács also makes a distinctively Weberian claim by assuming that the internal, autonomous rationalization of different social spheres makes any understanding of society as an integrated whole impossible – the different value orientations operative in the individual spheres can no longer be reconciled (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 103). This leads to a situation where no individual or group can grasp the totality of social life; any political or scientific attempt to understand society must remain restricted to some specific part of the social whole. Society as a whole thus remains epistemically inaccessible. This is another aspect of reification: individuals and social groups are forced to treat society as an external, unpredictable mechanism.

Weber seems to have accepted this development as inevitable. However, Lukács holds on to Marx’s idea that this epistemological position is ideological and, in the end, self-destructive. But he puts forward a much more radical argument than Marx: he claims that “reification” denotes a distortion of the whole relation between subjects and their social and natural environment that cannot be overcome within capitalist society, except on the level of abstract philosophical anticipation of a new relation to world. He links Marx’s theory of the “value form” with the Neo-Kantian concept of “*Gegenständlichkeitsform*” (the “objective form of things”) (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 88)). The Kantian idea is that human experiences can only find expression in judgments that have objective purport once they are synthesized by being given a specific form. Lukács assumes that there is a *historical dimension* of such forms of thinking, and he suggests that, under capitalism, the quantified, abstract, reified conceptualization of reality that is implicit in the commodity form becomes the form of *any and all* potential experience of objects (Kavoulakos 2017: 68). Thus, there is no way to overcome reification merely through reflection.

Furthermore, the thoroughgoing rationalization and reification of all social spheres that Lukács describes as a process of colonization of society by the commodity form affects not only ordinary experience but also the reflexive dimension of reason – that is, it affects all theoretical attempts to understand and analyze the structure of society (be it in economics or in law) as well as philosophical attempts to more generally understand the possibilities of subjects to relate to an objective world. In the second part of the “reification” essay, Lukács argues that all of modern philosophy is animated by the attempt to overcome a “hiatus” between subject and object that arises from a picture of that relation as of one between two unconnected poles – an active subject and a reality which is alien to it. This, as well, connects to some core concerns of the first generation of the Frankfurt School, namely to the question of how far the claims of social theory and the very notion of theory itself are affected by the distorting influence of identity thinking and the capitalist exchange principle.

According to Lukács, Hegel is the philosopher who came closest to an appreciation of reification by acknowledging the principle that history and society can only be properly comprehended by the subject of the historical process. As Hegel lacked the sociological insight into who the subject of history is – the proletariat – he could not cash out that insight in the form of a political theory (Lukács 1971 [1923]: 146). This leads Lukács, finally, in the

third part of the reification essay to delineate a radical account of how reification can be overcome: it is only the process of the self-discovery of the proletariat as the “subject-object of history” that can break through reification. This process coincides with the communist revolution in which the proletariat in fact becomes the subject of history.

That Lukács’s reification theory is central to later critical theory is a thesis which is shared by many accounts of the development of Western Marxism, although there is no agreement as to which part of his theory accounts for this central position. Hauke Brunkhorst has described the two problems of reification theory and class consciousness that Lukács connects as constitutive for the paradigmatic core of early critical theory (Brunkhorst and Krockenberger 1998). Andrew Feenberg has argued that the link between philosophy and practice that Lukács’s theory entails is the central element of critical theory (Feenberg 2014, 2017). Martin Jay has focused his analysis of the relation between Lukács and the Frankfurt School on the concept of totality (Jay 1984b). Whatever the answer is, it is clear that one cannot overestimate the importance of the description of the problem provided by Lukács for the first generation of the Frankfurt School.

### Lukács and the First Generation of the Frankfurt School

In the first years of the Institute of Social Research in the 1920s, a number of institute members were actively engaging with Lukács and his work. Lukács published not only *History and Class Consciousness* with the Malik publishing house that was financed by Felix Weil and his 1926 essay on Moses Hess in the institute director Karl Grünberg’s “Archiv,” but Weil also organized a “Marxist Work Week” in 1923 in Ilmenau where he and Pollock discussed recent work in social theory with Lukács and Karl Korsch, an event that motivated Weil’s later support for the financing of the Institute for Social Research. Adorno met Lukács in 1925 when the latter lived in Vienna after the failed Hungarian Revolution, a meeting that, as Adorno wrote to Berg, had “a profound effect” on him (Adorno 2008: 17; Müller-Doohm 2015: 94). There can be little doubt that both the *Theory of the Novel* and *History and Class Consciousness* were intensively discussed in the circles of what would later become the first generation of the Frankfurt School. Both Kracauer’s review of the *Theory of the Novel* (Kracauer 2011 [1921]) and Bloch’s review of *History and Class Consciousness* (Bloch 1977 [1923]) are evidence of those debates. Benjamin emphasizes the importance of Lukács, in particular, in a letter from 1926 where he informs Gershom Scholem that Lukács’s essay made him see the “practice of communism [...] in a different light than ever before” (Benjamin 1994: 248). In Adorno’s already mentioned letter to Berg, he similarly states that Lukács “had influenced me more than almost anyone” (cited according to Müller-Doohm 2015: 94).

As the *Theory of the Novel* was widely appreciated in the aesthetic debates of the 1920s and 1930s, it is not surprising that Benjamin and Adorno (who were both committed to the thesis that literary genres have a historical character) were favorably disposed toward that book. More controversial is the status of *History and Class Consciousness* for the first generation.

Benjamin explicitly described *History and Class Consciousness* as a major influence on his work throughout his life. This influence is quite easy to discern in *One-Way Street* (Witte 1975). The relation of Lukács to Horkheimer and Adorno is harder to describe. Although Buck-Morss argues that Horkheimer was, like Lukács, a proponent of Hegelian Marxism in the 1930s (Buck-Morss 1979: 21), it must be acknowledged that Horkheimer on the whole seems to be less impressed than Adorno by Lukács’s reference to the “totality.” Based on his vision of an empirically proceeding social science, Horkheimer rejects that concept at least in its Lukácsian version as useless for the purposes of a materialist theory of society and as

a remnant of metaphysical thinking (Korthals 1985: 319), although he uses a concept of totality in his engagement with psychological theories (Abromeit 2011: 82). The same holds for the concept of reification, which does not play any constructive role in Horkheimer's thought until his closer collaboration with Adorno in the 1940s. Finally, the idea of the practice of the proletariat as the final arbiter of the correctness of theory seemed particularly unacceptable for Horkheimer. His reflections on the relation between theory, intellectuals and the proletariat in "Traditional and Critical Theory" are clearly at least an implicit critique of Lukács (see Horkheimer 1975 [1937]: 213).

In comparison, Adorno's engagement with Lukács is much more extensive (for a detailed account of this engagement and a rich overview of textual evidence, see Braunstein and Duckheim 2015). Although Adorno is critical of both the Lukács of the *Theory of the Novel* and the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness*, especially as far as the concept of totality is concerned, the idea that the quantitative rationalization that is both expressed by the practice of commodity exchange and promoted by that very practice is the core phenomenon of domination in modern capitalist societies is clearly central to Adorno's thinking. The same holds for the idea that everyday phenomena of reification contain in their local experience the whole system of alienation and oppression that is characteristic for contemporary society. In fact, one can read Adorno's philosophical main work, *Negative Dialectics*, as a successor to *History and Class Consciousness* insofar as *Negative Dialectics* takes up Lukács's suggestion that modern rationality and modern philosophy equally reflect a form of thinking that has its ultimate roots in a structure of social domination. Both works endorse the claim that the predominance of a too narrow form of rationality also results in an impoverishment of experience that cuts off the qualitatively distinct features of individual objects. Philosophically, both works are rooted in the tradition of German Idealism, taking seriously Kant's claim that knowledge and experience are made possible through a distinctive human activity of synthesis by means of concepts. They also agree with Hegel's critique that these concepts are not ahistorical but instituted in specific forms of life. This does not mean that Adorno is just expanding on Lukács's claims. There are three major points in which he fundamentally disagrees with Lukács. First, he locates the origin of reified thought not in capitalist commodity exchange but in the human attempt to isolate oneself against the danger of regressing into nature by submitting nature to conceptual control. Second, Adorno does not assume that the major defect of reified thought or "identity thinking" is the loss of access to a meaningful totality, but rather the impoverishment of experiences of the "particular." Third, Adorno's critique of Hegel also applies to Lukács. According to Adorno, Hegel correctly opposes the ahistorical tendency of Kantianism to locate the origins of conceptual synthesis in an abstract subject. Hegel replaces this picture with one of a historical process of experience in which subject and object determine each other. However, Hegel's assumption that this process ends with a historical subject recognizing itself in that process reinstates the subject as the primary party. Adorno argues that in contrast to his Hegelian picture, Kantianism has the advantage of holding on to the independence of the thing-in-itself and thus to the idea that particular objects have an independence which is not dissolved in the subject's self-reflection. It is clear how this critique also applies to Lukács's conception of the subject-object of history.

To see how central the Lukács heritage is for Adorno, it is sufficient to consider a central passage of *Negative Dialectics* where Adorno writes,

The barter principle, the reduction of human labor to the abstract universal concept of average working hours, is fundamentally akin to the principle of identification. Barter is the social model of the principle, and without the principle there would be no barter; it is through barter that nonidentical individuals and performances

become commensurable and identical. The spread of the principle imposes on the whole world an obligation to become identical, to become total.

(Adorno 1973: 146)

While this betrays quite clearly a commitment to the link between capitalist commodity exchange and reified thinking, Adorno immediately qualifies that statement by arguing that we should not conclude by endorsing an abstract rejection of the exchange principle. Capitalist commodity exchange and conceptual thinking also contain a normative promise – the promise of free interaction between equals and the rejection of violence – at the same time as they undercut the realization of that very same promise by violently imposing equality on unequal elements by negating their individuality and their qualitative differences. Adorno thus accepts certain elements of the Lukácsian diagnosis of reification, but he rejects the consequences that Lukács draws, namely that we should recover qualitative experiences that might have been possible in a world before the dominance of capitalist exchange, or, perhaps even worse, that we could overcome reification by the emergence of a collective class subject that is thereby revealed as the final, constitutive ground of all reality. This is the central point of the Lukács critique in *Negative Dialectics*. Adorno argues against what he calls the “idealistic nature” of Lukács’s reification theory on two further counts. First, he argues that reification is only a subjective epiphenomenon (Adorno 1973: 190) of objective domination and that a critical theory that focuses on it therefore falsely privileges the ideological level above the material level. Second, and more importantly, the opposition to “thingness” is motivated by the tendency “to be hostile to otherness, to the alien thing that has lent its name to alienation” (Adorno 1973: 191). The complaint against reification is thus partly based on the idea that there ought not be anything that does not submit to human conceptual understanding (Adorno 1973: 375). Adorno also argues against an idea of reification as the dissolution of a seemingly original immediacy, as all such immediacy is in fact always produced by domination and is thus itself reified. Certain kinds of reification are thus historically important indicators of freedom. This seems to suggest that we can distinguish two meanings of “reification” – a negative meaning which Adorno himself frequently employs in *Negative Dialectics* that denotes treating the relational properties of objects as fixed and unchangeable essences (see, for example, Adorno 1973: 280). However, there is also a positive sense in which “reification” can denote the recalcitrance of objects and subjects to subsumption under subjective categories and which a negative dialectics has to take seriously (Jay 1984a: 68; Feenberg 2017: 116).

The basic terms of this engagement with the reification critique of Lukács are mirrored in Adorno’s earlier discussion of Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel* and in his attitude toward Lukács’s later aesthetic writings. In his early lecture “On the Idea of Natural History” from 1932 (Adorno 1984 [1932]), Adorno approvingly refers to one of Lukács’s basic theses from the *Theory of the Novel*, namely that modernity has created a second nature of commodity relations that excludes any immediate access to meaning. However, he criticizes Lukács’s insistence that there has been a past in which an immediately meaningful totality existed and that we can thus think of accessing this meaning obscured by modern second nature only “in terms of a theological resurrection” (Buck-Morss 1979: 47; Adorno 1984 [1932]: 118; Whyman 2016: 462). He contrasts this idea to Benjamin’s vision that understands (second) nature as a cipher that could be solved in any moment and would then let us recover meaning. In other words, the idea of a totality that guarantees immediate access to meaning has already invoked Adorno’s skepticism thirty years before *Negative Dialectics*.

Although by the 1930s Lukács had renounced the idea of an epistemically privileged standpoint that is only possible for the revolutionary proletariat – partially forced by political circumstances – and turned toward more modest philosophical ideas, Adorno still detects

some of his original impulses in his later writings about realism which provided a continued point of engagement for the Frankfurt School. Most famous is perhaps Adorno's essay "Reconciliation under Duress" (Adorno 1977 [1961]), a harsh review of Lukács's *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*. This was partly prompted by what Adorno saw as mischaracterizations of his own criticism of modern music. But the background for Adorno's open opposition to Lukács was also formed by some of Lukács's writings during the preceding two decades in which the latter quite summarily dismissed most of nonorthodox Marxist modern philosophy as "irrationalism," including some theorists that the Frankfurt School heavily draws on, such as Freud. Adorno acknowledges in the essay that Lukács's "personal integrity is above all suspicion" (Adorno 1977 [1961]: 152). But he accuses him of having submitted so far to Soviet orthodoxy that his theoretical framework has been damaged, even when he wants to go beyond the dominant aesthetic positions in the East. Adorno supports this charge by a number of points. The most central ones are connected to the idea that Lukács misunderstands the political function of modern art. According to Adorno, such art has political significance insofar as its "worldlessness" (Adorno 1977 [1961]: 160) acknowledges the impossibility of reconciliation and its focus on subjectivity holds fast to the suffering and alienation in modern societies. By rejecting any overt political engagement and any reference to transsubjective meaning, modern art can thus negatively refer to reconciliation as an ideal. Lukács, however, describes these features as "decadence" and imposes the demand on art to positively refer to a social overcoming of alienation, as embodied in socialism. Rather than appreciating the Utopian dimension of modern art, he sacrifices it to political imperatives. The parallel to Adorno's early criticism is clear: in both instances, Adorno rejects an approach to modernity in Lukács's writings that locates the hope for reconciliation in the rediscovery of a social totality, an approach that inadvertently thereby becomes conservative. In both instances, Adorno also uses motives from Benjamin, namely the idea that salvation will not be found in the large-scale march of history toward better times but in uncompromising attention to the small details of the present age.

### Habermas's Critique of Lukács

In a 1979 interview, Habermas recounts that he read Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* in the early 1950s and that it "excited [him] a great deal" (Horster et al. 1979: 32). But even though he occasionally refers to Lukács in his early work (most extensively in his reflections on theory and practice where he argues that Lukács's argument implies historical necessity and thus does not reflect the role of practice sufficiently, see Habermas 1971 [1957]: 444), he never systematically discusses the reification essay. As many commentators have noted, however, the sustained engagement with Marx that is characteristic of Habermas's early career can also often be read as an implicit engagement with Lukács. There are three points in particular in Habermas's critique of Marx that are relevant for his later explicit engagement with Lukács. First, there is the critique of Marx's reduction of social practice to material production that Habermas formulates in the late 1960s (Habermas 1973: 169) and which plays a major role in his *Knowledge and Human Interests*. As Martin Jay notes, this critique of Marx leads Habermas to reconsider the notion of social totality that critical theory had inherited from Western Marxism in general, and from Lukács in particular (Jay 1984b: 474f). As this notion is connected to a model of subjectivity according to which the freedom of a subject depends on an external world that it can recognize as the product of its own activities, it suggests a model of liberation according to which society must become accessible to the (collective) subject that had created it. With the introduction of communicatively structured intersubjectivity as a sphere of social freedom that does not conform to this subject-philosophical picture, Habermas moves critical theory away from a model of



practice that privileges the relation between an individual subject and its environment and toward a model that privileges relations between different subjects and consequently conceives of liberation as the realization of the potentials of rationality and mutual respect that are immanent in this practice.

The transposition of this step to the level of sociological theory also opens up the possibility of fully integrating Weber's insight into critical theory: social differentiation is a necessary component of modern rationalization. According to Lukács's interpretation of Weber, such differentiation must necessarily involve a loss of control over the social totality and thus leads to alienation. Furthermore, the incapacity of different forms of social understanding – such as economics, legal studies and philosophy – to make sense of society as a whole is a pathological effect of reification. It is not only a sign of the irrationality of a social totality in which the epistemic possibility of making sense of the whole is systematically undermined. Because it is bound to the capitalist domination of commodity exchange, it is a historically specific and thus reversible state of affairs. Habermas, by contrast, takes Weber's theory of unavoidable and irreversible social differentiation much more seriously (Habermas 1984 [1981]: I: 357): if we consider the differentiation of social structures as part of a process of social evolution that does not require us to understand history and society as the (conscious or unconscious) product of a collective subject (Habermas 1979 [1976]: 139), we can make sense of mismatches and tensions in social life as an outcome of unequal, one-sided processes of social evolution. The normative alternative that Habermas envisions is thus not the recovery of the potential to make sense of the social totality as a unified whole, but the idea that those specific social spheres and forms of rationality in modern life which can provide modern subjects with the resources to live autonomous lives can be reconstructed by philosophy in their autonomous logic. This is an implicit – and sometimes explicit – objection to the Hegelian Marxist picture that critical theory inherited through Lukács.

The theoretical framework that Habermas develops in the 1970s and 1980s is, among other things, directed toward taking up the insights of Lukács's diagnosis of reification as part of a social theory that analyzes the internal development of social systems of strategic interaction that increasingly become independent of lifeworld norms in modern capitalist societies. But Habermas is skeptical of Lukács's claim that strategic action orientations have already colonized all social spheres without remainder and that they have thereby deformed the relation between modern subjects and their world to the extent that recovering a more original, non-contemplative form of self-understanding requires a fundamental social transformation by which a new form of (collective) subjectivity is achieved. He is also skeptical of the idea that the development of strategic action systems should be understood as the distortion of a more fundamental and more appropriate form of productive relationship between producers and their environment. Rather, Habermas proposes to understand social reproduction as having the two aspects of material and symbolic reproduction. Whereas the material reproduction can be divorced from the establishment of understanding and be restructured to allow coordination by media-steered strategic coordination without any pathological effects, symbolic integration necessarily remains dependent on communicatively generated understanding. This is because the components of social normativity, symbolic tradition and personality structures which together form the lifeworld (from within which communicative coordination of actions becomes possible) are themselves reproduced through communication. The distinction between those social spheres that can and those that cannot be subject to non-pathological forms of rationalization allows Habermas to take up and to reformulate reification theory at a higher level of sociological complexity. Instead of describing it as a pathology of social life in general, he can now describe reification as the inappropriate takeover of communicatively integrated domains by the logic of the "system." His engagement with Marx, Weber and Lukács in the *Theory of Communicative Action* in

the context of this argument is decisive for Habermas's project at that stage, as it links his social theory with his critical project that aims to recover the core of the Lukácsian argument while revising its implausible theoretical foundations.

Habermas not only makes use of Lukács's notion of a "form of objectivity" as the subject-philosophical predecessor notion of his own idea of "forms of understanding," i.e. the principles which govern "the encounters of individuals with objective nature, normative reality, and their own subjective nature" (Habermas 1984 [1981]: II: 187), but also discusses Lukács's reification theory twice in the *Theory of Communicative Action*. In the first volume, it is identified not only as a theoretical source that inspired Horkheimer's and Adorno's arguments but also as an element which had to be left behind because of its misconceived view of the relation between theory and practice. In the second volume, Lukács's reification theory is – together with Weber – treated as a diagnosis of the fact of colonization that lacks the vocabulary to adequately analyze its own foundations.

Regarding the first argument, Habermas acknowledges that Lukács's analysis of how commodity fetishism becomes a socially operative principle in the formally rational organization of production indeed recovers the missing link between Marx and Weber. According to that analysis, the independence of formally organized systems of strategic interaction accounts for the loss of a unified concept of reason. Habermas argues that Lukács agrees with Marx that this loss cannot be overcome by a philosophy that merely reestablishes unified reason at the level of theory (Habermas 1984 [1981]: I: 363) but has to be realized in practice. However, instead of identifying a particular practice in present societies in which a "complementary relation between cognitive-instrumental rationality [...] and moral-practical rationality [...]" (Habermas 1984 [1981]: I: 363) is embedded as an inherent standard (in other words, instead of examining communicative action) and then reconstructing this practice philosophically, Lukács makes the "decisive error" (Habermas 1984 [1981]: I: 364) of assuming that his theory, even though it cannot restore a substantive, unified model of reason, can *anticipate* a practical overcoming of the loss of unity *at the level of philosophy*. In other words, with the idea that his philosophical-sociological theory can conclusively show that the idea of the proletariat as subject-object of history is necessary, Lukács assumes that the practical solution of the question regarding theory and practice can still be *represented by theory* before being put into practice. This overburdening of philosophy, in Habermas's view, results from the idea that the divisions within the social life of reason that are introduced by modern rationalization must be *healed* by the recovery of a substantive unity rather than be *accounted for* by means of an analysis of the internal differentiation within a practice of communication. According to Habermas, Horkheimer and Adorno avoid Lukács's mistake by rejecting the idea of a reconciliation of the division between theoretical and practical reason (Habermas 1984 [1981]: I: 376). According to Habermas, they do not offer a positive replacement for that figure of thought and instead opt for a purely negative project of the self-critique of reason. However, this makes it impossible for them to spell out the normative foundations of that very critique.

The second, more constructive role that Lukács's reification thesis plays in Habermas's work is in the context of the colonization theory. Here, Habermas criticizes the first generation of the Frankfurt School for both holding on to Marxist orthodoxy relating to the theory of value and reducing Weber's notion of formal rationality to instrumental-purposive rationality (Habermas 1984 [1981]: II: 334). At least in regard to the first mistake, it seems reasonable to say that they inherit it from Lukács. Habermas assumes that Marx's theory connects two levels of social description – on the one hand the system-theoretic description of market relations, on the other hand the action-theoretic description of class struggles (Habermas 1984 [1981]: II: 336). The theory of value that Marx develops in *Capital* uncovers "real subsumption," i.e. capitalist domination, as the explanation of the seeming independence of the systemic level, an independence which is shown by that very explanation to be a

mere illusion. Habermas objects to this picture because it presupposes a connection between the system-theoretic and the action-theoretic descriptions of social reproduction that can be captured by a semantic theory. Taking Weber's differentiation thesis seriously means that we have to assume instead that the availability of the two descriptions is best explained by the differentiation of distinct forms of action coordination and by the unequal dynamics of the rationalization of different modes of coordination (Habermas 1984 [1981]: II: 338–339). In other words, Marx still remains committed to the picture of society as a totality and thus has to treat social differentiation as pathological and as a misleading appearance. The same criticism, of course, applies to Lukács. Lukács's theory of reification uses the theory of value not only to make sense of the emergence of the media-coordinated sphere of the market, but also to both explain and criticize the inaccessibility of the social totality in all social domains. As the first generation of the Frankfurt School quite obviously agrees with the idea that the exchange principle is at the core of both social domination and identity thinking under capitalism, they are thus vulnerable to the same objection.

However, this does not mean that Habermas dismisses Lukács's reification claim in its entirety. Rather, the opposite: any attentive reader of Habermas and Lukács will recognize that Lukács's explanation of how reification, although initially confined to market exchanges, takes over the entirety of society is already a theory of colonization. In the reification essay, the mechanism by which the logic of value exchange subjects all cultural spheres to its rule is a formal, quantitative rationality that is impressed upon them by the functional requirements of the market. The parallel to Habermas is hard to miss. However, Habermas has the conceptual tools to distinguish *formal* rationality as a feature of actions from the *functional* rationality of media-steered subsystems and thus can replace Lukács's vague causality claims with a substantive sociological theory according to which subsystems of rational action coordination in the market and the state bureaucracy are subject to unequal and distinct dynamics of rationalization that are not available (at least not without pathological consequences) to lifeworld practices. Furthermore, the famous distinction between the systems perspective and the lifeworld perspective makes it unnecessary for Habermas to depend on the idea that there is a privileged "qualitative experience" that is obscured by reification. He thus changes the normative argument from one that depends on this notion of experience or on the idea of the totality toward a functionalist version that claims that lifeworld interactions cannot be completely adapted to functional requirements without thereby losing their integrative power in the process of social integration. This allows him to formulate the colonization thesis as a sociologically more plausible version of reification theory. In other words, Habermas's colonization thesis is not committed to the action-theoretic vocabulary that leads Lukács to envisage the proletarian revolution as a solution to the reification problem.

Habermas thus changes the substance of reification analysis in two aspects: first, by allowing that the independence of functional logics within the economic subsystem is unproblematic as long as it does not lead to colonizing effects; second, by moving away from an *immanent* critique of reification that focuses on how it violates normative expectations toward an *external* critique that takes the avoidance of pathological consequences as its presupposed standard (Jütten 2011).

The distinction between system and lifeworld is the part of Habermas's colonization thesis that has received the most attention. However, most objections, such as Honneth's (Honneth 1993 [1985]), focus on the question of whether the systems perspective is adequate, as it seems to rule out the possibility of social struggles in functionally integrated domains, especially struggles that are motivated by the violation of intersubjective expectations. The same critique, however, seems to apply to Lukács's original theory that describes the social pathologies created by recognition not as violations of intersubjective expectations, but as a subjective loss of meaning. From this perspective, a return to Lukács therefore does not seem

promising. While Chari (2010) advocates for a more materialist conception of intersubjectivity as an alternative to this approach, there has been no systematic reconstruction of Lukács from this perspective. More relevant is the objection that Habermas's move from immanent to functionalist critique even further displaces the issue of normativity (Jütten 2011: 711; Stahl 2013). To solve this problem, Lukács reification theory would have to be reformulated as a theory of the internal pathologies of social practices.

### Honneth's Reconstruction of the Reification Thesis

As for other critical theorists, Honneth's engagement with Lukács has an explicit and an implicit dimension. Explicitly, Honneth engages with the young Lukács in one of his early essays (Honneth 1995 [1986]) and extensively discusses his theory of reification in his *Tanner Lectures* (Honneth 2008). Implicitly, Lukács's idea of grounding critical theory in a Hegelian theory of history forms the background for much of Honneth's theoretical development. Although, for a long time, he seems to have rejected the idea of an immanent standard in historical social practices in favor of a more anthropological, substantive normative version of Hegelian recognition theory (Deranty 2009: 323), his more recent work suggests a more favorable attitude toward an immanent historical strategy, even though he continues to reject – for good reason – Lukács's strong subject-philosophical claims in favor of a more procedural version of immanent critique (Honneth 2014).

Honneth's *Tanner Lectures* on reification are perhaps the most sustained engagement of any core member of the Frankfurt School with the work of Lukács. Here, he systematically evaluates the possible contribution of Lukács's reification theory to the project of diagnosing “pathologies of the social” that Honneth considers to be at the core of the critical theory tradition (Honneth 2007 [1994]). In the *Tanner Lectures*, Honneth argues that Lukács's implicit argument in the reification essay is a normative one. However, this normative argument is not one regarding morality or social justice, but rather concerning pathologies of a whole way of life that deviates from a more appropriate social practice of relating to the world (Honneth 2008: 21). Honneth criticizes Lukács for subsuming, without much explanation, different phenomena under the label of “reification,” but he acknowledges that, at the core of Lukács's theory, we can find a reference to a certain detached stance toward the world in which the perspective of the uninvolved observer becomes “second nature.” Lukács condemns this stance, as Honneth observes, not in epistemic terms but rather as a form of practice that is somehow intrinsically wrong. But in this case, we must also be able to contrast it with a more appropriate form of a “genuine” practice. This is the normative core of the reification concept that Honneth sets out to reconstruct. However, he relatively soon rejects Lukács's explicit argument that analyzes the “correct” form of practice as one in which the producers (collectively, the proletariat) are aware of their active role. There are three reasons in particular for this rejection: the first is that this idea is embedded in an “identity philosophy” (Honneth 2008: 27) according to which subjects are only free when they can conceive of the external conditions of their activity as their own product. This, as Honneth argues, robs Lukács's critique “of any chance of social-theoretical justification” (Honneth 2008: 27). The second reason is that Lukács assumes, implausibly, and without much argument, that the commodity exchange is the fundamental and only source of reification. Finally, Lukács seems to disregard the possibility emphasized by Habermas that, in some spheres of social life, reified attitudes might not only be appropriate but actually required as part of the social differentiation process that is characteristic of modern societies.

However, there is also another reading of the normative intuitions behind Lukács's argument, Honneth argues, that remains implicit in his work. According to this reading, we should not think of reification as something that could ever be complete in the sense

of being irreversible. Although Lukács seems to assume such an irreversibility, it would undermine his claim that the proletariat could recover from reification. Honneth argues that he therefore implicitly must subscribe to a theory according to which reification is only the obscuring of a more fundamental practice which remains always present. Honneth wants to recover this intuition through an “unofficial” reading of Lukács that conceives of the correct practice as one which supports forms of “empathetic engagement and interestedness that have been destroyed by the expansion of commodity exchange” (Honneth 2008: 27). This intuition can be spelled out neither, Honneth argues, using Lukács’s economistic explanatory strategy that sees reification only as an effect of the dominance of exchange relations, nor by his underlying theory of practice which betrays a commitment to an idealist view according to which the only basis for our world being accessible to us is its creation by us as a collective subject.

The first step in Honneth’s constructive argument is to contrast Lukács’s explicit theory (that assumes that there is no non-reified practice left in capitalist society) with his more optimistic statements about the proletariat that suggest, according to Honneth, that reification only “conceals” such practice from our awareness. This concealment, however, cannot be a mere epistemic mistake but must be rooted in a “false interpretive habit” (Honneth 2008: 33). This allows Honneth to connect Lukács’s reification theory to Heidegger’s notion of “care.” According to this interpretation, both Lukács and Heidegger see a mode of practice in which we take an interested and engaged stance toward the world and toward other people both as more fundamental and as more adequate. This leads Honneth to the following reconstruction of the issue at stake in reification theory: “the human relationship to the self and the world is in the first instance not only genetically but also categorically bound up with an affirmative attitude, before more neutralized orientations can subsequently arise” (Honneth 2008: 35). This reconstruction also allows Honneth to connect to elements of Dewey’s theory, in particular the emphasis on the qualitative experience of situations as primordial. This reconstruction conceives of reification as the dominance of a detached attitude lacking participatory involvement that amounts to a forgetfulness of a more basic form of a recognitive, caring stance. The claim that this is an empirically more fruitful definition of reification can be supported by taking note of insights in developmental psychology and by drawing on an argument presented by Stanley Cavell for the general priority of *intersubjective recognition* over *subjective cognition*. According to this argument, a stance of empathetic engagement ontologically and genetically precedes any possible stance of detached observation. Furthermore, the capacity to take up the earlier stance is a condition of possibility for taking up the latter.

If we understand reification as the effect of subjects adopting an interpretive framework that conceals this dependency relation, then of course – as Honneth himself acknowledges – we cannot make any sense of Lukács’s radical critique of reification. This is because this critique seems to make the mistake of categorically rejecting all social practices which favor detached observation, rather than only criticizing those that lead people to also make the second-order mistake of ignoring the rootedness of such observation in empathetic engagement. Of course, one might object that this objection rests on a change in the meaning of “reification.” Lukács seems to describe reification primarily as a change in the structure of social practices and only secondarily as a problem of subjects adopting inappropriate attitudes within those practices. In contrast, Honneth is primarily interested in the change in “interpretive habits” and in the ability of subjects to correctly reflect on certain features of their engagement with the world. While this conception allows Honneth to engage in extremely interesting analyses of social phenomena in terms of a loss of recognition, it is unclear whether his reformulation really amounts to a development of Lukács’s analysis or rather to a change in subject.

It is therefore not surprising that many interpreters have argued that Honneth divorces the subjective and intersubjective dimensions of reification too much from the original Lukácsian idea that intersubjective relations are determined, in the last instance, by configurations of material practice and power (Chari 2010). Although Honneth allows that reification is promoted by historically specific social practices, he also assumes that we can define the contrasting non-reified practice ahistorically and that it is, in principle, available to all people at all times (Jütten 2010: 246). This is because he derives the normative standard from anthropological assumptions. It might be possible that one cannot make sense of some of Lukács's claims without making such assumptions, but one can safely assume that Lukács does not subscribe, explicitly or implicitly, to such a theory.

After the *Tanner Lectures*, Honneth has not systematically engaged with Lukács's thought. However, one can read his recent work – especially *Freedom's Right* (Honneth 2014) – as moving away from the anthropological assumptions that animate the *Tanner Lectures* toward a more internal critique of modern socialization. This also opens up possibilities for a new appraisal of the immanent critique implicit in Lukács's thought from the perspective of Honneth's theory.

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# NIETZSCHE AND THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

*David Owen*

Nietzsche's reception by, and influence on, the Frankfurt School takes both direct and indirect forms – and is marked by wide variation between different thinkers and generations. In this chapter, my focus will be restricted to Nietzsche's direct influence and reception, and primarily to his reception by, influence on and salience for Adorno and Horkheimer, on the one hand, and Habermas, on the other. It would, however, be remiss not at least to acknowledge that Nietzsche's work is fundamental for thinkers such as Weber, Simmel and Freud, all of whose works are significant influences on, and resources for, the development of Frankfurt School Critical Theory – and hence that a fully adequate intellectual history of Nietzsche's significance for the Frankfurt School would need to address the indirect as well as direct routes of this relationship. The rationale for the more restricted focus of this chapter is that the contrasting relationships of the early and later Frankfurt School to Nietzsche also reveal a central tension within the Frankfurt School between two distinct approaches to the tasks of critical theory.

## **Adorno and Horkheimer's Reception of Nietzsche**

Max Weber's contention that intellectual honesty in the social sciences requires that we acknowledge and come to terms with the challenges posed by Marx and Nietzsche is one that Adorno's philosophy endorses. The twin poles represented by Marx and Nietzsche may fairly be said to demarcate the force field within which Adorno's engagement with modernity is actualized – and while Marx's materialist view of history remains central to Adorno's thought, it is arguably Nietzsche's example that more fundamentally shapes the style and much of the character of Adorno's own work. As he comments in *Problems of Moral Philosophy*: “of all the so-called great philosophers I owe him [Nietzsche] by far the largest debt” (2000: 172). What is the character of this debt – and what are the limits of Nietzsche's influence on Adorno? Commenting on what he terms the Frankfurt School's “Nietzschean moment,” Wiggerhaus notes that

Adorno seeks to correct or supplement Marx through the use of Nietzsche as a thinker concerned with the “totality of happiness [*Glück*] incarnate.” Horkheimer ultimately supported him, seeing in Nietzsche a critic of the “entire [bourgeois] culture of satiety [*Genügsamkeitskultur*].

(2001: 144)



Whether Nietzsche is sensibly construed as a thinker concerned with the “totality of happiness incarnate” is very much open to question, but there is little doubt that Adorno sees Nietzsche as both a critic of modern bourgeois culture and, more importantly, one who provides resources for criticism that are missing from Marxist thought:

Nietzsche is uniquely important because he denounced the presence of the bad in good and thereby also criticized the way in which the bad has assumed concrete form within the positive institutions of society and, above all, in the different ideologies. ... And the critique he has provided has been far more subtle and specific than, for example, Marxist theory, which has condemned ideologies *en bloc*, but has never succeeded in entering into their inner workings, their lies, as deeply as Nietzsche.

(Adorno, 2000: 172)

At the same time, Adorno argues that even as it surpasses Marxist analysis in this respect, Nietzsche’s critical insight is also limited in a way that Marxist analysis is not:

Nietzsche failed to recognize that the so-called slave morality that he excoriates is in truth always a master morality, namely, the morality imposed on the oppressed by the rulers. If his critique had been as consistent as it ought to have been, but isn’t – because he was too in thrall to existing social conditions, because he was able to get to the bottom of what people had become, but was not able to get to the bottom of the society that made them what they are – it should have turned its gaze to the conditions that determine human beings and make them and each of us into what we are.

(2000: 174)

It should be noted that this is a somewhat restricted reading of Nietzsche in at least two respects. First, there is a cogent reading of slave morality as a morality articulated by a fraction of the noble class – the priests – that serves their interests in their conflict with the dominant knightly or warrior fraction of the noble class, recruiting slaves and lower classes into an ideological outlook that privileges the authority of the priests (Reginster, 1997). Second, Nietzsche is much more attentive to the interaction of social, economic and political power and cultural subject formation than this portrayal would suggest (Owen, 2005). Yet, despite these limitations, Adorno’s reading of Nietzsche as an astute cultural critic who provides perspicuous analyses of modern society but cannot grasp the structural dynamics through which this society is reproduced is not unreasonable – and this has particularly important implications for why Adorno sees the need to integrate what he sees as valuable in Nietzsche’s work into a wider Hegelian-Marxist framework in order to overcome what he sees as the limitations of Nietzsche’s own prognosis and prescription for addressing the ills of modernity. I’ll return to this latter point toward the end of the section, but before doing so, we need to delve deeper into the question of Nietzsche’s influence on Adorno’s own critical project. It will be helpful here to begin by reflecting on Horkheimer’s 1936 essay “Egoism and the Freedom Movement: On the Anthropology of the Bourgeois Era” to which Adorno refers in his 1963 lectures on the problems of moral philosophy as a cogent explication of the dialectic revealed in Nietzsche’s thought and which is rather clearer than the discussion of Nietzsche shaped by it in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1969).

In *Daybreak*, Nietzsche identified his project of reevaluation as, at least in part, the rehabilitation of those motivations and forms of conduct that “morality” condemned as

expressive of egoism: “we shall restore to men their goodwill towards the actions decried as egoistic and restore to these actions their *value* – *we shall deprive them of their bad conscience!*” (1997a: 93). To contextualize this exclamation, consider Kant whose stance is stated succinctly in the section on “Egoism” in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*:

the moral egoist limits all purposes to himself; as a eudaemonist, he concentrates the highest motives of his will merely on profit and his own happiness, but not on the concept of duty. Because every other person has a different concept of what he counts as happiness, it is exactly egoism which causes him to have no touchstone of a genuine concept of duty which truly must be a universally valid principle. All eudaemonists are consequently egoists.

(Kant, 2006: 12)

Morality conceived as a system of duties grounded in the categorical imperative excludes such self-love; it opposes itself to, and asserts a right to rule over, the sensuous nature of human beings. Horkheimer’s engagement with this topic aims to situate morality’s rejection of egoism and Nietzsche’s critical response to it within a historical account of the rise and triumph of the bourgeoisie.

Horkheimer identifies the poles of the modern (bourgeois) anthropology of man in terms of a pessimistic image of man as ruled by bestial instincts – untrustworthy, selfish, prone to violence and evil – and an optimistic image of man in terms of compassion, empathy and a natural tendency to social harmony. And yet despite their opposed accounts of human nature, Horkheimer remarks,

A closer look at the optimistic and pessimistic trends ... reveals a trait common to the two ways of thinking as they developed in history, which drastically diverted and weakened the focus of knowledge of man so strong in Machiavelli and the Enlightenment: the condemnation of egoism, indeed of pleasure itself. Both in the cynical proclamation of the dangerous wickedness of human nature which had to be kept in check by a strong government apparatus, and in the corresponding Puritanical doctrine of the sinfulness of the individual, who had to suppress his own desires with iron discipline and in absolute subjection to the law of duty, as well as in the contrary assertion of man’s originally pure and harmonious nature which is disturbed only by the restrictive and corrupt present conditions, the absolute renunciation of every egoistic urge is the self-evident basis.

(1982: 12)

This commonality stands in stark contradiction to the demands of everyday practice:

The more purely bourgeois society comes to power, the more its influence overcomes restrictions, men oppose each other with increasing hostility and indifference as individuals, families, economic groups, and classes. In the context of the sharpened economic and social contradiction, the originally progressive principle of free competition takes on the character of a permanent state of war, internally and externally. All who are drawn into this world develop the egoistic, exclusionary, hostile sides of their being in order to survive in a hard reality. In the bourgeoisie’s great historically effective anthropological views, however, any emotions or drives which do not contribute directly to concord, love, and sociability are despised, distorted, or denied.

(1982: 12)

Under capitalist society, egoism is both practically cultivated and, at the same time, must be condemned and denied: it is the (self-)love that cannot speak its name: "What is expressed in philosophy as the contempt for instinctual desires turns out in real life to be the practice of their repression" (Horkheimer, 1982: 13). Capitalism requires idealistic morality on the basis of both a general social interest and a class interest. The former, which this morality expresses in distorted form, "lies in the social need to restrain the principle of competition in the epoch dominated by it" (Horkheimer, 1982: 14). The latter in the role of morality enables social domination: for the masses "morality was supposed to mean submissiveness, resignation, discipline and sacrifice for the whole, i.e., simply the repression of their material claims" (Horkheimer, 1982: 14). More specifically, the emergence of liberal capitalist states that remove the fetters of feudal rule introduces new freedoms for the individual but, at the same time, a "conscience has to be indoctrinated into him. By fighting for the bourgeois freedoms, he must at the same time learn to fight against himself" (Horkheimer, 1982: 20):

All instincts which did not move in predesignated channels, every unconditional desire for happiness was persecuted and repressed in favor of "moral" strivings related to the "common good" and to the extent that this common good contradicted the most immediate interests of most individuals, the transference of psychic energies into socially permitted forms lacked any rational explanation, and society needed an education dominated by religion and metaphysics in addition to physical force in order to domesticate the masses.

(Horkheimer, 1982: 16)

It is against this background that Horkheimer claims that the "struggle against egoism goes further than single desires; it applies to emotional life as a whole and ultimately turns against any unrationalized, free pleasure which is sought without justification" (Horkheimer, 1982: 16).

This ascetic morality leads, on Horkheimer's account, to nihilism conceived (in a more restricted sense than what he takes to be Nietzsche's own view) as "the secret self-contempt of the individual on the basis of the contradiction between bourgeois ideology and reality" (Horkheimer, 1982: 52, fn.136). The individual within the mass reflects on himself in terms of the humanist view of dignity as grounded in the ability to act freely as this is mediated through ascetic morality and, at the same time, is confronted with an everyday reality of exposure to natural and social forces beyond his control. This leads to

a secret contempt for one's own concrete existence and to hatred for the happiness of others, to a nihilism which has expressed itself again and again in the history of the modern age as the practical destruction of everything joyful and happy, as barbarity and destruction.

(Horkheimer, 1982: 52)

The stated salience of Nietzsche for Horkheimer's argument is that Nietzsche is the most significant of a limited number of thinkers who have sought to rehabilitate egoism. The central importance of this move for Horkheimer is that in acting as an advocate for egoism, Nietzsche (and fellow travelers such as Mandeville, Helvetius and de Sade) reveals the peculiar fact that when "they traced down the condemned drives and raised them to consciousness without rejection or minimalization, these powers lost their demonic power" (Horkheimer, 1982: 59). Indeed, Horkheimer concludes,

By their own existence these psychologists seem to point out that the liberation from ascetic morality with its nihilistic consequences can bring about a human change in the opposite sense than internalization. This process, which abolishes it, does not cast man back to the previous, psychic stage, as it were, as if that first process had never taken place, but brings it to a higher form of life. ... Insofar as mankind ... enters a higher era, it will change reality and quickly acquire the freer psychic constitution such as the great number of strugglers and martyrs for that general transformation already have without psychological mediation, because the dark, happiness-denying ethos of a dying epoch no longer has any power over them.

(1982: 60)

There are two points to Horkheimer's positive appreciation of Nietzsche. The first is that once we acknowledge these drives as part of the natural condition of humanity, then they lose the demonic power they otherwise exercise:

When the will to cause suffering ceases to act "in the name" of "God," in the name of justice, morality, honor, or the nation, it loses, by means of self-knowledge, the terrible power it exercises as long as it is hidden by its own carrier because of an ideological denial. It is taken up into the economy of real-life conduct for what it is and becomes rationally masterable.

(1982: 59)

In denying the possibility of innocent expressions of self-love, morality demonizes drives that are a constitutive part of the human condition and hence the possibility of a form of social existence that acknowledges and channels aggression and the will to cruelty to serve the common good rather than denying and repressing these drives in the name of the common good, a path that leads to nihilism and its social and political expression in barbarism and terror on Horkheimer's account. The second is that the expression of such drives is capable of new higher forms in modernity. Nietzsche neither advocates nor takes as possible a reversion to some primitive natural state; on the contrary, he stresses the spiritualization of the expression of the drives, that is, their expression in cultural forms that we have acquired (for example, one might think of the expression of the erotic drive in love songs or of the drive to cruelty in biting exchanges of social wit).

Yet even as Horkheimer acknowledges these positive features of Nietzsche's project, his essay is itself an extended performance of the key criticism of Nietzsche that he advances. The criticism is this:

His error lies in the present's lack of historical understanding, which leads him to bizarre hypotheses where clear theoretical knowledge was possible. He was blind to the historical dynamics of his time and hence to the way to his goal; therefore, even his most magnificent analysis, the genealogy of morals and of Christianity, despite all delicate subtlety, turns out to be too crude.

(1982: 59)

Horkheimer's essay presents itself as offering the kind of analysis that Nietzsche's fails to provide and, in doing so, rearticulates the full expression of the morality of the ascetic ideal as bound to the emergence and development of the bourgeois era. This rewriting of the genealogy of morality thus also refocuses the project of overcoming morality and the more

restricted form of nihilism to which it gives rise on the overcoming of contemporary capitalist society as an economic, social, cultural and moral order.

Horkheimer's historical-philosophical essay may be seen as articulating the background against which Adorno's philosophical critique of Kant emerges. It does so because while Horkheimer's essay offers a diagnosis of bourgeois morality (of which Kant's moral philosophy is the most sophisticated intellectual expression) as both symptom and support of a social pathology, it does not offer a direct challenge to Kant on the philosophical plane. It is this task that Adorno takes up.

Nietzsche offers a variety of criticisms of "morality" in the sense exemplified by Kant's moral philosophy, but one central criticism derives from his reflections on the ascetic ideal. In the third essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche offers an account of the ascetic ideal:

The idea at issue [...] is the *value* which the ascetic priests ascribe to our life: they juxtapose this life (along with all that belongs to it, 'nature', 'world', the whole sphere of becoming and the ephemeral) to a completely different form of existence, which it opposes and excludes, *unless* it somehow turns itself against itself, *denies itself*. In which case, the case of an ascetic life, life functions as a bridge to that other existence. (2008: 96)

This ideal offers "a closed system of will, goal and interpretation" that expresses "an unsatisfied instinct and will to power which seeks not to master some isolated aspect of life but rather life itself" (2008: 96). What accounts for the triumph of the ascetic ideal on Nietzsche's account is that it provides a way of making sense of suffering:

Except for the ascetic ideal: man, the *animal* man, had no meaning up to now. ... The meaninglessness of suffering, *not* the suffering, was the curse that has so far blanketed mankind, – and *the ascetic ideal offered man a meaning!* Up to now it was the only meaning, but any meaning at all is better than no meaning at all; the ascetic ideal was, in every respect, the ultimate '*faute de mieux*' *par excellence*. Within it, suffering was interpreted; the enormous emptiness seemed filled; the door was shut on all suicidal nihilism. The interpretation – without a doubt – brought new suffering with it, deeper, more internal, more poisonous suffering, suffering that gnawed away more intensely at life: it brought all suffering within the perspective of *guilt*. ... But in spite of all that – man was *saved*, he had a *meaning*, from now on he was no longer like a leaf in the breeze, the plaything of the absurd, of 'non-sense'; from now on he could *will* something, – no matter what, why and how he did it at first, the *will itself was saved*. (2008: 162)

There are a number of features of Nietzsche's analysis that are salient for Adorno's critique of moral philosophy as exemplified by the figure of Kant, but central to it is a feature that Nietzsche stresses in his critique of the ascetic ideal, namely, the radical opposition it constructs – and must construct to secure the kind of authority that it claims – between the rational will and sensuous nature:

It is absolutely impossible for us to conceal what was actually expressed by that whole willing that derives its direction from the ascetic ideal: this hatred of the human, and even more of the animalistic, even more of the material, this horror of the senses, of reason itself, this fear of happiness and beauty, this longing to get away from appearance, transience, growth, death, wishing, longing itself – all that means, let us dare to grasp it, a *will to nothingness*, an aversion to life, a rebellion

against the most fundamental prerequisites of life, but it is and remains a *will*!... And, to conclude by saying what I said at the beginning: man still prefers to *will the void* than *void the will*...

(2008: 162, translation adjusted)

Kant's philosophical achievement for Nietzsche is to give this radical opposition its most systematic intellectual expression – and Adorno accepts and adopts this view in advancing an account of Kant's moral philosophy as combining rigorism and repression in its denial of any role for our sensuous nature in either the construction or motivation of morality (Adorno, 2000: 71–75). As Freyenhagen notes, Adorno sees Kant's denial of moral worth to motivations arising from affects as a logical product of the systematic view that such motivations are heteronomous with respect to freedom and hence to morality (Freyenhagen, 2013: 103):

In order to save the idea of moral worth, we need the pure, transcendental ego – removed from moral luck, from the contingencies of what our sensuous nature endows us with, and from what the external world makes out of our well-intentioned best efforts in terms of consequences. However, honouring freedom by cleansing it of everything empirical – Adorno objects – is at the same time to introduce an element of unfreedom into its very heart; specifically it introduces repression into the workings of freedom. In other words, freedom is purchased at the price of dominating our sensuous nature.

(Freyenhagen, 2013: 104)

Put in more concrete social terms, Adorno's claim is that “a supreme metaphysical principle has been created out of the idea of the emancipation of the bourgeois individual” (Adorno, 2000: 71). Apart from its general acceptance of Nietzsche's critique of the ascetic ideal as mediated through Horkheimer's rearticulation of this critique, Adorno's criticism involves two further points that draw on Nietzsche. First, Adorno shares Nietzsche's skepticism toward the presumption that universal moral responsibility is well motivated. What appears progressive may disclose a desire to blame and punish that has the ideological function of masking a social problem by individualizing responsibility (Freyenhagen, 2013: 106). Second, there is a Nietzschean question about whether the price (in repression) exacted for the achievement of moral agency is worth it. As Freyenhagen notes, Kant does allow that the fact that human beings are empirical beings who have a sensuous nature and, as such, are necessarily happiness-seeking beings can act as an indirect constraint on morality in the sense that being rationally motivated to act morally requires that we can hold to the thought that acting morally and achieving happiness are, in the final instance, reconciled. As Adorno puts it,

Kant finally concedes that the world would be a hell if it were not possible to achieve – and were it only in a transcendental realm – something like the unity of reason and the impulses it has suppressed.

(Adorno, 2000: 72 cited in Freyenhagen, 2013: 106)

To ground this possibility, Kant posits as *res fidei* the existence of freedom of the will, immortality of the soul, and God – but in doing so he thereby opens up the space for a critique of morality. Nietzsche's contention that if, after Darwin, we are intellectually honest, we cannot hold to these articles of faith, leaves us with an account of morality and a system of moral values that we cannot truthfully endorse and, hence, exposes us to the threat of nihilism. It is, in part, this predicament that leads both Nietzsche and Adorno to the task

of seeking to articulate an understanding of freedom and hence of ethics that overcomes the radical opposition constructed by the ascetic ideal between man's rational and sensuous nature.

However, while Adorno's critique of Kant exhibits recognizably Nietzschean elements, Adorno is also critical of Nietzsche's own response to the predicament that he diagnoses so acutely. This critique is less focused on the values that Nietzsche proposes than on what Adorno's takes to be the fact that these values simply cannot be practically realized except "on Sunday afternoons" under contemporary conditions (Adorno, 2000: 173) – and he echoes Horkheimer's point that Nietzsche lacks an adequate grasp of historical dynamics and of social structures. Yet despite this, Nietzsche provides a critical model for Adorno and Horkheimer. Nietzsche's attack on the Bismarckian *Kulturstaat* may be seen by Adorno and Horkheimer as a limited and partial precursor to their reflections on the Culture Industry, while the influence of *On the Genealogy of Morals* on the form and style of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is pervasive. This latter point is particularly so in respect of the third essay of the *Genealogy* on the meaning of ascetic ideals in which Nietzsche gives an account of how an instrumental relation to life emerges tied to a totalizing conception of the good and poses the question of nihilism as the prospect of such an instrumental rationality now divorced from any conception of the good.

Nietzsche's own turn to an expressionist understanding of human agency as exemplified by the figure of the artist is an attempt to rescue reason (and freedom) from its own self-undermining (Ridley, 2007a), where this commitment is not stated but rather shown in the textual performance of the *Genealogy* (Owen, 2007), and one can plausibly advance the same claim concerning *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in which the self-undermining of reason as instrumental rationality is displayed and the alternative understanding of reason is not stated but performed through the text. Perhaps this points to a final deep point of connection between Nietzsche and Adorno, namely, that their works are *compositions* (in the full artistic, and particularly musical, sense of that term), and grasping this point means understanding what these works are doing in the way that we understand what a work of art is doing – and in both cases reflection on this topic is central to their philosophical projects not simply because they take the domain of art and culture to be central to human experience but also because getting clear about how we understand art works is, at the same time, clarifying the character of their own philosophical activity.

### Habermas' Engagement with Nietzsche

The contrast between the reception of Nietzsche by Adorno and Horkheimer, and that of Habermas is somewhat stark, at least if we focus on the reading that Habermas' offers in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (to which I will return). However, at an earlier stage in his prodigious career, Habermas had engaged with less polemical intent with Nietzsche's work in an essay published as Habermas' *Nachwort* to an edition of Nietzsche's epistemological writings, this essay being largely (but not wholly) a repetition of the final chapter of Habermas' *Knowledge and Human Interests* published in the same year (1968) – and I'll begin by considering this initial engagement of Habermas' with Nietzsche's theory of knowledge.

Habermas' engagement with Nietzsche's epistemological writings is related to Habermas' own project in *Knowledge and Human Interests* to demonstrate both the unity of the relation of knowledge and human interests, and to argue that we can distinguish distinct modalities of knowledge in terms of the interests that they serve. Habermas' book is an extended defense of *self-reflection* against the dogmatic claim of scientism that the only genuine knowledge is scientific knowledge (and its philosophical expression in the doctrine of positivism); a defense that distinguishes the *empirical-analytic* sciences as serving our *technical interest* in

mastery of our environment expressed as *instrumental rationality*, the *historico-hermeneutic sciences* as serving our *practical interest* in mutual understanding expressed as *communicative rationality* and *critical theory* as serving our *emancipatory interest* in overcoming arbitrary constraints expressed as *ideology-critique* (Habermas, 2004). It is in relation to this project that Habermas addresses Nietzsche's reflections on knowledge, and it is intelligible that he should do so since Nietzsche takes knowledge and human interests to be necessarily intertwined.

Habermas' engagement starts by considering the second of Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*, "On the uses and disadvantages of history for life," in which Nietzsche rejects "positivist" approaches to the study of history in the context of a wider consideration of the different interests that human beings have in history and the different modes of historical understanding:

History pertains to the living man in three respects: it pertains to him as a being who acts and strives, as a being who preserves and reveres, as a being who suffers and seeks deliverance. This threefold relationship corresponds to three species of history – insofar as it is permissible to distinguish between a monumental, an antiquarian and a critical species of history.

(1997b: 67)

Habermas summarizes Nietzsche's view before introducing the claim that, in contrast to the critique of positivist historiography advanced by the hermeneutic approach associated with Dilthey, Nietzsche's critique "directs itself not against the false scientific self-understanding of contemporary history but rather against history as science" (Habermas, 2004: 54). Nietzsche, Habermas contends, "brings his demand to history from without: it should win back its meaning for life praxis by divesting itself of a straightjacket of scientific methodology, ceasing to be a strict science, even at the price of losing possible objectivity" (2004: 55). It is somewhat unclear what the grounds of this claim are meant to be. Nietzsche's attack on positivist historiography and its attendant conception of "objectivity" is grounded in the claim that history is integrally tied to human interests and, hence, that any approach to history that imagines that it can and should be divorced from any connection to human interests, that it can and should be "purely disinterested," is both conceptually incoherent and practically self-deceived, where this is precisely a "false scientific self-understanding of contemporary history" and one that, Nietzsche contends, has pathological cultural effects. Hence, Nietzsche's scornful remark about "naive historians" who "call the assessment of the opinions and deeds of the past according to the everyday standards of the present moment 'objectivity': it is here they discover the canon of all truth" (1997b: 90) and his deeper point against the positivist understanding of "objectivity":

According to this interpretation, the word means a condition in the historian which permits him to observe an event in all its motivations and consequences so purely that it has no effect at all on his own subjectivity: it is analogous to that aesthetic phenomenon of detachment from personal interest with which a painter sees in a stormy landscape with thunder and lightning, or a rolling sea, only the picture of them within him, the phenomenon of complete absorption in the things themselves: it is a superstition, however, that the picture which these things evoke in a man possessing such a disposition is a true reproduction of the empirical nature of the things themselves. Or is it supposed that at this moment the things as it were engrave, counterfeit, photograph themselves by their own action on a purely passive medium?

(1997b: 91)



This is, as Nietzsche remarks, “mythology, and bad mythology at that” (1997b: 91). The point is important because it establishes a connection between Nietzsche’s essay and the mature position that he will come to articulate and that is the true target of Habermas’ critical focus, namely, Nietzsche’s perspectivism.

Having identified what he takes to be a problem with Nietzsche’s view in the second Untimely Meditation, Habermas proposes that Nietzsche finds himself in the position of needing to prove the very possibility of knowledge oriented to action and, hence,

had to go back radically behind the scientizing conception of the world in order to conceive knowledge as such as opposed to every objectivism, even the scientific illusion of objectivism, on the basis of its preceding and inalienable connection with praxis.

(2004: 55)

Habermas finds the seeds of this “radical critique of knowledge” in Nietzsche’s earlier essay “On Truth and Lies in an Extramoral Sense” which he identifies with Nietzsche’s development of a naturalized Kantianism in which Nietzsche transposes Kant’s question “how are synthetic a priori judgments possible?” into another: “Why is belief in synthetic a priori judgments necessary?” Nietzsche proposes this transposition as part of a quasi-evolutionary story of human epistemic capacities in which he holds that the fact that we, human beings, deploy a range of categories (e.g., those for which Kant provides a transcendental deduction) to represent the world gives us no reason to hold the “real world” corresponds to the world as it appears to us and, hence, no reason to accept a metaphysical conception of truth. However, Habermas takes Nietzsche to draw a more radical claim: “Nietzsche concludes that not only the correspondence theory of truth but also the concept of truth as such is useless” (2004: 61).

It is certainly true that Nietzsche is, in the first half of the 1880s, committed to a view that denies the metaphysical version of the correspondence theory of truth and that he uses this conception of truth rhetorically to draw out the view that, judged by this standard, all judgments are false – and, hence, raise the threat of nihilism. However, it is certainly false to hold that this is the position expressed by Nietzsche’s perspectivism. To state, as Habermas does, that Nietzsche denies any distinction between knowledge and illusion or rejects the very concept of truth is to fail to recognize the development of Nietzsche’s philosophical position across his work. Consider Nietzsche’s aphorism in *Twilight of the Idols* “How the ‘Real World’ at last became a myth” in which he sketches out a history of the metaphysical distinction between real and apparent worlds. The relevant sections run thus:

3. The real world, unattainable, undemonstrable, cannot be promised, but even when merely thought of a consolation, a duty, an imperative.  
(Fundamentally the same old sun, but shining through mist and scepticism; the idea grown sublime, pale, northerly, Königsbergian.)
4. The real world - unattainable? Unattained, at any rate. And if unattained also *unknown*. Consequently also no consolation, no redemption, no duty: how could we have a duty towards something unknown?  
(The grey dawn. First yawnings of reason. Cockcrow of positivism.)
5. The ‘real world’ - an idea no longer of any use, not even a duty any longer - an idea grown useless, superfluous, *consequently* a refuted idea: let us abolish it!  
(Broad daylight; breakfast; return of cheerfulness and *bons sens*; Plato blushes for shame; all free spirits run riot.)

6. We have abolished the real world: what world is left? The apparent world perhaps? ... But no! *with the real world we have also abolished the apparent world!* (Mid-day; moment of the shortest shadow; end of the longest error; zenith of mankind; INCIPIT ZARATHUSTRA)

(Nietzsche, 1990: 50–51)

Whereas Kant stands at (3) on Nietzsche's account in which the noumenal realm, although unknowable, is posited and plays a pivotal role in Kant's critical system and account of morality, Nietzsche at varied points of his philosophical career occupies positions (4), (5) and finally (6) (for a clear account, see Clark, 1991). The importance of this point is two-fold. First, Nietzsche's perspectivism represents position (6) in which, far from dropping the distinction between knowledge and illusion, he is able to give a coherent account of how knowledge is integrally tied to human interests (expressed as affects) in which such interests/affects are the condition of possibility of knowledge: all knowledge is affect dependent (Janaway, 2007). Second, this entitles Nietzsche to the concept of truth and the distinction between truth and illusion that he, indeed, consistently deploys. (And to ward off another possible misunderstanding to which Habermas seems prone, we should note that Nietzsche's claim is not that a perspective determines what is true, but rather that it governs what is up for grabs as true or false.) One reason that these reflections on Habermas' misreading of Nietzsche matter is that recognizing the limitations and errors of Habermas' account also brings the recognition that Nietzsche offers a much more powerful alternative to Habermas' own account of the relation of knowledge and human interests than otherwise appears.

Habermas returns to Nietzsche in 1985 in his polemical text *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, which appears to be motivated by the concern that Nietzschean strands in contemporary philosophy (Adorno and Horkheimer, Heidegger, Derrida, Bataille, Foucault) are inadvertently enabling neoconservative politics by undermining the unfinished project of enlightenment. This text is, in certain respects, continuous with the earlier engagement, but the stakes are pitched higher. Habermas takes Nietzsche to be committed to an irrationalist rejection of reason, freedom and truth:

Nietzsche had no choice but to submit subject-centered reason yet again to an immanent critique – or to give up the program entirely. Nietzsche opts for the second alternative: He renounces a renewed revision of the concept of reason and *bids farewell* to the dialectic of enlightenment.

(Habermas, 1987: 85–86)

Habermas seeks to support this claim through a reading of Nietzsche in which reason is reduced to power through a series of steps:

1. The art critic is the model of all evaluation (1987: 123).
2. All validity claims are reduced to evaluations (1987: 123–124).
3. All evaluations are reduced to subjective preferences as expressions of power (1987: 124).
4. A standard is posited that distinguishes active and reactive forms of power (1987: 125).
5. This is “grounded” in a genealogy that operates on the principle: “What is *older* is *earlier* in the generational chain and nearer to the origin. The *more primordial* is considered the more worthy of honor, the preferable, the more unspoiled, the purer. It is deemed better” (1987: 125–126).

This is the argument that Habermas takes to underwrite his earlier claim concerning Nietzsche's irrationalism:

Nietzsche owes his concept of modernity, developed in terms of his theory of power, to an unmasking critique of reasons that sets it outside the horizon of reason. ... Nietzsche enthrones taste, 'the Yes and No of the palate,' as the organ of a knowledge beyond true and false, beyond good and evil.

(1987: 96, see also 123)

It is difficult to know quite how to approach Habermas' irrationalist reading of Nietzsche. The thought that origins should be glorified or that the value of phenomena is tied to its origin is one that Nietzsche quite self-consciously rejects throughout his career (see, for example, 2001: 202–203). However, the crux of Habermas' argument depends on two claims – that aesthetic judgments are irrational and that all judgments are aesthetic judgments (Habermas, 2004: 257) – so let me address these by way of sketching briefly an alternative account of Nietzsche's position.

We can start with the point that Nietzsche does take artistic agency to be the model of agency more generally (Ridley, 2007a; Pippin, 2010) and takes art as form-giving to be a general feature of human activity that is present across its varied domains (Ridley, 2007b). It is important however not to misinterpret this "aestheticism" since it is not a matter of treating all judgments in terms of aesthetic criteria (i.e., judging an ethical action in terms of its beauty) but rather of treating the form of judging as relevantly similar to that of aesthetic judgment in the sense that the relevant standards of judgment are not fixed independently and in advance of the performance. The actor is embedded in practices that have a history, whose standards of judgment have been developed and transformed across that history through the performances that compose it and, hence, are not fixed independently and in advance of current performances but, rather, can be developed and transformed through these performances. This is easily seen in the case of the history of art, and Nietzsche's proposal is that the same point is true for practices more generally, including epistemic and ethical practices. (On this point, despite their other differences, Nietzsche and Hegel are arguably close.) At the same time, these performances can exhibit or fail to exhibit salient virtues of the practice; thus, Nietzsche's position concerning, for example, epistemic claims is akin to that of virtue epistemologists in that he takes it that the exercise of intellectual virtues (such as *Redlichkeit*) are conditions of being entitled to knowledge claims.

Yet what count as the salient virtues may also be misconstrued within the practice such that the actors misunderstand their own activity – for example, they may suppose that pure disinterested contemplation is, *per impossible*, the appropriate disposition for epistemic purposes. The problem that Nietzsche then confronts is this:

1. He takes it that modern culture is ignoble and systematically misunderstands its own activity.
2. He cannot appeal to any substantive conception of the good to ground this judgment because he denies ("the death of God") that we can hold any such standard.

The doctrine of will to power is a response to this problem. We can sketch this doctrine briefly thus:

- a) Human agency involves making commitments/pursuing goals.
- b) Binding oneself to commitments and/or pursuing goals are *challenges* and succeeding in meeting these challenges is an *achievement* characterized by a feeling of power. The more challenging the commitment/goal, the greater the feeling of power on meeting it.

- c) To be an agent is thus intrinsically to be committed to acquiring the power to direct one's own agency (i.e., to make commitments/set and pursue goals) and to meet challenges by overcoming the obstacles to the self-directed exercise of our agency and thereby enhancing one's capacity for agency. (This is why Nietzsche identifies "will to power" with the "*instinct for freedom*.")

Thus,

- d) To be an agent is intrinsically to be committed to the cultivation of those virtues (as affective dispositions and practical capacities) that encourage and enable us to direct, exercise and enhance our own agency by taking up and overcoming challenges.

In an ethical culture that values challenging oneself such as the agonal culture of ancient Greece, these virtues (truthfulness, courage, independence of mind, resoluteness, etc.) will be prevalent. Suppose, however, that, for historically contingent reasons (i.e., the rise of Christianity), the values that we acquire through our ethical culture are ones that devalue these virtues and value opposed virtues (such as obedience, humility, and avoidance of suffering), then we have reason to hold that this is an instance of what Nietzsche terms "decadence," which is the condition that he holds modern culture to exhibit.

This necessarily very brief sketch of an alternative reading of Nietzsche serves here simply as counterpoint to Habermas' rather crude reductionist reading of Nietzsche as an irrationalist. It provides a way of understanding Nietzsche's project, and the centrality of his concern with art and the aesthetic in that project, which makes plain that the sense in which Nietzsche treats all judgments as aesthetic judgments is not to be confused with the aestheticization of epistemology or ethics but, rather, is a claim about the form of judgment in epistemic and ethical practices. Further, against Habermas' claim that such judgments are simple expressions of power, it offers a picture in which the conjunction of the feeling of power with the development of one's powers is a consequence of performing whatever one is doing well, that is, getting one's scientific experiment right, producing a decent poem or song, outwitting one's political opponents, etc. This is not the reduction of judgments to preferences – and it does indeed involve an appeal to intersubjective validity, that is, to the exchange of reasons. My judgment that I have exhibited the relevant virtues in doing the experiment, composing the poem or song and outwitting my political opponents may be mistaken – and this judgment is constitutively open to public affirmation, contestation or rebuttal. However, Nietzsche's picture also acknowledges that individuals may be differently situated in the space of judgments in terms of their levels of discernment (i.e., the judgment of a connoisseur of painting may reasonably have more weight than that of a neophyte). This is, however, as it should be. There are virtuosi (actors) and connoisseurs (spectators), who may not, and often will not, coincide in relation to any domain of human activity: aesthetic, ethical, epistemic, political, etc. Acknowledging that point does not remove us from the realm of reasons, rather it registers that we are located within it. This is the sense in which Habermas is right to say that Nietzsche takes the art critic as the model of the evaluating judgment; it is simply that everything else that Habermas says after that claim takes the significance of this point in exactly the wrong direction. I cannot, in the space available, definitively disprove Habermas' reading, but two reasons support the kind of alternative picture sketched here. First, the principle of charity suggests that given a choice between two interpretations of a thinker's work where one makes them appear as an incoherent irrationalist and the other a coherent defender of reason, we would need compelling textual grounds to favor the former, and Habermas' recourse at key junctures to material from unpublished notebooks (whose status as claims to which Nietzsche is committed is rather dubious) is perhaps telling here. The second is that the kind of picture I have presented coheres rather better with most of

contemporary Nietzsche scholarship (see, e.g., Gemes & Richardson, 2013). This is not to deny that there are many disagreements in this scholarship, merely to note that it favors the kind of picture I have presented, while one would be hard pressed to find any support at all for Habermas' reading.

## Conclusion

What is at stake in the contrasting reactions of Adorno and Horkheimer, on the one hand, and Habermas, on the other hand, to Nietzsche's philosophy? It is true that Adorno and Horkheimer are considerably more sympathetic to Nietzsche's criticisms of morality and to his genealogical mode of investigation than Habermas, but this difference points to a deeper issue concerning the nature of a critical theory of modern society. Habermas' project aims to vindicate a story of progress in which modernity as the unfinished project of enlightenment discloses the context-transcending universalist standpoint of morality. By contrast, Adorno offers a darker picture of modernity where the form of a critical theory is one of immanent criticism that rejects the possibility under the conditions of modern society of establishing context-transcendent standards of morality. This is not, as it is also not in Nietzsche, a story of decline but, rather, one of deep ambivalence concerning enlightenment, and it is this ambivalence that Adorno's negative dialectics articulates. If the stakes of how Nietzsche relates to critical theory are high, it is because Nietzsche's philosophy is one site of the battleground concerning the very form of a critical theory.

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## Further Reading

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# WEBER AND THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

*Dana Villa*

It is noteworthy that Weber's name nowhere appears in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, even though it is impossible to imagine the book without him. Indeed, it is arguable that main points of his influence – his concept of rationalization, his account of the triumph of *Zweckrationalität*, his focus upon the role self-denial or an inner-worldly asceticism plays in this triumph, and his depiction of the “steel housing” created by bureaucratization – outweigh Horkheimer and Adorno's borrowings from both Freud and Marx. No doubt their failure to give credit where credit is due is tied to both authorial pride and the anxiety of influence. But it is also tied to their insistence that Weber's work expressed what Horkheimer (in *The Eclipse of Reason*) termed a “subjective” form of reason.

Subjective reason is a form of rationality that concerns itself solely with the selection of rational (efficient and cost-effective) *means*, having nothing to contribute to the rational understanding or judgment of *ends*. It is *Zweckrationalität* described in a way that allows it to be contrasted with what Horkheimer calls “objective” reason: the end adjudicating “Reason” appealed to by Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and the mainstream of the Western philosophical tradition. *This* tradition viewed reason as a faculty concerned with *comprehending* divergent ends and *ranking* them accordingly. Socrates, Plato et al. believed reason to be up to these tasks because they thought it was capable of revealing “a structure inherent in reality that *by itself* calls for a specific mode of behavior in each specific case” (Horkheimer, 1974: 11). Because it could grasp the objective order of Nature (*physis*) or Being (*ousia*), reason could also bring human practical and theoretical life into *correspondence* with that (pregiven) order.

The “Reason” of the Western philosophical tradition was, then, both *emphatic* and *metaphysical*. It was emphatic because of its robustly normative character: it passed “judgment on man's actions and way of life” (Horkheimer, 1974: 9). It was metaphysical because it *assumed* that there is such a thing as an inherent or pregiven order of Being, and that reason can reveal it. It was this latter form of reason that Kant, the “all destroyer” (*der Alleszermalmer*), consigned to the ash heap of history with his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1784). Weber went beyond Kant by subjecting emphatically normative rationality to annihilating criticism in “Science as a Vocation” (1917). As Weber had earlier written in his “‘Objectivity’ in Social Science” (1903) essay,

The fate of an epoch that has eaten of the tree of knowledge is that it must know that we cannot learn the *meaning* of the world from the results of its analysis, be it ever so perfect; it must rather be in a position to create this meaning itself. It must

recognize that general views of life and the universe can never be the products of increasing empirical knowledge, and that the highest ideals, which move us most forcefully, are always formed only in the struggle with other ideals that are just as sacred to others as ours are to us.

(Weber, 1949: 57)

Neo-Kantian epistemology and the growth of the natural sciences expose the idea of a normative order of nature to be an illusion. Shorn of the “former illusions” fostered by the robust moral cognitivism of the tradition, we disenchanted moderns confront the fact that science – the embodiment of rational knowledge of reality *for us* – is incapable of giving an answer to the question of “What shall we do and how shall we live” (Weber, 1946: 143). Anyone who values intellectual integrity must acknowledge that, in questions concerning individual ethical conduct and the organization of a just society, no “objective” answers are out there waiting to be discovered by science, rational inquiry, or even “pure practical reason.” When it comes to ethical values and guiding political principles, Weber declares, “the individual has to *decide* which is God for him and which is the devil.” He must do this in full awareness of the fact that *reason* cannot and does not provide the kind of authoritative ranking of values so many yearn for (Weber, 1946: 148).

In *The Eclipse of Reason*, Horkheimer presents what he calls “Max Weber’s pessimism with regard to the possibility of rational insight and action” as “itself a stepping stone in the renunciation of philosophy and science as regards their aspiration of defining man’s goal” (Horkheimer, 1974: 6). Weber’s desire to face up to the epistemological and theoretical implications of a wide-ranging “disenchantment of the world” leads to a comprehensive *formalization of reason* and to the destruction of the normative content philosophers and theologians had traditionally assigned it. The unavoidable result, Horkheimer thinks, is that “the acceptability of ideals, the criteria for our actions and beliefs, the leading principles of ethics and politics, all our ultimate decisions are made to depend on factors other than reason.” Questions concerning ultimate values turn out to be “matters of choice and predilection,” of attitude, prejudice, and feeling. Moreover, it becomes “meaningless to speak of truth in making practical, moral, or esthetic decisions” (Horkheimer, 1974: 7–8).

As a general description of Weber’s position, Horkheimer’s remarks are more or less accurate. Weber does indeed repudiate moral cognitivism, at least the robust kind we find in the Western tradition. In and of itself, this repudiation is hardly shocking. For many of us, the appeal to an “objective order of value” does not open the door to arguments about which ultimate values should guide our lives; rather, it slams it shut. So long as dogmatically asserted orders of nature, Being, or divine purposes are *not* appealed to, we are free to consider a variety of ultimate values and ethical-political positions, and to engage in argument and debate about them. After Kant, Nietzsche, and Weber, we do this with an increased awareness that such arguments are unlikely – and probably unable – to produce a general consensus on the “correct” view of things, one which would establish peace among Weber’s “warring gods” and bring the debates to an end.

However, as we shall see, the Frankfurt School’s respective appeals to “critical reason,” “reflective” rationality, or “discourse ethics” as alternatives to subjective reason are predicated upon a caricature of Weber’s actual position. Horkheimer’s *Eclipse of Reason* is perhaps the most obvious example in this regard, but similar efforts are made by Adorno, Marcuse, and Habermas. This skewed reading of Weber – that he was a “decisionist” who, whether he intended to or not, encouraged political irresponsibility and irrationalism – is as constitutive of the Frankfurt School’s critical rationalism as it is for the “classical political rationalism” of the conservative thinker Leo Strauss (Strauss, 1953: 35–80).



Casting Weber as someone who embodies “subjective” reason and the decisionism that flows from it enables the Frankfurt School theorists to minimize the degree to which his rationalization paradigm provides the foundation and basic conceptual structure of much, if not all, of their work. It also enables them to frame Weber as the quasi-relativistic antipode to the Frankfurt School’s goal of establishing a critical theory of society that has firm normative foundations. Assuming we are willing to grant Horkheimer et al. their point in this regard, an obvious question arises: what, precisely, is their alternative to a “subjective” or formalized rationality?

Speaking broadly, the alternative they provide is something the Frankfurt School theorists call “reflective” reason. This form of reason is self-aware, critical in nature and dialectical in form. It views the technological-instrumental conquest of nature as the distorted expression of an unreflective or one-dimensional positivistic rationality, a rationality whose ultimate roots lie in the struggle for self-preservation. Unsurprisingly, reflective reason is premised on the rejection of the idea that science and technology provide the ultimate criteria of what is rational and what is not.

The inspiration for this distinction between reflective (philosophical and critical) reason and uncritical (scientific and technological) reason is Hegelian. It is found in those sections of the *Phenomenology* where Hegel criticizes the types of rationality the scientifically minded Enlightenment took as normative for the pursuit of knowledge. In Hegel’s view, the classifying rationality of a Linnaeus and the “reason as testing laws” approach of a Newton constitute the standpoint of the “mere understanding” (*Verstand*). This faculty analyzes the classes, structures, and causal connections that are to be found in what Kant famously called the “mechanism of nature.” These detemporalize and objectify the external reality confronting the subject-scientist.

Dialectical reason – as Hegel, Lukács, and the first-generation Frankfurt School conceived it – was premised upon three realizations. First, reality is neither as “fixed” nor “external” as the objectifying natural sciences presume. Second, *all* forms of knowledge – from the most naive empiricism to sophisticated scientific theories relying upon hypothesis, experiment, and verification – are viewed as historical in nature, each form generating criteria of truth that it is ultimately unable to fulfill. Third, concrete historical and social beings are seen as the *active authors and creators* of all forms of knowledge, rather than as contemplative or disinterested observers of a law-governed nature (Horkheimer, 1972: 197–201).

A dialectical form of rationality, then, is self-conscious in the sense that it *reflects* upon various forms of knowledge, viewing them as *stages* in the development of human consciousness rather than as more or less adequate reflections of a unitary object (nature, society) that stands opposite the knowing subject. Reason (*Vernunft*) recognizes that subject and object are dialectically intertwined. Evolving ideas of what *genuine* knowledge is – for example, the movement from Aristotelian to Newtonian physics – testify to an evolution not just in scientific understanding but in the character of humanity’s *self*-understanding. The intertwining of the human subject with the various “objects” it studies means that all knowledge is, ultimately, a form of self-knowledge.

The Frankfurt School’s version of dialectical rationality appeals to thought’s ability to reflectively suspend the conquest of nature and step back from the project of scientific-technological mastery. Taking on a life of its own, this project has become increasingly *unreflective* and automatic, with little regard for the human, social, and environmental costs it entails. The step back from the conquest of nature allows us to see this project as but one (distorted) dimension of a larger and more significant struggle. This is the struggle to realize our distinctively *human* interest in autonomy, to reconcile ourselves with nature, and to create a domination-free or “emancipated” society.

From the perspective of Horkheimer et al., our overall failure to reflect upon the implications of the conquest of nature means that thinking has been reduced to a sequence of logical, mathematical, and task-oriented operations; to what is, in essence, a more or less sophisticated form of calculation. The sheer success of the technological-scientific project to conquer nature thus thrusts reason's emancipatory potential – its capacity to question what we are doing and to keep the goals of autonomy, reconciliation, and a domination-free society alive – into oblivion. Forgetting the claims to truth, justice, and freedom articulated by the Enlightenment in its more critical phases, we orient ourselves increasingly to the smooth operation of the social machine.

This machine dominates both nature *and* human behavior, manipulating them with ever-greater efficiency thanks to advances in science and technology. The “system” that results no longer has any need to legitimate itself by means of the ideology of the “fair exchange of equivalents” that Marx had criticized. Instead, it legitimates itself by means of the ever higher standard of living it delivers to masses of ordinary working people. If we combine the rises in productivity, efficiency, and the standard of living late capitalism has achieved with the built-in administrative and functional demands of complex social systems, an ever more hierarchical social structure results, similar to the one prophesied by Weber.

Both “the masses” and “unreflective reason” (in the form of science, technology, and administrative rationality) take this hierarchy as necessary, justified, and totally uncontroversial, whereas, the “reflective” reason animating the Frankfurt School does not, for reasons sketched above. But here two further questions arise. First, assuming that there is such a thing as reflective or dialectical reason, on what grounds can it persuasively assert its superior self-awareness and truthfulness? What makes a “critical theory of society” not just *normatively* superior to “traditional” social theory but *epistemologically* superior as well? Second, what allows the Frankfurt School to claim that our interest in “emancipation” is something distinctively *human* and universal, rather than a theoretical anachronism born of a very particular (and hardly uncontroversial) nineteenth-century German tradition of philosophy and social thought?

The answer to the first question is found in the Frankfurt School's contention that all “traditional theory,” Weber's *verstehende Soziologie* included, is based upon a split between *facts* and *values* that is as methodologically untenable as it is politically suspect. Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and Habermas all offer us variations on what has long been a standard critique of “positivistic” social theory. The basic idea is that Weber – misguidedly pursuing a value-neutral (*wertfrei*) brand of social science – is forced to posit an epistemological abyss between the realm of facts and that of values. The philosophical roots of this abyss trace back to Hume and Kant, both of whom argued that no *ought* could be derived from true statements about what *is*. Weber updates and polemically reasserts this argument in his lecture “Science as a Vocation.” However, the Frankfurt School theorists point out that the possibility of making and maintaining such a split turns out to be an illusion. The “facts” are always already shaped by values that had (supposedly) been safely quarantined. Social scientific concepts and methods are both theory- and value-laden. This means that they will always be ideologically freighted, whether the “neutral” social scientist admits it or not.

Here I should note that Weber allowed – indeed emphasized – the knowledge-constitutive character of the broad historical and cultural *perspective* that lies behind the social scientist's selection of topic and objects of investigation. As “Science as a Vocation” and the essay “Objectivity in the Social Sciences” make clear, what Weber objected to was not the presence of values as such. He thought the presence to be irreducible. Rather, what he objected to was the pretense that science or scholarship – *Wissenschaft* – could somehow reduce conflicting values and ways of life to a common denominator, measure their relative utility or rightness, and authoritatively guide us in the choice between them (Weber, 1946: 144–145).

Weber therefore drew a sharp distinction between the *legitimate* construction of ideal-type value concepts (which the social scientist employs to understand the meaning of complex social phenomena) and the ideologically guided *advocacy* of a particular moral, religious, or political agenda. In the latter case, the social scientist invariably picks and chooses among the facts at his disposal, ignoring those that are inconvenient for the ideological position he advocates but does not fully own up to.

Weber thought that nothing was more dishonest than the scientist, scholar, or professor presenting ideological conclusions as the simple and logical consequence of “letting the facts speaking for themselves.” From the perspective of the Frankfurt School, however, the theoretical abstinence preached by Weber in the name of intellectual honesty is itself deeply problematic. It fails to register the way value neutrality and “sticking to the facts” is itself an ideology, one based upon a static or functionalist view of sociocultural reality. Seen from this angle, the approach favored by Weber and traditional theory endows contemporary social reality with a bogus coherence, stability, and legitimacy. “Traditional” or “value-neutral” theory effaces the conflicts and contradictions that arise from inherent social tensions (on the one hand) and from the historical development of institutions, ideas, and practices (on the other). Moreover, the Frankfurt School sees value neutrality as the back door through which relativism and decisionism enter.

The answer to the second question is more of a moving target. In their respective responses to Weber’s value neutrality, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Habermas offer different accounts of the normative foundations of critical theory. The problem they all faced was how to demonstrate that *their* social criticism was not just another ideologically inflected perspective, but rather the expression of a reflective rationality grounded upon our distinctively *human* needs and interests. In *The Eclipse of Reason*, Horkheimer answers this demand by appealing to an apparently clear-cut alternative to “subjective” reason, namely, “objective” reason. This is a form of reason that transcends instrumental reason’s fixation on efficient means, and which focuses instead on the rational adjudication of ends. Like the metaphysical systems of old, “objective reason” is emphatically normative in character, capable of providing authoritative guidance when values or interests conflict. In contrast to the value bracketing of Weber’s “subjective” reason, Horkheimer insists that objective reason is grounded upon the *truth* of such principles as justice, equality, happiness, and freedom (Horkheimer, 1974: 20). But what, one might ask, does “truth” mean in this context?

In preceding centuries, Horkheimer argues, the principles of justice, equality, freedom, and happiness were “supposed to be inherent in or sanctioned by reason.” They were viewed not as subjectively posited “values,” but rather as aspects of an objective *moral* reality grounded in man’s nature as a progressive being capable of achieving freedom and autonomy. The rise of scientism and instrumental rationality plunges these constitutive dimensions of our humanity into oblivion, thereby depriving thinking of its “rational foundation” (Horkheimer, 1974: 28). Horkheimer acknowledges that the men of the Enlightenment were wrong to ascribe such principles to “Nature” and “Nature’s God.” However, they were *not* wrong in thinking that the principles of justice, equality, freedom, and happiness were somehow inherent in, and demanded by, reason itself.

Horkheimer’s turn to the past, not just to distinguish “subjective” from “objective” reason but to renew the promise of such an emphatic rationality, certainly looks like an exercise in nostalgia. In the opening chapters of *The Eclipse of Reason*, he apparently clings to the dream of Western rationalism – the idea of a value-ranking, end-defining Reason – while turning a blind eye to just how far the “disenchantment of the world” has actually progressed. And, truth be told, he never fully abandons this dream. Yet the rationalist rhetoric of *The Eclipse of Reason*, when combined with Horkheimer’s suggestion that an “objective” ethics might still be derived from some new form of ontology or *prima philosophia*, is more than a little misleading. In Chapter 5, “On the Concept of Philosophy,” Horkheimer writes,

Ontology, the heart of traditional philosophy, attempts to derive the essences, substances, and forms of things from some universal ideas that reason imagines it finds in itself. But the structure of the universe cannot be derived from any first principles in our own minds. There are no grounds for believing that the more abstract qualities of a thing should be considered primary or essential...[In fact] concepts ranked in the order of their generality mirror man's repression of nature rather than nature's own structure....Philosophical ontology is inevitably ideological because it tries to obscure the separation between man and nature and to uphold a theoretical harmony that is given the lie on every hand by the cries of the miserable and disinherited.

(Horkheimer, 1974: 181–182)

Nietzsche was right: reason and power, metaphysics and domination, have been linked ever since Plato and Aristotle spun out their concepts in logical-hierarchical order. In actuality, ideas like the “great chain of being” or Aristotle's hierarchy of ends mirror the structures of social domination from which they arose and which formed their historical context.

If the great tradition and the attempts to derive *practical* from *first* philosophy are irreducibly tainted by power and domination, what is the point of invoking “objective” against “subjective” reason? The latter simply lays bare what was always contained in the former – a connection Horkheimer himself mercilessly draws out in his “excursus” on Sade and Nietzsche in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Yet the concept of *philosophical* truth found in the tradition – truth as the progressive “adequation of name to thing,” as the genuine reconciliation of the universal with the particular – contains traces of man's originally mimetic and non-dominating relationship to nature.

According to Horkheimer, critical theory preserves this idea of philosophical truth by means of its relentless critique of instrumental rationality and the false (“reified”) reality this rationality produces. Normatively speaking, it bases itself upon the idea of a domination-free society, which is an idea Horkheimer sees as written into civilization's great but distorted ideals: justice, equality, and freedom (Horkheimer, 1974: 182). The elucidation of this normative standard in undistorted form cannot, however, proceed by means of immanent critique alone. Horkheimer insists that the nature and extent of the distortions found in the “great ideals” can be fully revealed only through the theoretical articulation of the repressed (mimetic) relationship between man and nature.

The latter project is possible only if reason uses its reflective powers to penetrate to the primordial grounds of Western civilization, uncovering its repressed natural contents. According to Horkheimer, then, the normative grounds of critical theory/reflective reason are not to be found in the projection of a utopian future, nor are they found in emancipatory potentials somehow contained in late capitalist society. They are found, rather, in a naturalism whose roots trace to the young Marx's Feuerbachian-Romantic idea of “sensuous being” (an all-sided, undistorted human relation to nature) and to Nietzsche's hypotheses concerning the self-violence that results from civilization blocking the external expression of natural drives (Marx, 1978: 70–101; Nietzsche, 1989: 120–130). They are found, in other words, in a naturalism that is grounded upon a speculative anthropology – nothing more, nothing less.

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Adorno's negative dialectics offers an alternative approach to the question of critical theory's normative foundations, one that is clearly distinct from Horkheimer's mix of anthropological speculation and philosophical nostalgia. These “methodological” differences substantially impact how Adorno answers the question of where to ground our interest in human emancipation and autonomy.

For Adorno, it is imperative that the dialectical employment of critical reason avoids bogus reconciliations of the universal with the particular. The latter abound in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, a text which assures us that "what is rational is actual and what is actual is rational." While Hegel's approach to politics and society is dialectical, his *affirmation* of the status quo flows directly from the assumptions built into his idealist philosophy of identity (the identity of thought and being, concept and reality). In asserting the "identity of identity and difference" as both the *conditio sine qua non* and final end of dialectical thinking, Hegel sets in motion a pattern by which the universal (society, the state, general concepts) repeatedly subsumes the particularity of the concrete individual person or thing. But, *contra* Hegel, Adorno insists that this subsumption of the particular by the universal is hardly the negation, preservation, and genuine synthesis that Hegel claims it is. Rather, the dialectical moment of subsumption effectively obliterates the whole dimension of concrete particularity, casting it aside as worthless "existence."

As a philosopher of nonidentity – that is, as a thinker who insists upon the *irreducible gap* between the *abstractness* of general concepts or entities (on the one hand) and the *concreteness* of particular phenomena or persons (on the other) – Adorno is perfectly aware that he can hardly combat Hegel's affirmative stance by falling back upon the rationalist groundings of justice and human freedom Horkheimer cites in *The Eclipse of Reason*. Rigorously applied, negative dialectics must show how *every* philosophical attempt to complete the journey from the abstract (concept) to the concrete (thing) entails the effacement of the particular. This conceptually driven effacement has its social *doppelgänger* in the absorption of the individual by the "coercive collective." From Adorno's perspective, the specific *form* that this collective takes barely matters. The "totally administered society" born of monopoly capitalism absorbs and negates the individual just as completely and effectively as does the fascist *Volksgemeinschaft*.

No liberal would countenance the latter conclusion, no matter how much he or she might endorse Adorno's general defense of the individual against the collective. Adorno reaches this dubious conclusion in part because his defense of the individual cannot be separated from his indictment of the logic of conceptual rationality as such. As he observes in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the latter *always* operates by subsuming a particular under the universal, "amputating" the incommensurable and effacing the very qualities that make a given particular or individual unique (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: 9). This effacement of qualities reaches its apogee in the mathematizing science of Descartes, Newton, and the Enlightenment. The radical turn away from quality to quantity thus facilitates the schematization of both natural and social reality. This in turn paves the way for the manipulation and domination of both realms by instrumental rationality, whether in the form of technological or administrative-bureaucratic reason. The point is that such developments are hardly contingent, since conceptual rationality – and its violently formalizing logic – was rooted in the project of subjugating nature from the very beginning.

Adorno's critique of conceptual rationality and deductive logic, as well as his description of the positivistic Enlightenment as "totalitarian" in nature, takes Weber's rationalization thesis and radicalizes it to a point where it is almost unrecognizable. For Weber, "rationalization" was a process inextricably linked to modernization and the rise of industrial capitalism. For Adorno, "rationalization" is a process that reaches back to the pre-Socratic Greeks and beyond, to the very roots of Western civilization. If we merge the "dialectic of enlightenment" narrative with Adorno's developed critique of identity thinking, we get a genealogy of a power-rooted and power-centric *ratio* that more than matches Heidegger's deconstruction of Western metaphysics in terms of sheer historical depth and inclusiveness.

Insofar as Western philosophy has fetishized deductive logic, the principle of noncontradiction, and the creation of encompassing metaphysical systems, it has contributed to – indeed, prefigured – a state of affairs in which a comprehensive universal (the “system”) absorbs, transforms, and accounts for the reality of every existent. Universal and particular are “reconciled” by the universal swallowing the particular. As Adorno observes, *unity*, not the preservation of particularity or differences, “remains the watchword from Parmenides to Russell” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: 5). The only way to escape the chalk circle created by discursive thought, Adorno suggests, is by being open to a non-objectifying form of aesthetic rationality. Such rationality is immanent in artworks, which preserve the concreteness of the particular and encourage a *contemplative* form of reflection. As Adorno notes in his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*,

Reason in artworks is reason as gesture. They synthesize like reason, but not with concepts, propositions, and syllogisms—where these forms occur in art they do so only as subordinated means—rather, they do so by way of what transpires in the artworks. Their synthetic function is immanent: it is the unity of their self, without immediate relation to anything externally given or determined in some way or other; it is directed to the dispersed, the aconceptual, quasi-fragmentary material with which in their interior space artworks are occupied.

(Adorno, 1997: 30)

For Adorno, critical theory’s superiority to traditional theory is not simply found in its awareness of the practical interests driving nomological scientific and sociological knowledge. More importantly, it is found in critical theory’s ability to dissolve all “reified” products of thought and discover (abstract) images of a reconciled condition, usually in contemplation-inducing works of avant-garde art. The human interest in emancipation is grounded less upon the testimony of the Western philosophical tradition than it is upon a deeply rooted human longing for reconciliation with both external and internal nature – that is, for an unalienated and unfragmented condition.

Obviously, such a longing would predate the process of capitalist rationalization. It would, in fact, be a reminder of the wound civilized man endlessly inflicts upon himself. An important consequence of this view is that utopia should not be viewed as forming its material preconditions within the shell of a fully developed capitalist order. Contra Marx, man’s reconciliation with nature, self, and society is by no means “immanent” in the historical process. Rather, its possibility is indirectly testified to by the sheer violence, pain, and alienation of our “unreconciled” condition. This is a condition in which the conquest of nature and the advance of technological civilization regularly produce barbarism, the industrial production of corpses in the death camps and world-annihilating nuclear weapons being only the most obvious examples. The human interest in emancipation is thus grounded in civilization’s ceaseless reproduction of suffering and in the horror of a completely rationalized world.

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In *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), Marcuse developed many of the thought-trains contained in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, applying them to a specific object: the technologically advanced and economically booming society of Cold War America. Again, Weber’s rationalization thesis provides the indispensable background, enabling Marcuse to present advanced industrial society as a “technological universe” which is also, at the same time, a “political universe.”

"Today," Marcuse states, "domination perpetuates and extends itself not only through technology but *as* technology":

In this universe, technology... provides the great rationalization of the unfreedom of man and demonstrates the "technical" impossibility of being autonomous, of determining one's own life. For this unfreedom appears neither as irrational nor as political, but rather as submission to the technical apparatus which enlarges the comforts of life and increases the productivity of labor. Technological rationality thus protects rather than cancels the legitimacy of domination and the instrumentalist horizon of reason opens on a rationally totalitarian society.

(Marcuse, 1964: 61)

As Habermas observes, in this passage, Marcuse presents Weberian rationalization not only as "a long-term process of the transformation of social structures" but also as a "rationalization" in the Freudian sense, one which serves to conceal the "perpetuation of objectively obsolete domination" by invoking purposive-rational imperatives (Habermas, 1970: 85). Our human interest in freedom and autonomy, in leading a self-determining life, takes a back seat to the supposedly unavoidable technical-hierarchical requirements of manipulating and controlling nature.

Two points are notable in this regard. First, Marcuse retreats from Adorno and Horkheimer's more radical pronouncements about the nature of *conceptual* rationality, the better to focus his critique on an out-of-control *technical* rationality. Second, Marcuse tacitly assumes that the model of the "all-sided" (or "three-dimensional") individual promoted by Schiller, Humboldt, and the young Marx is the correct one. Our "interest" in emancipation and a domination-free society is universal because thinkers like Schiller, Humboldt, and Marx saw it as an irreducible component of our essential humanity. Far more than either Horkheimer or Adorno, Marcuse assumes this idealist-romantic model of the individual to be normatively binding. In his view, it is definitely *not* just another contingent historical product of the post-Enlightenment cultural constellation.

But if the interest in emancipation and autonomy is constitutive of our humanity, how is it that technological society has been so successful in muting it? The answer is found in consumer culture, and in the lulling simulacrum of freedom it creates. Like Horkheimer and Adorno, Marcuse assumes that the working classes have been totally pacified by the comfortable and secure "administered life" that a consumer society is able to provide, thanks largely to advances in technology. Autonomy and self-direction give way to "free" choices between commodities and entertainments that fleetingly satisfy factitious appetites. Thanks to a structure of domination that erodes his humanity, "one-dimensional" man winds up lacking both the motivation and capacity to resist.

Given the ability of the "system" to neutralize or co-opt oppositional energies, it is not surprising that Marcuse shifts his critical focus from the spheres of technology, production, and consumption to the cultural realm. Here, perhaps, one could find a breeding ground for oppositional energies and social critique. This may seem counterintuitive, at least from a Marxist point of view. However, as Marcuse points out, the literature and high art of bourgeois Europe in the nineteenth century filled precisely this role. The result was a "two-dimensional culture" in which the aesthetic realm maintained a relative autonomy *vis-à-vis* the economic sphere.

Literature and art in this period "were essentially alienation, sustaining and protecting the contradiction – the unhappy consciousness of the divided world, the defeated possibilities, the hopes unfulfilled, and the promises betrayed." However, the advent of mass culture in the twentieth century effectively neuters this critical power: "Higher culture becomes part

of the material culture. In this transformation it loses the greater part of its truth" (Marcuse, 1964: 61). The resulting "flattening out of the antagonism between culture and social reality" means not just a loss of critical power, but also the "obliteration" of the "transcendent elements" – the images of a reconciled, unalienated condition – previously found in high culture.

The absorption of the very sphere in which Adorno had placed his admittedly slim hopes means that technological society can uninterruptedly churn out one-dimensional men with a "happy consciousness." Incapable of seeing anything wrong with a society that provides a higher standard of living as well as myriad possibilities for entertainment and relaxation, one-dimensional man is the abstract negation of the "all-sided" individual. But he is also the ultimate product of a rationalization process that knows no bounds. Since he no longer views society in terms of hierarchical structures of authority, one-dimensional man achieves a level of social integration that exceeds that of Weber's *Ordnungsmenschen*.

Marcuse's updating of Weber's rationalization thesis thus winds up in the same theoretical cul-de-sac as Adorno's. The criticism of a crypto-totalitarian social form leads both of them to reject immanent critique and to insist that potential for opposition and resistance is to be found only in the interstices of advanced capitalist society or beyond its boundaries. For Adorno, this potential is found in high modernism and avant-garde art. For Marcuse, the hope is that it is to be found among the "outsiders and outcasts" of society. And, if this potential is not found there, perhaps it can be found at the margins of the capitalist West, in the Third World.

Viewed retrospectively, Adorno and Marcuse's dismissive attitude toward established liberal democratic institutions looks like a recipe for political impotence. The point to be stressed here is that this dismissive attitude is hardly arbitrary. It flows from their unblinking working out of the political, economic, and cultural implications of the rationalization process as they understood it. It was precisely the despairing political implications born of this understanding that led Habermas to formulate his theory of communicative action.

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While Weber's work provides the indisputable backdrop for *The Eclipse of Reason*, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and *One-Dimensional Man*, only Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action* is framed explicitly as a critique and reconstruction of Weber's theory of rationalization. This move from background to foreground had several important consequences. First, it enabled Habermas to engage Weber in a critical dialogue of the sort the first generation of Frankfurt School theorists had simply passed up. Second, it facilitated a rethinking of the normative foundations of a critical theory, foundations that were in danger of dissolving in a haze of anthropological speculation and romantic-utopian notions of a fully "reconciled" or unalienated condition. Third, it enabled Habermas to recover and systematically address ideas of *praxis*, practical reasoning, and the public sphere that had been obscured by the work model of action that underlay both Marx's social theory and the Frankfurt School critique of instrumental rationality (Habermas, 1973: 41–81).

The general argument of *The Theory of Communicative Action* is well known. Beginning with a systematic reconstruction of Weber's theory of rationalization, Habermas detects a tension or paradox within it that points the way out of the corner Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse had painted themselves into. On the one hand, Habermas argues, Weber presents capitalist modernity as characterized by the hegemony of *zweckrational* over *wertrational* action. This hegemony accelerates bureaucratization, facilitating the integration of economic forces with the political-legal institutions of the state and with the scientific-technological resources found in universities and research institutes. However, on the other hand, Weber sees



an internal connection between the process of rationalization and what many of us would call the secularization of society. This second dimension of rationalization falls under the broad rubric of “the disenchantment of the world.” According to Weber, this is a millennia-long process, the modern phase of which dissolves the legitimating power of tradition, the Church, and Nature (the latter conceived as a teleological structure of normative ends or “perfections”).

In his own social theory, Weber emphasized how this process of “intellectualization” stripped the world and cosmos of the God- or Nature-given meaning they were once assumed to possess. The dissolution of theological-metaphysical accounts of the world’s supposedly teleological structure forced modern man to confront the reality that meaning cannot – at least not honestly – be *discovered* in the world by any rational means, whether these be scientific or philosophical in nature. Rather, it must be *created* by the value-positing and value-affirming activities of human beings themselves. Should this project collapse or fail to be taken up in the first place, an overwhelming sense of meaninglessness will afflict the now disenchanted Occident.

This pessimistic analysis carried over to the first-generation Frankfurt School theorists, whom Lukács memorably accused of taking up residence in “the Grand Hotel Abyss.” In contrast to Horkheimer et al., Habermas *does not* view Weber’s disenchantment thesis as a one-way ticket to a nihilistic hell born of the universal triumph of instrumental rationality. Rather, he sees it as expressive of a sociocultural *learning process*, one that is intertwined with the process of secularization and that occurs over the centuries leading up to the modern period. This learning process leads Occidental man to increasingly *dispense* with such pre-discursive grounds of authority and legitimacy as “divine right,” God’s will, or Providence. It leads Occidental man to increasingly endorse the principle that the validity of claims regarding the truthfulness, sincerity, or rightness of a proposition can be “redeemed” only through intersubjective dialogue taking the form of argument and the giving of reasons and evidence. When it comes to collective action and decision, the “unforced force of the better argument” gradually usurps the legitimating power previously associated with God or a teleologically structured Nature. Once articulated and dispersed across society, the “right to justification” – that is, the right to justification by means of rational argumentation and the weighing of evidence – can never be legitimately denied or suspended, however much clerical and political authorities might wish it could.

If, as Habermas suggests, disenchantment embodies such a collective-historical learning process, then it turns out that *rationalization* has not one but two tracks (Habermas, 1970: 118–119, 1981: 144–145). The first track is the one Horkheimer et al. had focused upon, namely, the rationalization of society in terms of greater integration of state and economy, increased efficiency in production and administration, and an overall improvement in systemic coherence and performance. The second track – overlooked by the early Frankfurt School and, indeed, by Weber himself – is a process of *communicative* rationalization. In contrast to the first form of rationalization – in which the growth of productive forces and technological advances combine to make a hierarchical social structure appear necessary – the effects of the second form are benign and, Habermas thinks, in principle democratic.

Communicative rationalization occurs not at the level of the economic-technological “system,” but rather in the “lifeworld” of everyday communicative interaction. It was in this latter sphere that questions of morality and the “good life” had traditionally been dealt with, albeit in a mystified (theological-metaphysical) way. However, as Habermas, once again following Weber, points out, the early modern age witnesses a growth in the autonomy of law and morality. The modern separating out of life-spheres brings about “a detachment of moral-practical insights, of ethical and legal doctrines, of basic principles, of maxims and decision rules, from the [theological and cosmological] world-views in which they were at first embedded” (Habermas, 1981: 162).

With this separating out of the legal, moral, and political spheres, the justification of norms, laws, and enactments undergoes a seismic shift in grounds. The appeal to tradition, God, or the teleological structure of nature is dropped in favor of an appeal to popular consent and rational agreement. This shift is manifest in the rise of modern natural law doctrines (which emphasize the principles of equality and universality) as well as in the social contract theories of thinkers like Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau (who make legitimate political power and obligation hinge upon the principles of agreement and consent). It is also manifest in the rise, during the first half of the eighteenth century, of what Habermas had earlier dubbed the “bourgeois public sphere.” Confined, at first, to such informal social sites as coffeehouses, salons, Masonic lodges, and *Tischgesellschaften*, the bourgeois public sphere provided spaces in which private individuals could come together without regard to status in order to debate literary and cultural affairs. Through such semipublic debate and deliberation, the European middle classes gradually learned the art of critical-rational judgment (Habermas, 1989). In these proto-public spaces, the prerogatives of social rank were suspended, parity reigned, and all were agreed that the “force of the better argument” should carry the day.

According to Habermas, then, Weberian “disenchantment” entails a process of *cultural rationalization* that leads, in turn, to *communicative rationalization*. This rationalization is concretized in the growing hegemony of the principle that the only *legitimate* way to redeem validity claims is “discursively” – that is, through processes of rational argument that aim at mutual understanding and (ultimately) agreement. *Pre-discursive* forms of authority (Divine Will, tradition, etc.) are stripped of the public power they previously possessed. The ultimate result of communicative rationalization would be the universal recognition, by both governors and governed, of the idea that public-political institutions and actions are subject to the principle of “the discursive redemption of validity claims” and to the “right to justification” that grounds it.

In Habermas’s view, such recognition would have produced a wide-ranging democratization of the social and political spheres, were it not for the creeping colonization of the lifeworld by the logic and instrumental rationality of the economic-administrative “system.” The fact that communicative rationalization (and the democratization it implies) seems to be giving way to system rationalization should not obscure the fact that – contra Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse – rationalization does indeed have two faces. Communicative rationalization, Habermas argues, has already had enormous impact on the political world (for example, in acceptance of the idea of government by consent of the governed) as well as upon our ideas of what persuasive moral and political arguments look like. The widespread tendency to assert the prerogatives of economic efficiency, the logic of complex systems, and technocratic expertise across virtually all spheres of life ought not blind us to the fact that there is an escape from the “iron cage,” one that was more or less built into the process of rationalization as Weber conceived it.

In making this argument, Habermas is clearly trying to recover the critical, antiauthoritarian core of Enlightenment reason. This core had been obscured by Weber’s failure to fully stress the dual character of rationalization, as well as by Horkheimer and Adorno’s relentless focus upon the positivistic, dogmatic, and nature-conquering side of the Enlightenment.

We can trace the impetus behind Habermas’s view of communicative rationalization back to a declaration Kant made in a footnote to the first preface to *The Critique of Pure Reason*. “Our age,” Kant wrote,

is the age of criticism, to which everything must be subjected. *Religion*, by its *sanc-tity*, and *legislation*, by its *majesty*, commonly try to gain exemption. But they then arouse a just suspicion against themselves, and cannot lay claim to the unfeigned respect which reason only grants to such things as have been able to sustain its free and public scrutiny.

(Kant, 1965: 9)

This is as pointed a formulation of the “right to justification” as one could wish for. Indeed, Kant’s description of the character of his own age registers the moment when the “discursive redemption of validity claims” became part and parcel of Western culture’s self-understanding. Communicative rationalization and the attainment of what Kant later terms *Mündigkeit* go hand in hand (Kant, 1970: 54–60).

In assessing Habermas’s overall contribution to the reorientation of critical theory, it is important to bear in mind one crucial difference between his earlier work and *The Theory of Communicative Action*. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas presented the eighteenth-century “rationalization” of the public sphere as essentially a *historical* process. To be sure, this historical analysis revealed the “parallel track” of rationalization, anticipating and correcting what Habermas later came to view as the biggest conceptual lacuna in Weber’s social theory. However, such an analysis contributed relatively little to the project of providing critical theory with a new and secure normative grounding. It was this later ambition, and the desire to make good critical theory’s earlier deficiencies, that drove Habermas to formulate the *type* of arguments he does in *The Theory of Communicative Action*.

In *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas claims that the implicitly egalitarian, democratic, and agreement-focused aspects of communicative rationality are not – or at least not ultimately – grounded upon such contingent historical developments as the Enlightenment and the rise of the bourgeois public sphere. Rather, he views them as built into the pragmatic structure of communicative interaction or utterance *as such*. Habermas supported this assertion through a set of what he described as “quasi-transcendental” arguments, arguments which drew heavily from George Herbert Mead’s theory of linguistic behavior, Lawrence Kohlberg’s research into psychology and moral development, John Austin’s speech act theory, Piaget’s cognitive development studies, and Émile Durkheim’s idea of the “linguistification of the sacred.”

Habermas’s deployment of these and other diverse sources in support of his basic argument stands as an unsurpassed achievement in theoretical reconstruction and synthesis. Of course, both the sources and Habermas’s use of them are open to contestation, and Habermas has had to answer a broad range of criticisms. This is not the place to canvass these criticisms. I would like to conclude, instead, by noting the major achievements and deficits of Habermas’s reconstruction of Weber’s theory of rationalization.

First, there is no denying that Habermas was successful in thematizing a “second track” of rationalization, one latent in Weber’s theory and barely developed by him. This thematization enabled him – and us – to escape the closed system of instrumental reason forecast by the first-generation Frankfurt School theorists. Second, Habermas’s deployment of a basic distinction between *work* and *interaction* (or between instrumental action and communicative action) enabled him not just to tease out the Janus-faced quality of rationalization but also to rid critical theory of the last vestiges of the demiurgic subject – humanity in the form of the proletariat – bequeathed it by Marx. While Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse no longer viewed proletarian revolution as the way to create or “make” a new world, they *did* follow the young Marx in emphasizing the need for a reconciliation between humanity as subject and nature as a repressed and exploited “object.” The result was a single-sided focus upon a diremption-healing naturalism rather than a confrontation with the question of how to contain purposive rationality within its proper bounds, thus preserving and protecting free political institutions.

Third, Habermas effected a paradigm shift within critical theory. While Adorno correctly pointed out the deficits of an identity philosophy, he failed to fully extricate himself from the modern philosophy of the subject (or consciousness). From Descartes and Kant through Hegel and Nietzsche, modern philosophy had framed reason – and the critique of reason – in

terms of a faculty or power exercised by the knowing or willing subject. Habermas breaks free of this paradigm by presenting reason as a communicative practice, one exercised intersubjectively rather than monologically. The shift from a philosophy-of-consciousness paradigm to a paradigm of intersubjectivity allows a re-grounding of ethical norms in communicative structures and practice. Reason is no longer a faculty implanted in us by nature or God, nor are ethical norms derived from within, through “right reason’s” self-examination.

Impressive as these achievements are, Habermas’s success is limited by deficits in his theory of communicative action and his attachment to a “weak” form of foundationalism.

First, the “paradox” of rationalization Habermas isolates in his *Theory of Communicative Action* is, perhaps, a bit less saving than he thinks. Yes, Weberian “disenchantment” points to a historical-ethical learning process, one that could well be hypothetically reconstructed in terms of Kohlberg’s three-stage theory of moral maturation. However, this “learning process” and the communicative rationalization it implies have clearly been overstated by Habermas. After all, we live in a world where “pre-discursive” sources of authority retain a good deal of validity and strength. A great number of people, perhaps even the majority, have yet to buy into the “linguistification” of the sacred. Contrary to Habermas’s appropriation of Weber’s “disenchantment of the world” theme, *religion* retains a monopoly on morality and dictates the criteria of ethical behavior for many millions, if not billions, worldwide. This suggests that Habermas and the rest of the Frankfurt School have put the Enlightenment cart before the horse. This blind spot regarding religion is something Habermas has lately attempted to correct, but it may well be a case of too little too late.

Second, while Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse can be criticized for locating the normative grounds of critical theory in anthropological speculation and an idealist-romantic model of the natural, “all-sided” individual, Habermas’s intersubjective reformulation has its own problems. Not being satisfied with the recovery of the Enlightenment values the earlier generation had put in question, Habermas attempts to ground these values in the pragmatic structure of communication as such. This stab at a transcultural basis for dialogical norms and the “right to justification” might well be seen as an instance of reification and bogus universalization. For what Habermas has done is not so much to *reveal* dialogical norms built into the pragmatic structure of speech as utterance, as *project* a culturally and historically specific set of norms and values *back* upon the structure of communicative action. The norms and values are taken from the Socratic inheritance of the West and from the Enlightenment’s conception of reason’s critical role in the public sphere (a conception fully fleshed out in Kant’s essay, “An Answer to the Question ‘What is Enlightenment?’”).

Third, while Habermas gave up on the robust form of moral cognitivism he voiced in *Legitimation Crisis*, he has remained leery of the idea that politics is the realm of *opinion* and that *compromise* is and must be the appropriate way of coming to a decision. Compromise is, for Habermas, an essentially “liberal” idea, one which suggests a *modus operandi* for a pluralist society riddled with conflicting *interests*. In the liberal paradigm, Habermas contends, divergent particular interests *clash*, but they are never genuinely mediated by a deliberative process and (thereby) raised to a higher level of generality. In fact, at the end of the political process, these interests have pretty much the same character as they did at the beginning. The clash of interests thus produces a resultant force vector – the compromise – but is incapable of actually *generalizing* interests.

In contrast, Habermas thinks, rational will formation should take the form of a deliberative process capable of transferring the Kantian test of universalizability from the inner domain of consciousness into the three dimensionality of a discursive public sphere. While it may be mistaken to think that democratic debate can produce the “correct” or “true” answer to a policy question, it is not mistaken to think that properly structured public deliberation serves to mediate and transform particular interests, working them over and purifying them

so that they might become the raw material of a truly general (democratic) process of will formation. Democratic or rational consensus has a completely different (and higher) moral and epistemological status than does a compromise between interests.

While Habermas is correct in suggesting that the general interest or common good can never result from the mere aggregation of particular interests, he is wrong to suggest that the general interest or common good is, in principle, univocal and potentially uncontroversial. As Thomas McCarthy has suggested, Habermas has never really taken on board the “liberal” idea that even rational people of good will can fundamentally disagree about the nature and shape of the common good (Calhoun, 1992: 66). The bracketing or mediation of particular interests does not necessarily produce a harmonious convergence of opinions. On the contrary, such bracketing or mediation enables us to see our fundamental philosophical differences more clearly.

To leave it at this – to say that no clear and univocal general interest arises from the bracketing or mediation of particular interests – would, in Habermas’s view, land us back on the terrain of Weber’s “warring gods” and commit us to the “decisionist” politics that supposedly flows from it. Yet this is simply not the case. True, Weber did stress the dimensions of struggle and conflict in his political thought, but he did so in a largely metaphorical way, one commensurable with the electoral agon familiar to citizens of advanced Western democracies. Moreover, the *moral* pluralism implied by his theory of the disaggregation of life-spheres does not point so much to the rational irreducibility of ideological differences as to a tragic view of the realm of value itself. While he denied that Weber had a shaping influence on his thought, Isaiah Berlin’s “objective moral pluralism” articulates the Weberian position on these issues with far greater accuracy than the Frankfurt School brickbat of “irrationalist decisionism.”

For Berlin as for Weber, values can and do conflict, not just between cultures but within them. Thus, to take an obvious example, the values of freedom, equality, and justice in a liberal democratic society can be, and often are, in tension with each other. And there are times when they are in outright conflict (Berlin, 1969: 118–172). Contrary to what Habermas implies, there is no form of discourse or common denominator that will enable us to weigh and rank these values according to a single lexical or “rational” scale. When we confront instances where the tension between these values has tipped over into conflict, the “solution” is not a retreat to a theoretically umpired discourse situation which aims at producing agreement. It is, rather, a willingness to compromise and to make painful trade-offs. *This*, and not a political version of Kierkegaard’s “leap of faith,” is what Berlin and Weber mean when they insist that, at the end of the day, one simply has to make a choice. In other words, the alternative to a “rational will consensus” achieved through a deliberative decision procedure is *not* the obstinate (“irrational”) soldiering on for one’s cause, without concern for costs or consequences. It is, rather, the practice of a politics of trade-offs and compromise between plural actors whose ideas of the good life and the just society inevitably – and, I should stress, legitimately and irreducibly – conflict.

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# HEIDEGGER AND THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

*Cristina Lafont*

The relationship between members of the Frankfurt School and Heidegger is notoriously uneasy and ambivalent. A major explanatory factor is Heidegger's involvement with National Socialism (e.g., as rector of Freiburg University from 1933 to 1934) and his refusal to publically distance himself from the Nazi regime after the war. This relationship is especially fraught for Frankfurt School figures such as Herbert Marcuse and Jürgen Habermas who were avowed Heideggerians during early and formative periods as philosophers. Naturally, Heidegger's political involvement raises questions about whether there is an internal connection between his philosophy and political ideology. Yet, Marcuse and Habermas only began to reexamine Heidegger's philosophy after his association with Nazism became known (Marcuse) and after his refusal to distance himself from the Nazi regime after the war (Habermas). It was therefore too late to fully extricate his influence from their philosophical development. There is a fascinating and ample literature exploring the many connections between Heidegger's philosophy and the work of major figures within the Frankfurt School tradition such as Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Jürgen Habermas. This literature analyzes a variety of connections ranging from the parallel development of similar philosophical interests and ideas (e.g., the critique of technology, the philosophical significance of art) to some remarkable convergences in philosophical views (e.g., the critique of Western rationality as instrumental rationality), despite their disparate philosophical approaches. A comprehensive exploration of these connections is beyond my scope here, as many of these affinities resulted from the general *Zeitgeist* rather than from any direct influence by Heidegger.<sup>1</sup> I shall focus here on the narrower question of how Heidegger's philosophy made a systematic contribution to critical theory. Two developments stand out: Herbert Marcuse's early attempt to articulate a "Heideggerian Marxism" and Jürgen Habermas's creative incorporation of hermeneutics into his distinctive approach to critical theory. The latter influence has undoubtedly had more of a lasting impact upon critical theory than the former, as Marcuse's early project was soon abandoned. Nevertheless, Marcuse's critique of the shortcomings of Heidegger's philosophy, which motivated his attempt to integrate it with Marxism, remains important because it illuminates the complex relation between hermeneutics and critical theory.

## **Marcuse's Heideggerian Marxism**

Herbert Marcuse was an avowed Heideggerian working with Heidegger in Freiburg from 1928 to 1932. In fact, reading *Being and Time* is what prompted him to leave Berlin for Freiburg and return to university to study philosophy. Prior to the 1927 publication of *Being*

and *Time*, the study of philosophy at German universities was dominated by traditional philosophical approaches (neo-Kantianism, neo-Hegelianism and positivism). These approaches had only survived the upheavals of World War I at the price of being reduced to exercises of scholastic exegesis unable to connect with (and speak to) the experiences and traumas of the younger generation of postwar students. This had led Marcuse to leave the university in a kind of self-imposed “inner emigration” (Wolin 2005: xii). He continued reading the early Marx as well as important works in the tradition of Hegelian Marxism, most notably Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness*—which appeared in 1923 and tremendously influenced his later work. However, he was also deeply dissatisfied with the anti-philosophical, overly naturalistic, deterministic and scientistic interpretations of Marxism that prevailed at the time (i.e., before the publication of Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* in 1932). In that philosophically barren context, the publication of *Being and Time* was quite an extraordinary event. As Marcuse described it many years later,

Heidegger’s work [*Being and Time*] appeared as a new beginning: we experienced his book (and his lectures, whose transcripts we obtained) as, at long last, a concrete philosophy: here there was talk of existence [*Existenz*], of our existence, of fear and care and boredom, and so forth.

(Marcuse 1977: 162)

Moreover, Heidegger’s philosophy of existence as a form of “concrete philosophy” shared a deep affinity with key Marxist motives such as the critique of reification, the priority of practice over theory, the attempt to break with German idealism, the rejection of the subject-object (S-O) paradigm and so forth. Thus, in Marcuse’s estimation, Heidegger’s existential philosophy offered the ideal conceptual framework and philosophical foundation to overcome the anti-philosophical, official interpretation of Marxism and reconnect it with the concrete concerns of human existence. As Marcuse put it, “*Being and Time*... seems to represent a turning point in the history of philosophy: the point at which bourgeois philosophy unmakes itself from the inside and clears the way for a new and ‘concrete’ science” (Marcuse 2005: 10–11). Indeed, as Marcuse explained it in a later interview, at the time he was convinced that “there could be some combination between existentialism and Marxism, precisely because of their insistence on concrete analysis of actual human existence, of human beings, and their world” (Marcuse 2005: 166).

Obviously, the project of combining both approaches only makes sense if there are some shared affinities. At the same time, the need to combine both approaches also suggests that each side contributes something that the other side lacks. The complementarity between Marxism and Heidegger’s philosophy that inspired Marcuse to articulate a Heideggerian Marxism is succinctly characterized by Wolin:

Since a critical thematization of “lived experience” played such a prominent role in Heidegger’s fundamental ontology, at the time Marcuse surmised that it might provide the philosophical stimulus necessary to revivify an orthodox Marxist discourse that had lapsed into advanced senescence. Marxism tried to diagnose the “objective,” economic preconditions of capitalism’s collapse, but it seemed to neglect the “subjective” side of the equation, working-class consciousness. Conversely, whereas Heidegger’s philosophy excelled at describing the phenomenological structure of being-in-the-world, its weakness lay in its incapacity to address those aspects of the contemporary crisis that were *social* and *historical* as opposed to *timeless* and *ontological*.

(Wolin 2005: xvii)



In fact, in the interview cited above Marcuse notes that he believed Heideggerian existentialism and Marxism could be combined “precisely because of their shared insistence on concrete analysis of actual human existence.” Yet, he immediately qualifies this:

But I soon realized that Heidegger’s concreteness was to a great extent a phony, a false concreteness, and that in fact his philosophy was just as abstract and just as removed from reality, even avoiding reality, as the philosophies which at that time had dominated German universities, namely a rather dry brand of neo-Kantianism, neo-Hegelianism, neo-Idealism, but also positivism.

(Marcuse 2005: 166)

Even in his early writings from the 1930s, Marcuse was already complaining that an existential analytic of Dasein would amount to an exercise of empty abstraction if it failed to incorporate an analysis of the historical and social conditions of Dasein’s actual existence—the material conditions of historical existence that Heidegger dismissed in *Being and Time* as merely ontic analysis. Nevertheless, despite such complaints, his diagnosis at the time was ambiguous. It is unclear whether he thought the failure to incorporate the analysis of the actual historical and material conditions of Dasein’s existence was a failure that a proper philosophical interpretation of authentic human existence could and should overcome or whether it marked the limits of philosophy as such, that is, the need to transcend philosophical analysis in the direction of a political transformation of the reified socioeconomic conditions of existence (McCarthy 1991: 91–92).

Be that as it may, there is a systematic methodological difficulty lurking behind Marcuse’s criticism of Heidegger for failing to integrate an ontic analysis of the material conditions of authentic existence into his existential analytic of Dasein. The methodological individualism that an analysis of authentic existence requires would seem to be a major impediment to the analysis of actual historical, social and economic conditions. For these conditions affect human beings not as individuals but as members of different groups, classes and political communities. As McCarthy expresses Marcuse’s point, “the individual is not the proper unit of sociohistorical analysis and political practice” (McCarthy 1991: 91). However, the first-person perspective of the individual seems irreducible in an analysis of authentic existence. If so, it would need to be incorporated (rather than transcended) if the resulting theory is to provide a robust basis for a critique of alienation and reification in capitalist societies—precisely the kind of theory that Marcuse was aiming at and tried to articulate in later works such as *One-Dimensional Man* and *Eros and Civilization*.

Seen from this methodological perspective, Marcuse’s criticisms of Heidegger’s existential philosophy in the late 1920s and early 1930s actually pinpointed a fundamental problem that members of the Frankfurt School tradition themselves grappled with in their attempts to articulate a critical theory of society. Indeed, the methodological difficulty of combining, in a single theoretical approach, the “subjective” side of human existence in the search for authenticity and the “objective” socioeconomic and historical conditions that affect individuals behind their backs and without their awareness is hardly a peculiar shortcoming of Heidegger’s existential philosophy or even a limitation of philosophy as such. It is a fundamental methodological problem that philosophy shares with all the human sciences. The issue is how to close the gap between the objective and subjective perspectives. More specifically, how can a single explanatory paradigm combine the “functionalist” or “observer” perspective which provides empirical knowledge of the material (social and economic) circumstances of the reproduction of society with the “internal” or “participant” perspective of human beings who engage in shared normative practices while also developing their (authentic) life projects? This methodological difficulty is also at the center of Habermas’s reception of Heidegger’s philosophy.

## Heideggerian Hermeneutics and Habermas's Critical Theory

In 1953, Habermas published a newspaper article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* entitled "Thinking with Heidegger and against Heidegger: On the publication of Lectures Dating from 1935" (Wolin 1992: 186–197). In that article, Habermas criticizes Heidegger's decision to republish his lectures from 1935 in which he spoke about "the internal truth and greatness" of National Socialism, without adding any commentary or expression of regret or apology for his involvement with Nazism. But beyond the reproach directed to Heidegger the person, Habermas also focuses on the difficult question of the internal relationship between Heidegger's moral failure as a person and the structure of his philosophical work. This is a question that Habermas has confronted and answered in slightly different ways in several publications over the past four decades (see Habermas 1953, 1959, 1985, 1988). A constant element of his different analyses is the suggestion that the particular route that Heidegger took in his famous *Kehre* was motivated by external elements related to Heidegger's political involvement with Nazism rather than by the internal development of his philosophical project as originally conceived in *Being and Time*.<sup>2</sup> This diagnosis makes Habermas's strongly critical attitude toward Heidegger's late philosophy compatible with another element of his evaluation of Heidegger that has equally remained constant, namely, his claim that *Being and Time* is the "most significant philosophical event since Hegel's *Phenomenology*." Although it is not always easy to infer from Habermas's critical analyses why exactly he thinks so highly of *Being and Time*, it is clear that if he didn't the self-imposed task of "thinking with Heidegger and against Heidegger" would make no sense. In that case, the comparatively simpler alternatives of just thinking against Heidegger rather than with him or ignoring his philosophy altogether would seem more appropriate.

Certainly, the appropriateness of the task could be explained in purely historical terms. On the one hand, the influence of Heidegger's master work inside and outside Germany was already undeniable in the 1950s and only became clearer as time wore on. Moreover, its influence in Habermas's own philosophical development is equally undeniable. As Habermas has pointed out repeatedly, he was a "thoroughgoing Heideggerian" until 1953 (Dews 1986: 194). Just a brief look into Habermas's dissertation on Schelling suffices to confirm that claim. However, I am not exploring here the biographical aspects of the influence of Heidegger's philosophy in Habermas's intellectual development, but rather the systematic question that this biographical fact raises, namely, the nature and extent of the internal relationship between Heidegger's and Habermas's philosophy. Taking Habermas's self-imposed task as a guide, I will identify first what I consider to be the most significant overlapping elements of both approaches. Once it becomes clear how far Habermas's "thinking with Heidegger" goes, it will be possible to address, in a second step, the question of how far his "thinking against Heidegger" succeeded. Needless to say, with such philosophically complex approaches as Heidegger's and Habermas's, it would be hopeless to aim at a complete account of their interconnections. Thus, I am going to focus exclusively on some core elements that, in my opinion, are particularly significant to the extent that they have directly influenced the development of Habermas's own approach.

One of the most significant innovations of Habermas's distinctive approach to critical theory is due to his early endorsement of the linguistic turn. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Habermas became convinced that the methodological deficiencies of the philosophical paradigm of mentalism were partly responsible for the major shortcomings he identified in the work of the first generation of Frankfurt School's critical theorists (Habermas 1981, chapter 4). However, the importance of language and communication in Habermas's work cannot be adequately understood by simply situating it among those philosophical approaches that contributed to the linguistic turn in the twentieth century. Although Habermas embraced the

linguistic turn partly because of the methodological advantages of the paradigm of language over the paradigm of mentalism, the significance of his analysis of language and communication is not just methodological, but substantive. In the communicative use of language, Habermas discovers a genuine kind of rationality (“communicative rationality”) that—as he contends—is irreducible to instrumental rationality. This finding enables him to carry out two fundamental tasks that, in his opinion, the first generation of critical theorists had not been able to accomplish, namely, to overcome the narrow concept of instrumental rationality dominant in the social sciences and to explain how social order is possible. These tasks are carried out in his monumental work *The Theory of Communicative Action*.

The key to Habermas’s development of his theory of communicative rationality lies in his early appropriation of the conception of language of the hermeneutic tradition—the conception of language elaborated by the Haman-Herder-Humboldt tradition and further developed by Heidegger and Gadamer. Indeed, it is this conception of language that enables both Heidegger and Habermas to articulate an alternative to the philosophical paradigm of mentalism (i.e., what Heidegger calls the S-O model and Habermas the paradigm of the philosophy of consciousness). It is explicitly to this end that phenomenology undergoes a hermeneutic transformation in *Being and Time*, whereas in the *Theory of Communicative Action* critical theory undergoes a shift toward communication theory. As I have argued elsewhere (Lafont 1999), the key to both transformations is the conception of language as *constitutive* of our experience or as world-disclosing (see also Taylor 1977, 1980, 2005). Since this may be more obvious regarding Heidegger’s philosophy after the *Kehre*, let me first of all indicate very briefly why this is already the case in *Being and Time* (see Lafont 2000). This will also be helpful in elucidating its deep commonalities with Habermas’s own linguistic turn.

In order to break with the predominance of the S-O model characteristic of traditional philosophy, in *Being and Time* Heidegger generalizes hermeneutics from a traditional method for interpreting authoritative texts (mainly sacred or legal texts) to a way of understanding human beings themselves. As a consequence, the hermeneutic paradigm offers a radically new conception of what is distinctive about human beings: to be human is not primarily to be a rational animal, but first and foremost to be a self-interpreting animal (Taylor 1977). It is precisely because human beings are nothing but interpretation all the way down that the activity of *interpreting a meaningful text* offers the most appropriate model for understanding any human experience whatsoever (Lafont 2005). This change of perspective amounts to a major break with traditional philosophy, which has been guided, for the most part, by a diametrically opposed impulse to model human experience on our *perception of physical objects*. Heidegger confronts this attempt with two major objections. First, Heidegger argues that by trying to model human experience on the basis of categories taken from a domain of objects radically different from human beings (i.e., physical objects), traditional philosophy provides an entirely distorted account of human identity. To show this, Heidegger articulates an alternative, hermeneutic model that makes it possible to understand human beings as essentially self-interpreting creatures. Second, Heidegger argues that by focusing on perception as the private experience of an isolated subject, the S-O model incorporates a methodological individualism (even solipsism) that entirely distorts human experience (giving rise to nothing but philosophical pseudo-problems such as the need to prove the existence of the external world). To defend this claim Heidegger offers an alternative, hermeneutic account of our experience that makes it possible to understand human beings as inhabiting a symbolically structured world in which everything they encounter is already understood as something. As a consequence, the central feature of Heidegger’s hermeneutic turn lies in the introduction of a new notion of world. After the hermeneutic turn, the world is no longer the totality of entities, but a totality of significance, a web of meanings that structures Dasein’s understanding of itself and of everything that can show up within the world.

A central feature of the hermeneutic notion of world is that it is *intersubjectively shared*. As Heidegger remarks in *Being and Time*, “the world is always the one that I share with Others. The world of Dasein is a *with-world*” (Heidegger 1927: 118). This phenomenological fact, however, cannot be accounted for within the constraints of the methodological individualism characteristic of the S-O model, since the public world can neither be identified with the totality of objects nor with the private sphere of the mental acts of an isolated subject. The specific relationship that Dasein has with others in virtue of sharing a public world cannot be modeled on the relationship of a subject either to itself or to objects different from itself. This, however, poses an important challenge to *Being and Time* as well. In view of the rigid dichotomy established between Dasein and all other entities (for methodological reasons), the world is a difficult phenomenon to situate. On the one hand, *Being-in-the-world* is a fundamental structure of Dasein, so “the one” as an element of this structure is an *existentiale*, an ability of Dasein (the ability to take the community’s perspective of the “generalized other,” in G.H. Mead’s terms). But, on the other hand, the articulation of the world precedes each and every individual Dasein (Heidegger 1927: 364). If it did not, if it were just the product of the meaning-conferring acts of an individual subject, the S-O model would be reestablished. Yet, if “the one” is prior to any individual Dasein and is neither an occurrent entity nor a “transcendental subject,” how is it constituted? Where is it situated? In direct answer to this question Heidegger remarks in *Being and Time* that “the ‘one’ is constituted by the way things have been publicly interpreted, which expresses itself in idle talk” (Heidegger 1927: 252). This is the most important feature of the hermeneutic notion of world: the world is always intersubjectively shared *because it is linguistically articulated*. It is by virtue of sharing a natural language that Dasein can share the *same* world with others.

In this context, it is important to keep in mind one of the crucial differences between the traditional and hermeneutic notions of world. Whereas the former is supposed to refer to a *single* objective world (to the extent that everything is supposed to be under the same causal laws), the latter admits of a plurality of worlds. Cultural lifeworlds as totalities of significance are *plural*. This plurality of worlds opens an issue that has no equivalent in the framework of the traditional notion of world. In order for the hermeneutic notion of world to be plausible, one must first be able to explain how a particular Dasein can be said to share the *same* world with others.

As Heidegger explains in *Being and Time*, it is in virtue of sharing a language that speakers and hearers can talk about the same things even if those things are not equally accessible to all of them:

In the language which is spoken when one expresses oneself, there lies an average intelligibility; and in accordance with this intelligibility the discourse which is communicated can be understood to a considerable extent, even if the hearer does not bring himself into such a kind of being towards what the discourse is about as to have a primordial understanding of it.... We have *the same thing* in view, because it is in the *same* averageness that we have a common understanding of what is said.  
(Heidegger 1927: 212; italics in the original)

If this claim is right, if subjects come to share a common world of objects only to the extent that they previously share a common understanding of those objects, the explanatory priority of perception that underlies the S-O model can be shown to be wrong. Heidegger explains,

This way in which things have been interpreted in idle talk has already established itself in Dasein. (...) This everyday way in which things have been interpreted is

one into which Dasein has grown in the first instance, with never a possibility of extrication. In it, from out of it, and against it, all genuine understanding, interpreting and communicating, all re-discovering and appropriating anew, are performed. *In no case is a Dasein, untouched and unseduced by this way in which things have been interpreted, set before the open country of a 'world-in-itself' so that it just beholds what it encounters.* The dominance of the public way in which things have been interpreted has already been decisive even for the possibilities of having a mood ... The 'one' prescribes one's affectivity, and determines what and how one 'sees.'

(Heidegger 1927: 213; my italics)

It is precisely this hermeneutic model of a linguistically articulated and intersubjectively shared lifeworld that will allow Habermas to break with the priority of the philosophy of consciousness that he identified as the major methodological flaw of the first generation of critical theory. As he points out in an interview with Peter Dews, within the theoretical framework of the first generation of Frankfurt School critical theory, "there was no room for ideas of the life-world or of life-forms... So they were not prompted to look into the no-man's-land of everyday life" (Dews 1986: 196). Consequently, they were not interested in linguistic communication as the mode of reproduction of the lifeworld (Habermas 1967: xiii).

In an article entitled "The logic of the social sciences," Habermas explicitly underscores the superiority of the view of language of hermeneutics over two others, the phenomenology of the lifeworld articulated by A. Schutz from a Husserlian point of view, and the "positivist analysis of language" that at the time he saw exemplified by the early and later Wittgenstein (Habermas 1967: 89–170). Whereas the latter conceptions share an instrumental view of language as a mere tool for communication, the hermeneutic conception articulates a constitutive view of language as world-disclosing. According to Habermas, the crucial methodological difference between these conceptions is that the Husserlian and positivist approaches rely on the possibility of adopting an observer or external perspective from which language can be objectified (i.e., become the object of analysis), whereas hermeneutics recognizes the impossibility of adopting such a perspective. As Habermas indicates in a later article entitled "The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality," "hermeneutics has taught us that we are always a participant as long as we move within the natural language and that we cannot step outside the role of a reflective partner" (Habermas 1970: 191). At the same time, however, Habermas is totally aware of the difficulty that this claim poses for any attempt to combine the internal perspective of a participant in a linguistically articulated lifeworld with the external perspective of a social critic that the project of a critical theory requires. It is precisely this methodological difficulty that motivates Habermas's criticism of the hermeneutic claim to universality, which is the main target of his article as a whole. We can distinguish two slightly different problems involved in this methodological issue, problems he had already identified in this article and has continued to elaborate in the following decades. One is descriptive, the other normative.

At the descriptive level, there is an unavoidable explanatory limitation built into the hermeneutic approach, since speakers, as participants in a shared cultural lifeworld, do not have access to the type of external empirical knowledge that reconstructive sciences provide. Hermeneutic self-reflection, as Habermas indicates, "throws light on experiences a subject makes while exercising his communicative competence, but it cannot explain this competence" (Habermas 1970: 186). This explanatory deficit is not only obvious with regard to the reconstructive sciences that Habermas discusses in this context, such as linguistics and developmental psychology, but equally the case with regard to most of the causal knowledge provided by the empirical sciences, including the social sciences. In particular, as Habermas will argue in his *Theory of Communicative Action*, systemic mechanisms that affect

the lifeworld from the outside are inaccessible from the participants' perspective. Access to them requires that the social theorist adopt an external perspective, as articulated in the broad tradition of functionalism by authors such as Marx, Parsons or Luhmann. From this point of view, Habermas's criticism of hermeneutics' structural blindness toward the material (social and economic) circumstances of the reproduction of the lifeworld echoes the main arguments against Heidegger's approach that, as we saw above, Marcuse articulated in the 1930s. Of course, recognizing the need to integrate the hermeneutic and the functionalist perspective is one thing, providing a coherent account of society as constituted by both self-sufficient systems and the lifeworld is another. But I will not focus on this issue here, since this is clearly the side of critical theory less related to Heidegger's philosophical hermeneutics. Instead, I would like to focus on another difficulty, a normative one, which arises specifically in the attempt to integrate hermeneutics and critical theory.

Whereas the explanatory limits just mentioned point to a clear deficit of the hermeneutic approach and thus speak in favor of expanding it to integrate the empirical knowledge provided by the social sciences, the same cannot be said of the normative limits that the hermeneutic approach imposes on the critical aims of the theorist. Recognizing that "we are always a participant as long as we move within the natural language and that we cannot step outside the role of a reflective partner" poses a normative challenge to the authority claimed by the theorist to criticize the prevalent societal understanding as ideological. As Gadamer pointed out in his famous debate with Habermas (see Gadamer 1966, 1967, 1971), in adopting an external perspective the social theorist engaged in the critique of ideologies breaks the symmetrical dialogue among participants and, in so doing, can only impose her own views about the good society on the basis of a self-ascribed knowledge monopoly or privileged access to truth. Thus, the critical theorist becomes, *willy-nilly*, a "social technocrat" in disguise (Gadamer 1967: 274). In a critical theory of these characteristics, the emancipatory interest of the critical theorist just collapses into the technical interest of a "social engineer" who prescribes without listening. In sharp contrast to this conception, Gadamer argues, the hermeneutic perspective of a symmetrical dialogue oriented toward understanding prohibits its participants from ascribing to themselves a superior insight into the "delusions" of other participants that would eliminate the need of validation of their own views through dialogue with them. Seen from this perspective, the normative limitation of the hermeneutic approach poses a real challenge to the aspirations of critical theory. Any departures from the symmetrical conditions of dialogue among equal participants automatically raise questions concerning the legitimacy of the theorist's criticisms as well as their right to impose their conception of the good society upon others. Looking back, Habermas's theory of communicative rationality presents two main strategies for confronting this challenge without giving up on the possibility of a critical theory. Moreover, these two strategies constitute the original core of Habermas's distinctive approach to critical theory.

The first strategy concerns the very core of the hermeneutic approach, namely, the view of language as *constitutive* of the lifeworld. In this context I cannot discuss in detail Habermas's account of communication, but I will indicate very briefly what I consider to be the crucial point of departure vis-à-vis the hermeneutic approach. As I have argued elsewhere (Lafont 1999, chapter 5), the main innovation of the Habermasian approach lies in its ability to incorporate externalism in an account of linguistic communication (Habermas 1996, 1999).

As we saw before, according to Heidegger, dialogue is only possible if one and the same world is disclosed to all speakers so that they can talk about the same things. For, as he argues in *Being and Time*, "only he who already understands can listen" (SZ, 164). Therefore, speakers can come to share a common world of objects only insofar as they already share a

common linguistic understanding of those objects. A shared linguistic world-disclosure or, in Gadamer's terminology, a common tradition, is the precondition for any understanding or agreement that speakers may bring about in conversation (Gadamer 1960). Once this is accepted, however, it becomes unclear how speakers can ever question or revise such a factually shared world-disclosure or communicate with those who do not share it. Our linguistic world-disclosure seems unrevisable from within and inaccessible from without. This conception of the world-disclosing function of language has extremely counterintuitive consequences. The most notorious of them can be found in Heidegger's writings on language after the *Kehre*, where he provocatively claims that "there is no thing when the word is lacking" (Heidegger 1959: 163) or that "language speaks" and thus is "the master of man" (Heidegger 1953: 184). It is in view of these claims that charges of linguistic idealism and of reification of language are a commonplace among interpreters of Heidegger's later works, Habermas included.

In order to avoid these counterintuitive consequences in his debate with Gadamer, Habermas rejects the hermeneutic claim that understanding is only possible on the basis of a factual agreement among speakers with a shared linguistic world-disclosure. Instead, Habermas claims that understanding depends on a "counterfactual agreement" that all speakers share just in virtue of their communicative competence. This agreement is based on *formal* presuppositions and thus does not depend on shared content or a shared world-disclosure among participants in a conversation. Habermas characterizes the essential difference between his position and Gadamer's as "*the questioning of the ontological self-understanding of the philosophical hermeneutic which Gadamer propounds by following Heidegger*" (Habermas 1970: 203). In that context, he remarks,

Gadamer turns *the context-dependency of the understanding of meaning*, which hermeneutic philosophy has brought to consciousness and which requires us always to proceed from a pre-understanding that is supported by tradition as well as to continuously form a new pre-understanding in the course of being corrected, to *the ontologically inevitable primacy of linguistic tradition*. Gadamer poses the question: 'Is the phenomenon of understanding adequately defined when I state that to understand is to avoid misunderstanding? Is it not, rather, the case that something like a 'sustaining consensus' precedes all misunderstanding?' We can agree on the answer, which is to be given in the affirmative, but not on *how to understand this preceding consensus*.

(Habermas 1970: 203; my italics)

Seen in retrospect, his explanation of the essential difference between Gadamerian and critical hermeneutics anticipates the main features of the theory of communicative rationality that he articulated in the following decades. He explains,

It would only be legitimate for us to equate the sustaining consensus which, according to Gadamer, always precedes any failure at mutual understanding with a given factual agreement, if we could be certain that each consensus arrived at in the medium of linguistic tradition has been achieved without compulsion and distortion.... A critically enlightened hermeneutic that differentiates between insight and delusion... *connects the process of understanding to the principle of rational speech*, according to which truth would only be guaranteed by *that kind of consensus which was achieved under the idealized conditions of unlimited communication free from domination* and could be maintained over time.... It is only *the formal anticipation of an idealized dialogue...* which guarantees *the ultimate sustaining and counterfactual*

*agreement* that already unites us; in relation to it we can *criticize* every factual agreement, should it be a false one, as false consciousness.... To attempt a systematic justification, we have to develop... a theory which would enable us to deduce *the principle of rational speech* from the logic of everyday language and regard it *as the necessary regulative for all actual speech*, however distorted it may be.

(Habermas 1970: 205–207; my italics)

According to Habermas's theory of communicative rationality, speakers who want to reach an agreement about something in the world have to presuppose the truth of what they are saying, the normative rightness of the interaction they are establishing with the hearer through their speech acts and the sincerity or truthfulness of their speech acts. Complementary to these three validity claims (truth, normative rightness and truthfulness), speakers must also share the notion of a single objective world that is identical for all possible observers. As Habermas points out in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, "actors who raise validity claims have to avoid *materially prejudicing* the relation between language and reality, between the medium of communication and that about which something is being communicated." This alone makes it possible for "the contents of a linguistic worldview [to become] *detached from the assumed world-order itself*" (Habermas 1981: 50–51). Obviously, if participants in communication are to evaluate whether things are the way they think they are or are as someone else believes, they cannot at the same time dogmatically identify their own beliefs with the way the world is. This is why communication oriented toward understanding requires that the participants distinguish, however counterfactually, between everyone's (incompatible) beliefs and the assumed world-order itself. Put in Habermas's own terms they have to form "a reflective concept of world." The formal presupposition of a single objective world is just a consequence of the universal claim to validity built into the speakers' speech acts. It is just an expression of the communicative constraint that makes rational criticism and mutual learning possible, namely, that from two opposed claims only one can be right. Thus, the formal notion of world and the three universal validity claims build a system of coordinates that guides the interpretative efforts of the participants in communication toward a common understanding, despite their differences in beliefs or worldviews. This formal framework allows speakers to assume that they are referring to the same things even when their interpretations differ. As a consequence, they can adopt the externalist attitude necessary for disagreement and criticism without ever having to leave their shared communicative situation.

Now, to the extent that such an externalist perspective is equally accessible to all participants in communication, Habermas can reject Gadamer's claim that the critical theorist, in order to carry out her critique, has to break the symmetry of communication oriented toward understanding and become a "social technocrat" in disguise. In the *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas remarks,

in thematizing what the participants merely presuppose and assuming a *reflective* attitude to the interpretandum, one does not place oneself *outside* the communication context under investigation; one deepens and radicalizes it *in a way that is in principle open to all participants*.

(Habermas 1981: 130)

In this remark, we can already identify the other major strategy that Habermas has followed to confront the hermeneutic challenge.

By identifying the possibility of adopting an externalist perspective as a structural element of any communication oriented toward understanding, Habermas can reject the charge of



paternalism that Gadamer had raised against his approach to critical theory back in the 1970s. At the same time, however, it becomes clear that this strategy is based on the acceptance of the criterion of legitimacy that underlies the charge, namely, that the ultimate criterion of validation of any criticism or proposal for social change is the actual dialogue among all participants involved. Thus, no matter how superior the empirical and theoretical knowledge of the critical theorist may be, she must situate herself as a discourse participant among equals to validate her criticisms and proposals through actual dialogue (Habermas 1983: 122, 1992: 172).

This is indeed the most distinctive element of Habermas's approach to critical theory. As he sees it, the critical theorist is not supposed to base her criticisms of current societies on her particular conception of the good society, but is supposed to leave space for the citizens themselves to determine and develop their different collective and individual life projects (Habermas 1992: 107, 110). To that extent, critical inquiry does not seek to achieve specific ends but to bring about those social conditions in which its insights and proposals might be validated or falsified by citizens themselves (Bohman 2001). This decidedly democratic turn of critical theory makes it possible to justify the claim that the evaluations on which the theorist's criticisms are based do not illegitimately constrain the space of citizens' political self-determination, and thus do not amount to a tendentious attempt to advance the critics' own political preferences concerning the good society under the aegis of their self-proclaimed epistemic authority.

With this proposal, critical theory definitively breaks with the paternalistic tendencies of the Marxist tradition and emphasizes the normative importance of citizens' political self-determination. In so doing, however, it does not give in to the hermeneutic temptation to cede to the participants and their traditions the only say about the significance of the social practices they engage in. The theoretical reconstruction of the communicative and social conditions under which any political proposals could be validated or falsified by citizens themselves provides the critical theorist with a powerful criterion for measuring current social conditions and criticizing those responsible for the perpetuation of injustices. At the same time, insight into the validity of such a criterion does not derive from any privileged access to truth on the side of the critical theorist, but it is anchored in the communicative practices that discourse participants already share. Consequently, this kind of criticism is not only open to all participants but also publicly addressed to them.

It remains an open question whether the Habermasian approach to critical theory can succeed in its goals and thus offer a solid basis for a fruitful research program. This is particularly the case regarding the two elements that I have identified here as central to Habermas's attempt to think "with Heidegger and against Heidegger." On the one hand, the prospects of successfully incorporating externalism in an account of linguistic communication will need to be assessed in light of the results of current discussions on theories of meaning in the philosophy of language. On the other hand, the prospects of the democratic turn in critical theory will need to be assessed in light of the results of current discussions on deliberative democracy in political philosophy. Be that as it may, it is clear that Habermas's distinctive approach to critical theory represents a genuine alternative to Heideggerian hermeneutics precisely because it came about by thinking with Heidegger and against Heidegger.

## Notes

- 1 A selected sample of such works is listed at the end of this piece as suggestions for further reading. For a brief overview of the relationship between each of the main figures of the Frankfurt School and Heidegger, see Thomä 2003: 361–368.
- 2 For some textual evidence from *Being and Time* against this interpretation, see Fritzsche 1999.

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## Further Reading

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A. Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse. The Catastrophe and Redemption of History* (Oxford: Routledge, 2005) offers an excellent analysis of the similarities and differences between Heidegger's and Marcuse's critique of technology. I. MacDonald and Krzysztof Ziarek, eds., *Adorno and Heidegger: Philosophical Questions* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008) is an interesting collection of analyses that provide an overview of philosophical topics common to the works of Heidegger and Adorno. W. Phillips, *Metaphysics and Music in Adorno and Heidegger* (New York: Palgrave, 2015) offers an illuminating analysis of common philosophical concerns and deep affinities between Heidegger's and Adorno's philosophy. H. Mörchen, *Adorno und Heidegger. Untersuchung einer philosophischen Kommunikationsverweigerung* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981) offers the most detailed study of the relationship between Heidegger and Adorno to date. R. Wolin, *Heidegger's Children. Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Joas and Herbert Marcuse* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015) contains an in-depth analysis of the relationship between Heidegger and Marcuse.

# ARENDT AND THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

*Seyla Benhabib and Clara Picker*

## Biographies and Theories

Any consideration of Hannah Arendt and the Frankfurt School is likely to be thwarted from the start by the profound dislike which Arendt seems to have borne toward one of the Frankfurt School's most prominent members, namely, Theodor W. Adorno. Arendt's aversion to Adorno presumably began when Arendt held Adorno personally responsible for the failed attempt of her then husband Guenther Stern (later Anders) to receive his habilitation (second dissertation) at the University of Frankfurt in 1929. Adorno was among members of the faculty of the University of Frankfurt who would be evaluating Stern's habilitation, essential to secure a teaching post in a German University. He found the work unsatisfactory, thus bringing to an end Stern's hopes for a university career. It was also in this period that Arendt uttered her notorious statement regarding Adorno – "Der kommt uns nicht ins Haus" – meaning that Adorno was not to set foot in their apartment in Frankfurt (Young-Bruehl 1982: 80; Benhabib 2012: 33). While this hostility on Arendt's part never diminished, Adorno seems to have endured it with a cultivated *politesse*. However, Adorno's correspondence with Gershom Scholem reveals that the dislike between Arendt and Adorno was mutual (Angermann 2015: 191).

Arendt's temper flared up several more times at Adorno: in the aftermath of World War II, in a letter to Karl Jaspers (Köhler and Saner 2001: 697), she accused Adorno of trying to collaborate with the Nazis in the early 1930s on account of a publication in a student newspaper. In the 1940s, Arendt became convinced that Adorno and his colleagues were preventing the publication of Walter Benjamin's posthumous manuscripts (Arendt to Heinrich Blücher on August 2, 1941, in Köhler and Saner 2000: 72–73; Schöttker and Wizisla 2006: 146). Finally, Arendt's animosity toward Adorno was reactivated upon the publication of *The Jargon of Authenticity* (Adorno 1973 [1964]), a book which contained strongly polemical criticisms of Martin Heidegger—Arendt's former mentor and lover who had been an active and public supporter of the National Socialist regime from 1933 to 1936. Arendt expressed these criticisms and accusations primarily in her private correspondence with friends and interlocutors; direct interactions between Arendt and Adorno appear to have been rare. The only preserved direct correspondence between Arendt and Adorno took place in the Winter of 1967, when Arendt was preparing *Illuminations*, the first publication of Walter Benjamin's writings in the American context (see Schöttker and Wizisla 2006: 176–177, 178–181; Benhabib 2011, 2018). The tone of this correspondence is polite yet reserved, underscoring the absence of any personal rapport between the correspondents.

However, such psychological attitudes and personal animosities should not dominate or constrain our evaluation of a thinker's interpretative legacy. Despite their personal tensions, the relationship between Arendt's and Adorno's work has become the object of increased scholarly interest (see Rensmann and Gandesha 2012). Indeed, the absence of intellectual recognition and collaboration between Arendt and members of the Frankfurt School seems quite puzzling in light of the similarities of their biographies, intellectual origins, theoretical interests, and political diagnoses: Arendt, as well as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, on whom we will focus in this chapter, were shaped by the intellectual milieu of the Weimar Republic; they were of German-Jewish descent (Adorno on his father's side) and were compelled to emigrate to the United States in order to escape the deadly grip of National Socialism. Moreover, they shared a profound intellectual admiration and personal affection for Walter Benjamin and sought to keep alive Benjamin's intellectual legacy. Finally, and perhaps most importantly in the present context, common to them is a deep theoretical preoccupation with what we might tentatively call the "diagnosis of modernity as crisis": the idea that modernity portends a novel historical dynamic that is intimately tied to the catastrophes of the twentieth century – the rise of fascism, the Holocaust and Stalinism. Investigating this historical dynamic and its implications thus became a central philosophical and political task in the lives of these German-Jewish émigrés. Among the themes that occupied Arendt and the members of the Frankfurt School are the persistence of human misery in the face of mighty technological progress and the overcoming of old forms of bondage at the expense of new kinds of unfreedom.

Their reactions to the catastrophes of the twentieth century were political as opposed to theological or philosophical. They never lost faith in human beings' capacity to start anew and change their collective conditions of existence (Arendt), or to anticipate the "wholly other" (Adorno and Horkheimer) and imagine a more just and humane future. Arendt tried to retrieve the project of political freedom, in the sense of building republics in which freedom could be housed, from the leveling and unreflective qualities of mass society. Adorno and Horkheimer insisted on the hope that human emancipation would not herald an empty but concrete utopia. Thus, they were fundamentally united in their belief that human misery could be overcome, even in the face of developments where despair was more tempting.

The question of anti-Semitism and the eventual destruction of European Jewry is a particularly sharp lens through which to observe the theoretical affinities and differences among these thinkers. This is because they shared a view of the Holocaust as historical rupture that necessitated a reexamination of the philosophical tradition on the one hand, and a profound reorientation of intellectual activity on the other. Arendt's early claim that

the institution of concentration and extermination camps .... may very likely become that unexpected phenomenon .... which must cause social scientists and historical scholars to reconsider their hitherto unquestioned fundamental preconceptions regarding the course of the world and human behavior

(Arendt 1950: 49)

and Adorno's insistence that "[a] new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar happens" (Adorno 1973: 365) both speak to this concern. Moreover, Arendt and the Frankfurt School understood modern anti-Semitism as but one expression of a historical crisis that had given rise to the reorganization of European societies along totalitarian lines.

However, their respective analyses also reflect the central intellectual and political differences between these thinkers. Arendt's commitment was to a civic republicanism grounded

in a phenomenology of Athenian democracy which was not nostalgic but anticipating the hope for new foundings under conditions of modernity as well. By contrast, Adorno and Horkheimer sustained a critical allegiance to a tradition of Marxism that the reality of Stalinism had rendered practically impotent and historically obscure.

With respect to their theories of modern anti-Semitism, we view Arendt's approach to explaining the origins of European anti-Semitism, and the solutions she offers to go beyond it, as being strongly inflected by her commitments to an autonomous Jewish politics in the interwar period; a commitment that is neither Zionist nor simply anti-Zionist. Horkheimer, by contrast, begins his analysis of anti-Semitism with a rather orthodox Marxist view in 1939, but as the extent of the destruction of the European Jewry becomes clear, together with Adorno, this analysis is supplemented by an increasingly psychoanalytic diagnosis of anti-Semitism in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1942–47).

### **Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust: Adorno and Horkheimer**

For Adorno and Horkheimer, the rise of modern anti-Semitism had to be explained in the context of the large-scale structural changes that accompanied the transformation of nineteenth-century liberal capitalism into what they called often “monopoly capitalism.” The latter term refers to a historical phase in which the self-contradictory nature of capitalist society gives rise to a state of permanent crisis, leading to the transformation and partial replacement of indirect social mediation (via the free market) with direct political domination. Adorno and Horkheimer thus viewed fascism and National Socialism, despite the occasional anti-capitalist rhetoric that these movements embraced, as a continuation of the capitalist world order. In Horkheimer's “The Jews and Europe” (1939), we can see that this premise leads to two crucial consequences: if this “new” anti-Semitism has to be understood as “an emissary of the totalitarian order, which has developed out of the liberal one” (Horkheimer 1989 [1939]: 77) then (a) one has to situate modern anti-Semitism within the context of the specific historical tendencies within capitalism, and (b) one has to come to terms with the fact that a return to the liberal order would not do away with the very structures which gave birth to modern anti-Semitism in the first place. Thus, “whoever is not willing to talk about capitalism should also keep quiet about fascism” (Horkheimer 1989 [1939]: 78). Specifically, Horkheimer explains modern anti-Semitism to be a consequence of the decline of the sphere of circulation:

The Jews are stripped of power as agents of circulation, because the modern structure of the economy largely puts that whole sphere out of action. They are the first victims of the ruling group that has taken over the canceled function. The governmental manipulation of money, which already has robbery as its necessary function, turns into the brutal manipulation of money's representatives.

(Horkheimer 1989 [1939]: 90)

While this account is certainly vulnerable to accusations of Marxist functionalism (Benhabib 2011: 24), Horkheimer does not suggest that anti-Semitism itself has an economic purpose or rationality. Instead, anti-Semitism here appears as a symptom that corresponds to the general substitution of direct domination for indirect anonymous social mediation. Nevertheless, the account of modern anti-Semitism in “The Jews and Europe” lacks specificity and remains underdeveloped in important aspects.

As Martin Jay has documented (Jay 1986: 90–100), Horkheimer's and Adorno's position on anti-Semitism was changing throughout the 1940s. While the economic dimension continues to be significant, it is the position of the Jew in “mental imaginary of Nazism”

(Rabinbach 2000: 52) that begins to gain prominence. This new analysis is announced in the “Elements of anti-Semitism” chapter of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (henceforth abbreviated as DE).

In DE, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the emergence of totalitarianism necessitates a revision of both Hegelian and Marxist theories of history. This is because both traditions imbue the historical process with a positive meaning. The Marxist view did so by understanding history as enabling human emancipation through the increasing control of nature via the technological organization of social labor. The Hegelian perspective grasps history as the continuous unfolding of Reason itself. Both perspectives thus enable a view of history as progress, and it is this particular understanding of history that, from the standpoint of the 1940s, could no longer be upheld. The Marxian philosophy of history which postulated man’s increasing emancipation from the forces of nature is now supplemented with a Nietzsche- and Freud-inspired vision of progress as the repression of life instincts and the growth of psychic resentment (see Wiggershaus 2001 for an account of the Frankfurt School’s “Nietzschean Moment”). Labor is indeed the sublimation of desire, as Hegel had argued (Hegel 1977 [1807]: §190–195); but the act of objectification through which desire is transformed is not an act of self-actualization but an act of fear and repression, leading to the domination of nature within oneself. The Hegelian view of history as the progressive unfolding of *Reason* is supplanted by a Weberian understanding of progress as progressive *rationality*. “Progressive rationality” here refers to the human species’ growing ability for self-preservation. It is thus a rationality of the domination of nature, understood as the control of both external nature and man’s inner nature. The decisive feature of both these dynamics is that they eclipse the moment of self-reflection. Nearly two decades after the publication of DE, Adorno would describe the progress of rationality in its unreflective form as being “at the bottom nothing other than the exploitation of nature transferred to men and continuing to work in them” (Adorno 2006 [1964/5]: 16).

From the standpoint of the Holocaust, the history of human civilization (which Adorno and Horkheimer here take to be coextensive with the history of the Enlightenment) appears not as the continuous unfolding of emancipatory reason but rather as the development of an ever more complex barbarism. In this sense, the myth of Odysseus (understood as the original myth of modern individuality) and the fact of the Holocaust act as bookends to the self-destructive dynamic of the Enlightenment: the myth which is Enlightenment and the Enlightenment which becomes myth first in scientific positivism and, eventually, in Nazi propaganda. The transformation of Western civilization into open barbarism through the emergence of totalitarianism reveals that the development of civilization was, from the outset, driven by a dialectical antagonism between culture and barbarism. Caught in the wild currents of this civilizational dynamic, the Jews become its privileged objects of sacrifice.

Nazi anti-Semitism is a special case of organized paranoid delusion. But what is it that makes the Jews particularly vulnerable objects of such paranoid fantasies? In order to answer this question, Adorno and Horkheimer interrogate the content of secular “nationalist” anti-Semitism as well as its ideological predecessor, Christian anti-Judaism.

Part of Adorno and Horkheimer’s reflections on secular, National Socialist anti-Semitism operate within the framework of analysis laid out in Horkheimer’s “The Jews and Europe”: modern anti-Semitism is understood as a historically specific *societal* phenomenon, feeding on the “destructive urge which the wrong social order spontaneously produces” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002 [1942–7]: 137). However, rather than elaborating on the historical circumstances that can account for the specific *content* of the anti-Semitic imaginary (e.g., the historical realities that are hypostatized and racialized in anti-Semitic ideology), Adorno and Horkheimer draw on psychoanalytic categories to explain what could be called “subjective” factor, i.e., the psychological mechanisms that make individuals and masses *receptive* to anti-Semitic propaganda.

To do so, they utilize the concept of “false projection” (which they sometimes also refer to as “pathic projection”). *False projection* can be understood as a kind of deformed mimesis (Ibid.: 154). *Mimesis* refers to the mechanism through which the human species has learned to regulate its fear of nature (and, by extension, of “the other” in more general terms). In mimesis, the fear of the other is mastered through a “form of mimicry or semblance that appropriates rather than replicates its object in a non-identical similitude” (Rabinbach 2000: 55). Yet, if mimesis “makes itself resemble its surroundings, false projection makes its surroundings resemble itself” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002 [1947]: 154). As a consequence, the subject projects its own internality onto an external object, and in this process “[i]mpulses which are not acknowledged by the subject and yet are his, are attributed to the object: the prospective victim” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002 [1942–7]: 154).

Importantly, Adorno and Horkheimer do not regard the mechanism of projection per se as pathological. In a sense, the process of perception itself can be understood as “mediated immediacy,” as a mechanism by which subjective elements are unconsciously transferred to an apparently ready-made object. But without the element of reflection this mediated immediacy is reified and thus acquires “hallucinatory power” (Ibid.: 160). *Reflection* here refers to a subject’s capacity for negating its initial judgment; to its ability to “conceptually carr[y] through the failure of the absolute claim and thereby continu[e] to qualify his or her judgment” (Ibid.: 161). This capacity for negation distinguishes “thought” from “fixed judgment.” The latter is immovable and characterized by “paranoid over-consistency.” Instead of negating his judgment,

the paranoiac clings obdurately to the claim which has caused the judgment to fail. Instead of going further by penetrating its subject matter more deeply, thought places itself entirely in the hopeless service of the particular judgment.

(Adorno and Horkheimer 2002 [1942–7]: 61)

The pathic moment of false projection is thus not projective behavior as such but the exclusion of the element of reflection from that behavior. This results in a paranoid condition of a totalizing kind. The subject, no longer able to differentiate between himself and the outside world, loses all abilities that are predicated on this capacity: “Instead of the voice of conscience, [the subject] hears voices; instead of inwardly examining itself in order to draw up a protocol of its own lust for power, it attributes to other the Protocol of the Elders of Zion” (Ibid.: 156).

### Anti-Semitism and the “Jewish Question”: Arendt

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt repeatedly insists that eliminationist anti-Semitism has to be understood as a *central* component of the National Socialist worldview. Criticizing the “failure to take seriously what the Nazis themselves said,” Arendt argues that the fantastical nature of anti-Semitic propaganda – the fact that, as she puts it, anti-Semitism presents an “outrage to common sense” – must not lead one to conclude that it was “merely a pretext for winning the masses or an interesting device of demagoguery” (Arendt 1979 [1951]: 3). Urging her readers to take modern anti-Semitism seriously, Arendt rejects theological and metaphysical accounts of European anti-Semitism. Far from constituting an eternal dimension of the relationship between Jews and gentiles, eliminationist anti-Semitism has to be understood as a specifically modern phenomenon. As such, it reflects the disintegration of traditional political structures in Europe, and, in particular, the decline of the nation-state in the aftermath of European imperialism (Benhabib 2011: 31). In contrast to the religiously motivated anti-Semitism of the Middle Ages, modern anti-Semitism has to be grasped as a



*political* phenomenon. Challenging explanations of anti-Semitism that subsumed the latter under broad categories such as nationalism and xenophobia or that declared it epiphenomenal to movements of the economy (Arendt 1979 [1951]: 4), Arendt seeks to explain its origins through a reconstruction of the “Jewish question” in modern European history. At the heart of her theory of anti-Semitism lies a fundamental paradox: the rise of modern anti-Semitism coincides with the decline of the modern nation-state and “reached its climax at the exact moment when the European system of nation-states and its precarious balance of power crashed” (Ibid.: 3). Therefore, it could not be treated simply as a product of nationalism and xenophobia.

In Arendt’s view, at least part of the explanation is to be found in the convergence of political, economic, and psychological factors that both tied the Jews to the nation-state and undermined their ability to adapt to its transformations. Arendt’s account of the emergence of the modern nation-state anticipates some elements of her theory of modernity that she would later fully develop in *The Human Condition* (1958). Specifically, she grasps the modern nation-state as a symptom of the deepening split between *state and society* in the eighteenth century and its transformations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries into a phenomenon which she will call “the rise of the social” (Arendt 1958: 46ff).

The modern nation-state needed the Jews, relying both on their financial resources and on their political loyalty for its consolidation. In return, it rewarded wealthy Jews with social privileges that made them dependent upon state power and prevented their integration into society. The Jews didn’t much object, as this privileged status coincided with their own aspiration to maintain a separate identity (Arendt 1979 [1951]: 13).

In financing the state’s beginnings, the Jews also tied their destinies to its further developments. When, in the wake of imperialism, the fortunes of the nation-state waned so did those of the Jews. The extraordinary capitalist development of the nineteenth century pushed the expansion of national economies eventually beyond the borders of the nation-state and came to rely increasingly on the exploitation of resources through imperialist ventures. Unluckily for the Jews, in the ensuing imperialist scramble, the bourgeoisie, which constituted the driving force behind economic expansion, came to rely on a very different kind of ally, “the mob” (*les déclassés*), in its quest for power (Benhabib 2011: 13).

Horkheimer and Adorno, as well as Arendt then seek to understand the rise of modern anti-Semitism and the eventual destruction of the Jews of Europe through socioeconomic, cultural, and psychological categories. In this respect, they differ from many others such as Gershom Scholem, Jacob Taubes, Martin Buber, Leo Baeck, and Kurt Blumenfeld, for whom the European catastrophe was first and foremost a Jewish catastrophe that transmuted traditional Christian Jewish hatred and anti-Judaism into eliminationist anti-Semitism through the methods of mass destruction available to the modern state. Whereas Horkheimer moves from a political-economic toward a more psychoanalytically oriented diagnosis of Nazi anti-Semitism in his joint work with Adorno, Arendt’s analysis remains historical, emphasizing the “configuration” and “crystallization” (see Benhabib 2003 for these categories) of certain elements in the development of the modern European state formation and its imperialist transformation.

At this point, we would like to highlight a particularly interesting divergence between Arendt’s approach and that of Adorno and Horkheimer – namely, their respective attitudes toward the explanatory potential of psychological, and in particular, psychoanalytical, categories for the study of modern anti-Semitism. On the one hand, Arendt as well as Adorno and Horkheimer regards modern psychology as problematic insofar as it constitutes a product of scientific positivism. However, while this leads Arendt to avoid psychological explanations for political phenomena, the Frankfurt school repeatedly utilizes psychological categories in both their empirical research and philosophical reflections. The convergence of

Arendt's and the Frankfurt School's critiques of positivism thus contrasts with their respective attitude toward the utilization of modern psychology in their own research.

In the second part of this chapter, we will examine their critiques of positivism. We will then turn to a discussion of Theodor Adorno's methodologically most rigorous deployment of psychological categories in *The Authoritarian Personality*. Finally, we will analyze Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* which, as we argue, resonates with *The Authoritarian Personality* in important ways. Far from being incompatible, it is our contention that these analyses can also be read as complementing each other.

### Arendt's Distinction between Knowing and Thinking

There are the three major philosophical influences on Arendt's thought: phenomenology, Heideggerian Existenz philosophy, and Aristotelian doctrine. Indicative of Arendt's affinity with phenomenology are her rejection of the traditional dichotomy between *being* and *appearance*, her affirmation of the primacy of appearance, and, consequently, the centrality of the realm of human experience (Arendt 1977: 17). Rejecting the Kantian distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenological (or appearing) world, phenomenology makes the investigation of appearances its central task. Since appearances are no longer contrasted with their presumed being or essence, phenomenology considers the knowledge we can obtain about appearances as objective rather than subjective. This allows the overcoming of the notorious dichotomy between subject and object.

Martin Heidegger would work out the full implications of this approach in *Being and Time* (Heidegger 1962 [1927]). While we will not go into detail about the relationship between Heidegger's and Arendt's thought, we would like to draw attention to one feature of Heidegger's philosophy that became particularly important for Arendt's own thinking: the distinction between categories of knowledge concerning nonhuman entities and categories adequate to the realm of human experience, and, consequently, for the disclosure of "being." The former categories, which are associated with a scientific worldview, might allow for knowledge about "what" entities are; however, only the latter categories address the question of "being" by asking "who" humans are.

While Arendt would work out a forceful critique of some dimensions of Heidegger's philosophy and develop her own distinctive framework, we can also find a similar link between concepts and the experience of the individual in her thinking. Arendt's most important categories like "labor," "work," and "action" are not merely intended to describe what people happen to do. Rather, they seek to illuminate how individuals *experience* what they are doing. Just as Heidegger's *existentials* (existentialia) can be understood as categories expressing the fundamental ways in which *Dasein* relates to the world, so too labor, work, and action are existential categories that seek to grasp how human beings experience the world in and through practice (cf. Benhabib 2003 [1996]: 102–122).

From this philosophical vantage point, modern society, and specifically the rise of modern science, progressively endangers the possibility of experience per se. The inherently expansive nature of what could be called "the scientific worldview" penetrates all realms of human life with far-reaching and disastrous consequences; indeed, it threatens our ability "to think" itself. The modern world, Arendt notes in *The Human Condition*, is one in which "knowledge (in the modern sense of know-how) and thought [might] have parted company for good" (1958: 3). If this were to continue, "then we would indeed become the helpless slaves, not so much of our machines as of our know-how, thoughtless creatures at the mercy of every gadget which is technically possible, no matter how murderous it is" (Ibid.). The distinction between "know-how" and "thought" that Arendt here invokes is critical: "thinking" for Arendt, constitutes an activity that exceeds the mere ability to cognitively

process information. In her essay “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” Arendt clarifies the specificity of thinking by invoking the Kantian distinction between “reason” (*Vernunft*) and “intellect” (*Verstand*). While “intellect” strives after verifiable knowledge, “reason” is the “urge to think and to understand” (Arendt 2003 [1971]: 165). Thinking is thus not concerned with the accumulation of knowledge and in that sense it differs profoundly from a “scientist’s thirst for knowledge for its own sake.” Rather, it constitutes a quest for meaning and as such it cannot serve any predetermined practical goal. It is an activity that mainly consists of examination and reflection: an activity that implies the preliminary rejection of all “accepted opinions and ‘values,’” because it “relentlessly dissolves and examines anew all accepted doctrines and rules” (Arendt 2003 [1971]: 177).

Conversely, “thoughtlessness” or the inability to think – a category that will play a significant role in Arendt’s account of the notorious Nazi criminal Adolf Eichmann – refers to a state of mind in which the ability for this kind of reflection has been lost: a condition in which one’s thinking can neither be penetrated by “the claim on our thinking attention which all events and facts arouse by virtue of their existence” nor examine its own claims from a standpoint external to itself (Arendt 2003 [1971]: 160).

### **The Frankfurt School Distinction between Traditional and Critical Theory**

Kant’s distinction between “intellect” (*Verstand*) and “reason” (*Vernunft*), which inspires Arendt’s dualism between “knowing” and “thinking,” also plays a crucial role in the Frankfurt School’s critique of positivism. In his essay, “Traditional and Critical Theory” (1972 [1937]), Horkheimer compares scientific positivism with “critical theory.” Both the specialized sciences and those philosophical theories that consider their achievements to be the only valid model of knowledge perpetrate an epistemic illusion: they encourage us to consider the object of cognition as a ready-made, ahistorical reality, and they construe the relationship of the knowing subject to this object as one of passive cognition or limited experimentation. Such “traditional theories,” under which Horkheimer subsumes philosophy as well as certain social science methodologies, question neither the historical constitution of their subject matter, nor do they reflect on the purposes to which knowledge they produce is put in society. This second dimension is less significant for Horkheimer than the manner in which the concepts, constructions, and scientific operations of traditional theories produce a distorted image of social reality.

Horkheimer distinguishes the critical theory of society from a critique of the economy, even if the former and the latter are inextricably linked (Horkheimer 1980 [1937]: 627/247; Benhabib 1986: 152 ff). The critique of political economy does not reify the economy but considers the tendencies of society as a whole and analyzes “the historical movement of the period which is approaching its end” (ZfS: 1937: 627/247). Critical theory aims at more than the given laws and structures of society: it judges the given in the light of a normative standard, namely, the “realization of the free development of individuals” through the rational reconstitution of society (Ibid.: 628/248).

What Arendt calls “thinking” may be helpfully compared to what Horkheimer characterizes as “critical theory.” For both, such activity entails penetrating beyond the surface of appearances not to denigrate them but to grasp their true significance. For Arendt, this involves a rejection of accepted points of view that serve to hide the novel and distinctive aspects of the phenomena, thus condemning us to a repetition of commonplace wisdom. Arendt is less concerned with disclosing the hidden meaning *behind* the appearances than with comprehending the uniqueness of the given through judging it in all its worthy and repulsive aspects. She understood her work in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* as facing up to the historically unprecedented nature of this phenomenon, and for this reason, totalitarianism

needed to be distinguished from tyranny as well as from dictatorship and only then could we begin to understand its true dimensions.

For Horkheimer too, critical theory dissolves the tyranny of the given and of the commonplace upon our intellect by exposing its formation or constitution through social praxis. What is made by humans can also be changed by them. Remaining true to a Marxist-Hegelian theory of the social constitution of reality, Horkheimer argues that critical theory liberates us by disclosing the contingency of our sociohistorical world. For both, critical thought is in the service of freedom. Arendt understands such freedom in classical civic-republican terms as the founding of new constitutional orders in which freedom can be housed (Arendt 1978). For Horkheimer freedom is the unfolding of human capacities through the rational reorganization of society such as to overcome the constraints of the capitalist system and to realize its unredeemed potential.

But remaining true to the historically conditioned character of critical theory itself, by the late 1930s, the critique of traditional theory is replaced by the “critique of instrumental reason.” On the one hand, this turn can be explained by reference to the triumph of Hitler and fascist forces throughout Europe. Indeed, the impact of these events on the Frankfurt School’s theoretical activity can hardly be over-appreciated. However, we would also like to emphasize another historical phenomenon that constitutes an important background condition for Adorno and Horkheimer’s work. Here, we are thinking of the failure of the Russian Revolution (from the standpoint of revolutionary Marxism the latter failed in that it did not trigger a global revolution) and the subsequent degeneration of Marxism into Stalinism. Indeed, published transcripts of Adorno and Horkheimer’s private discussions suggest that these developments had led them to ask whether a critical theory along Marxist lines was even a possibility in their own historical moment (Adorno and Horkheimer 2011 [1956]). The fact that Arendt did not share this particular set of concerns might help to better appreciate the distance between her and the Frankfurt School’s intellectual and political commitments in light of all diagnostic commonalities.

### “Instrumental Reason” versus the “Rise of the Social”

“Instrumental Reason” is perhaps among the most well-known phrases of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School through which they sought a synthesis of Max Weber’s theory of modernity as rationalization with Marx’s analysis of the spread of commodity fetishism (cf. Habermas 1973; Held 1980; Honneth 1985; Benhabib 1986). Weber used the concept of ‘rationalization’ to describe a process of cultural disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) and societal differentiation. *Societal differentiation* signified the separation of the capitalist economy from the political state and the bureaucracy, the family and other institutions of civil society. The autonomization of the economy in the nineteenth-century period of liberal capitalism meant, ideal-typically, that the market would be governed by its own logic of the purchase and sale of commodities, including the sale and purchase of labor force as a commodity. The rise of a modern bureaucracy that administered public and private organizations according to legally promulgated, predictable, and formal rules of conduct was made possible by a capitalist economy which provided the basis for the monetized salaries of the bureaucracy; such a bureaucracy in turn was needed for the functioning of a market which was dependent upon the legal rational application and administration of the laws of property and contract. *Cultural disenchantment* referred to the concomitant shifts in cultural norms (such as the increasingly elevated status of the natural sciences and the ethical value of the autonomous personality).

In his *History and Class Consciousness*, Georg Lukács provided an unforgettable synthesis of Weberian rationalization and Marxian commodification processes which became

paradigmatic for the Frankfurt School (Lukács 1971 [1923]). While accepting Weber's analysis through a Lukácsian lense, Adorno and Horkheimer could no longer share in the latter's revolutionary optimism. By the 1930s, in light of the failure of European revolutionary movements, the seemingly unstoppable rise of fascism, and the consolidation of Stalinism in the Soviet states, revolutionary optimism had itself become ideological – if not Stalinist. In this context, the Weberian diagnosis that modernity would end in producing “professionals (*Fachmenschen*) without heart and sensualists without soul” regained actuality even if not all emancipatory hope was lost (Weber 2001 [1930]: 124). In the *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer maintained that the two moments of cultural rationalization for Weber, namely the value of the autonomous personality and the radical separation of nature from culture – the dualistic ontology of modern science – were incompatible (see Benhabib 1986: 164–171). The promise of the Enlightenment to free man from his self-incurred tutelage could not be attained via a reason that is a mere instrument of self-preservation. However, it would be wrong to conclude that Adorno and Horkheimer simply succumbed to political and intellectual pessimism. Their published works as well as posthumously published notes and conversations give testimony to the seriousness with which they continued to interrogate possibilities for new revolutionary openings (Adorno and Horkheimer 2011 [1956]) and critically reflected on their own role as intellectuals in the context of their specific historical moment (see Adorno 1993).

Hannah Arendt shares Adorno's and Horkheimer's somber perspectives on modernity to a certain extent. But whereas the Frankfurt School theorists retained this mind-set after their return to Germany in the 1950s, Arendt's encounter with American republicanism (see King 2015), the Hungarian rebellion of 1956, the Civil Rights Movement in America, and the outbreak of the student movements in 1968 gave her hope that the spirit of freedom had not entirely perished in the hearts of men and women (Arendt 2006 [1963], 1969).

*The Human Condition* (1958) is the work in which the outlines of something like Arendt's theory of modernity emerge. It is also due to this work that many commentators have mistakenly considered Arendt a nostalgic theorist of the Greek polis and its virtues (cf. Holmes 1979). “The rise of the social” is the phrase through which Arendt tries to capture her understanding of modernity. Without the well-established contrast in German sociology between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (Ferdinand Tönnies), this phrase is hardly intelligible, since “the social” in English ubiquitously refers to all spheres of human activity, productions, and relations. There are three dominant meanings of “the social” in Arendt's work (Benhabib 2003 [1996]: 22–27). At one level, the social refers to the emergence of the capitalist exchange economy when what Arendt calls “glorified housekeeping” becomes the public concern par excellence. The national economies of modern states displace the concern with the public sphere of politics. At the second level, the social refers to mass society. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the principal characteristic of mass society is said to be loneliness. She writes,

Loneliness, common ground for terror, the essence of totalitarian government .... is closely connected with the uprootedness and superfluosity which have been the curse of modern masses since the beginning of the industrial revolution and have become acute with the rise of imperialism at the end of the last century and the break-down of political institutions and social traditions in our time. To be uprooted means to have no place in the world, recognized and guaranteed by others; to be superfluous means not to belong to the world at all.

(Arendt 1979 [1951]: 475)

Statelessness preceded the condition of the mass of men who, having no protection by a public authority, are uprooted and eventually rendered superfluous (Arendt 1979 [1951]:

177). Arendt's resounding call of the "right to have rights" of every human being is an appeal to reconstruct the political systems of modernity such as to eliminate statelessness and superfluousness. Superfluous peoples are easy to dispense with in extermination camps.

Yet it would be wrong to think that Arendt, like Adorno and Horkheimer after 1939, saw a straight line from "the sling shot to the atom bomb" in Adorno's words (Adorno 2006 [1964/5]: 12). Nor did she think it inevitable that modernity would result in totalitarianism. Like Alexis de Tocqueville, she was interested in the principle of equality, which modernity had ushered in, and was more focused in exploring its paradoxical possibilities than submitting to the drumbeat of instrumental reason. This Tocquevillian orientation yields the third aspect of "the rise of the social" for Arendt, namely, life in civil society and civic associations which becomes possible only through the spread of equality in modernity. By "equality" Arendt does not just mean political and legal equality but also the eventual equalization of tastes, behavior, and manners. Arendt's historical writings on the Jewish question (see Arendt 2007), her early biography of Rahel Varnhagen (Arendt 1974 [1957]), and her discussions of racism, nationalism, and imperialism in Part Two of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* show her to be exploring the dialectic of equality and difference in modern societies.

She writes,

Equality of condition, though it is certainly a basis requirement for justice, is nevertheless among the greatest and most uncertain ventures of modern mankind. The more equal conditions are, the less explanation there is for the differences that actually exist between people; and thus all the more unequal do individuals and groups become .... This perversion of equality from a political into a social concept is all the more dangerous when a society leaves but little space for special groups and individuals, for then their differences become all the more conspicuous.

(Arendt 1979 [1951]: 54)

This insight of Arendt into the dialectic of equality and difference is, we believe, the most consequential aspect of her view of modernity. It is also what gives Arendt's thought a new actuality in the contemporary world at a time of the explosion of identity-based struggles. We believe that it is Arendt's cultural sociology of modernity (rather than her clearly inadequate understanding of the economy in modern societies) that most deserves emphasis.

The reasons for the comparatively hopeful nature of Arendt's assessment of developments in the 1960s, in particular, can be traced back to the above-mentioned contrast between her civic-republican perspective versus Adorno and Horkheimer's struggle with the Marxist tradition. Even if Adorno and Horkheimer had started to doubt whether Marxism could be rescued from its Stalinist degradation into positivism (Adorno and Horkheimer 2011 [1956]: 4), they still remained convinced of ultimate inadequacy of gradual reform. As Adorno remarks (in response to a caution against reformism by Horkheimer), "[r]eform of the administration cannot be brought about by peaceful means" (Ibid.: 22). And yet, their assessment of global prospects in 1956 suggests that they regarded such a fundamental change as absolutely necessary. "If we let history go its own way and just give it a little push," Adorno notes, "it will end up in a catastrophe for mankind." To which Horkheimer responds, "Nothing can be done to prevent that except to bring in Socialism" (Ibid.: 87).

In conclusion, we would like to consider one of Arendt's most well-known thesis about the "banality of evil." It is our claim that the Frankfurt School's theory of the "authoritarian personality" throws unexpected light on what Arendt may have meant with this phrase.

## The Authoritarian Personality and Adolf Eichmann

*The Authoritarian Personality*, now considered a classic in the field of social psychology, provided Adorno with the opportunity – and challenge – to translate his theoretical categories into an empirical research program. The project, which was part of the *Studies in Prejudice* series sponsored by the American Jewish Committee, sought to investigate whether it was possible to identify psychological patterns that made individuals more or less receptive to antidemocratic ideas (Adorno et al. 1969 [1950]: 2). The aim of the study was not to provide an account for the existence of anti-Semitism in society – such an account, the authors emphasize in the volume's introduction, would require a sociological or historical, rather than psychological, approach. Instead, it proceeded from the question why “certain individuals accept [anti-Semitic ideas] while others do not” (Adorno et al. 1969 [1950]: 3).

To do so, Adorno and a team of social psychologists from the University of California at Berkeley, designed a set of questionnaires and mapped the collected answers on three different scales: the A-S scale (to measure anti-Semitism), the E-scale (to measure ethnocentrism), and the Politico-Economic Conservatism scale. While each of these scales measured attitudes in specific areas, the later developed F-scale aimed at measuring “antidemocratic tendencies in the personality itself” (Adorno et al. 1969 [1950]: 13). The F-scale is methodologically noteworthy in that it aimed to measure the *potential*, the “readiness” of individuals, for fascism (rather individuals' active commitment to different forms of prejudice). The basis for grouping different opinions and attitudes within a particular scale was “the conception that taken together they expressed a single general trend” (Ibid.).

The F-scale consists of nine variables, which were adapted from the interpretative frame that Adorno and Horkheimer had deployed in the “Elements of Anti-Semitism” chapter in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Buck-Morss 1977: 178–181). Here, Adorno and Horkheimer had approached anti-Semitism as product of a specific configuration of psychological tendencies which, conversely, were rooted in the social structure of postliberal capitalist society: conformism (or “conventionalism”), authoritarian submission and aggression, a lack of critical reflection, sexual repression, pathic projection, superstition, and stereotyping (i.e., a disposition to think in rigid and inflexible categories) (Adorno et al. 1969: 228; Buck-Morss 1977: 181).

For the purpose of this chapter, we would like to highlight two aspects in this context. First, the classification of individuals into different psychological types can itself be regarded as an instance of the very behavior the study associated with the authoritarian personality type. In Adorno's words, “the rigidity of constructing types is itself indicative of that ‘stereopathic’ mentality which belongs to the basic constituents of the potentially fascist character” (Adorno et al. 1969 [1950]: 746). However, Adorno argues, there is good reason for the “persistent plausibility of the psychological approach,” since there exists an *objective* societal trend toward the liquidation of individuality in modern society. Thus, “[t]here is reason to look for psychological types because the world in which we live is typed and ‘produces’ different ‘types’ of persons” (Ibid.: 747). This theoretical premise, which “comprehends the typification of men itself as a social function” constitutes the *critical* aspect of the authors' typology (Ibid.). (For a detailed discussion of Adorno's struggle with the study's self-reflexivity problem, see Gordon 2017.)

Second, one cannot help but notice the similarities between the F-scale variables and Hannah Arendt's phenomenological assessment of Adolf Eichmann's character. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt had coined the by-now infamous, and still controversial, expression “the banality of evil” so as to give voice to what she regarded as the most puzzling feature of this Nazi war criminal – namely, the latter's “thoughtlessness.” Eichmann, she argued, was no “Iago and not Macbeth,”

[e]xcept for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all ... He *merely*, to put it colloquially, *never realized what he was doing*... It was sheer thoughtlessness – something by no means identical with stupidity – that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period.

(Arendt 1965: 288)

For Arendt, it was precisely the *banal* quality of Eichmann's character that constituted the central *moral* and *legal* challenges of his trial (Arendt 1965: 26–27). In this context, the term “thoughtlessness” is not synonymous with “forgetfulness” or “negligence,” but is meant to signify a specific mentality, or psychic syndrome. For Arendt, Eichmann was “thoughtless” in that he displayed a puzzling “inability to think.” In her later essay “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” Arendt describes this inability to think in terms of a peculiar combination of *flexibility and rigidity* on Eichmann's part: on the one hand, Eichmann adapted with considerable ease to the rules and standards of judgment of his trial – rules and standards that couldn't have been more different from those that had been operative in the Third Reich. On the other hand, this flexibility was contrasted with a peculiar kind of mental rigidity, which Arendt saw manifested in Eichmann's language. The latter, Arendt notes, was made up of a “limited supply” of clichés and “stock phrases,” rendering Eichmann “utterly helpless only when confronted with a situation to which none of them would apply” (Arendt 2003 [1971]: 158–159). For Arendt, this rigidity pointed to a lack of the capacity for reflection in Eichmann's part: such clichés and stock phrases provided certain scripts that enabled us to live our daily lives without constantly falling into deep reflection of our experiences. Hence, they protect us against

the claim on our thinking attention which all events and facts arouse by virtue of their existence. If we were responsive to this claim all the time, we would soon be exhausted; the difference in Eichmann was only that he clearly knew of no such claim at all.

(Arendt 2003 [1971]: 160)

In other words, Arendt's concept of *thoughtlessness* indicates absence of the capacity for reflection, leading to what the Frankfurt School theorists would have called a *reification of thought*. It designates a mode of cognition that operates by consistently imposing a fixed set of learned rules on reality, no matter how contradictory the result may be. In this sense, “thoughtlessness” also indicates the inability for facing up to experience.

Certainly, while “the banality of evil” thesis has been much misunderstood, it was Arendt's generalization about the behavior of Jewish Councils, appointed by the Nazis to administer territories in East and Central Europe, that caused much bitter rebuttals and hurt in the Jewish community, earning her Gershom Scholem's caustic remark that she lacked “*Ahabat Israel*” (love of the Jewish people) (Scholem 1964: 51–56). Arendt's continuing and almost militant involvement with Jewish and Israeli politics contrasts with the silent acceptance and solidarity with Israel that Adorno and Horkheimer displayed (see Angermann 2015).

Yet, Max Horkheimer's private notes from this period reveal that he as well was highly critical of the Eichmann trial – indeed, that he even regarded the circumstances surrounding the latter as potentially harmful. “The formal grounds for the trial,” Horkheimer observed, “are obviously untenable” since “Eichmann did not murder in Israel, nor can Israel wish that the seizure of political criminals in the asylum they should or should not have found become the general rule” (Horkheimer 1978: 194). Against the claim that objections of this sort had



to be measured against the important educational function of the trial, Horkheimer argues that the trial would do more harm than good in this respect:

Both among Israel's youth and the sympathetic masses in other nations which one hopes to win over, the unconscious suspicion that the slain are being used for political means, that they serve tactical and propagandistic ends, will constitute an obstacle, however legitimate the national purpose will be.

(Ibid.)

Thus, Horkheimer concludes, "nothing good will come of this trial, neither for the security and position of Jews in the world, nor for their self-consciousness" (Horkheimer 1978: 196).

## Conclusion

Despite all personal enmities and rivalries, Arendt's work, as well as Adorno's and Horkheimer's, exhibits a remarkably rich synthesis of German Philosophy from Kant to Hegel, to Husserl, Heidegger, and beyond, with great focus on sociohistorical and cultural realities. For all of them National Socialism, in particular, signified a "break in civilization" (Diner 2000) of such magnitude that the imperative of thinking became to understand how Auschwitz was possible. They brought to this question the formidable analytical tools of German Idealism and social theory. It is this passion for understanding how what happened was possible that forms for them an ethical imperative. Thought must be in the service of emancipation, in Adorno and Horkheimer's language; for Arendt, thinking must grasp the new such as to enable vistas of freedom.

It is by reading and engaging with their multiple legacies that we will gain the richness of perspective and analytical sharpness to understand the past in order to master our own future.

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# MARCUSE AND THE PROBLEM OF REPRESSION

*Brian O'Connor*

As an associate of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research during the 1930s, Herbert Marcuse produced a range of papers that would have significant impact on the future agenda of critical theory. He made innovative contributions, among other things, to the developing relationship between Frankfurt School theory and Hegelian and Weberian notions of social development, to the idea of culture as a limitation on human possibility, and to articulating the sharp differences between liberalism and emancipatory theory. Unlike a number of his peers, notably, Max Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, and Theodor W. Adorno, he gave little attention to possible affinities between critical theory and psychoanalysis. In retrospect, this disinterest is remarkable given his cooption of that branch of psychology, from the 1950s onward, on a scale that is unparalleled among Frankfurt School philosophers before or since.

Marcuse attempted, in effect, to reset the very foundations of critical theory by granting shared explanatory authority to certain psychoanalytic concepts in the interpretation of experience within contemporary capitalist societies. This merger involves a radical assumption. Marcuse believed that Freudian theory can be coherently modified to enable it to speak of the world that is of interest to critical theory. Some of the topics of critical theory and psychoanalysis may appear suggestively close on a number of issues – alienated and neurotic experience, for example, might be understood as accounts of human beings whose circumstances prevent them from being at home with themselves and in the world – but they lie far apart with regard to the causal explanation of the conditions they describe. An obvious reason for this is that Freud does not see his enterprise as a political one. For him, capitalism represents no special evil. He rejects the optimistic notion that civilization exists in order to enable spontaneous and expressive freedom. Critical theory, by contrast, takes freedom of that variety as an ideal that emancipatory social theory must continue to promote. Freud recognizes that agreeable ways of living could be found wherever civilization has succeeded, but these ways are subordinate to the behavioral constraints required for the very existence of civilization itself. Freud, then, might seem to be of little use to critical theory if he believes that civilization essentially involves constraint, that coercive inner experience that stands in the way of genuine emancipation. Marcuse maintains, however, that Freud's basic story of how civilization emerges can be translated from science into the more effective register of history. This translation hinges on some of Freud's own underdeveloped, though acknowledged, historicist theses. The product of Marcuse's reconstruction of Freud's official theory amounts, indeed, to a new line of psychoanalytic theorizing, one that will require justifications that cannot be settled by referral to Freudian authority.

The discussion of Marcuse that follows is centered on his book *Eros and Civilization* (published originally in 1955). In that text, Marcuse reinterprets a number of Freudian ideas. These include the ideas of the death and life instincts, the Oedipus complex, and sublimation. An analysis of Marcuse's creative appropriation of any one of these ideas could allow us to appreciate the distinctive new spaces that Marcuse opens up for critical theory. This chapter, however, will focus on the complex variety of ways in which Marcuse reinvents the idea of repression. That idea, in fact, occupies the central place in Marcuse's theory since he finds in it a compelling explanation of the forms of experience and individual formation that are specific to the contemporary world. Particular attention will be given to Marcuse's original ideas of "surplus repression" and scarcity as domination, together with several attendant claims that support those ideas. As we shall see, Marcuse offers several lines of thought about repression and emancipation that pull his key theses in different directions. In some places, Marcuse accepts Freud's claims about the necessity of repression, while in others he offers reasons for the elimination of all repression. These differing lines open up distinctive issues and problems. Marcuse's critical appropriation of Freud, it should be noted, has proved to be hugely controversial on a wide range of grounds. Critics, as the editors of his *Collected Papers* explain, have accused Marcuse of generating "pseudo-concepts" by means of defective and simplistic interpretations of Freud (Kellner, Pierce and Lewis 2011: 51). This chapter will offer no view on whether Marcuse is entitled to read Freud as he does. Rather criticism will be concerned with the coherence of that reading within the terms of the emancipatory social theory it aims to be.

### The Turn to Psychoanalysis

Marcuse's commitment to psychoanalysis is of a quite different order to what we find elsewhere in Frankfurt School critical theory. The conventional, and indeed continuing, motivation for critical theory's consideration of psychoanalytic material is to locate an apparently neutral – i.e. non-ideologically driven – theory of individual development or personality that can provide evidence for the fundamental theses of critical theory itself. Notions like commodification or reification capture social relations that have gone awry in some sense: they describe brutal yet apparently normal ways of relating to others, the world, and oneself. The intricate accounts of individual development offered by Freudian theory might – the conventional line goes – provide a way into an explanation of the entrenchment of these inadequate forms of relating. When critical theory approaches psychoanalysis with that sort of interest, it is, in effect, intellectually exploitative: it seeks corroboration of its antecedently developed concepts, and its involvement with psychoanalysis is limited strictly to what is supportive of those concepts. Marcuse's adoption of psychoanalytic material for social theoretical purposes, however, goes further than that. Psychoanalytic material is not alone to be used, it is also developed. Likewise, critical theoretical concepts are not merely illustrated by psychoanalytic terminology, but broadened in response to psychoanalytic insights. Marcuse, in effect, wants to employ psychoanalytic psychology and critical theoretical notions as two complementary and mutually implicating perspectives on the very same phenomena. Two ostensibly radical accounts of social agency combine, as equal partners, to try to explain with unprecedented reach the hidden forces that generate the sense of reality that frames human experience. The social phenomena that Marcuse considers in *Eros and Civilization* are revealed uniquely through this synthetic theory.

In the introduction to *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse explains the need for a new theoretical approach to the social world:

This essay employs psychological categories because they have become political categories. The traditional borderlines between psychology on the one side and political and social philosophy on the other have been made obsolete by the condition of man in the present era: formerly autonomous and identifiable psychical processes are being absorbed by the function of the individual in the state – by his public existence.

(EC xi)

The analysis of contemporary human experience offered in *Eros and Civilization* works to make good on the claim that political and psychological life are inseparable. It is argued that individual formation is no longer intelligible without reference to the social-political context of that formation. Marcuse maintains, we can see, (1) that there was once an “autonomous” psychical space. This view implies that the political dimension of life could be, what we might call, external or, indeed, perhaps nonexistent. By the political realm Marcuse intends those conditions put in place by human beings to facilitate interpersonal freedom and the effective production and consumption of goods necessary for the preservation of life. When that realm is external it will lie under the control of human beings. It can be manipulated by them without it exerting any reciprocal influence on those who manipulate it. This realm, however, has now become, through the development of a capitalist system which encroaches on our lives, part of the inner world. The relationship of control is reversed. Once external institutions, having lost any reference to human agency, have themselves become autonomous and now govern our experiences and expectations. This brings us to Marcuse’s basic proposition (2) that there are uniquely totalizing conditions in place in contemporary life, i.e. that all experience is in some respect an expression of the social system. There is a weaker version of this claim which holds that actions which are assumed to belong to individuals – their personal preferences or their conceptions of a good life – *operate within the limits* of what the allegedly self-maintaining social system can tolerate. Marcuse takes the stronger view of this process and proposes that society shapes individuals to the degree that their *choices are a function* of the system. They are “a standardized reaction pattern” (EC 252). It is this claim – the totalization thesis – that underpins Marcuse’s synthesis of the psychological and political spaces. As we shall see, Marcuse’s considerations of what emancipation would mean oscillate between these two options. That is, Marcuse tries to identify freedom both with the space of the ordinarily civilized (i.e. the former reality) and the absence of all repression since repression is a special quality of the totalized world (i.e. the present reality).

In a paper from the time of *Eros and Civilization*, “Freedom and Freud’s Theory of Instincts” (originally delivered in 1956), Marcuse further addresses the justification for his new theoretical approach. It is one thing to be struck by the similarities between the concerns of two quite different theories that belong to two separate fields of enquiry. The methodological question of how the two can be combined needs, though, to be answered. Marcuse acknowledges that he must show that Freudian categories, which are generally thought to be in some sense biological ones, can be appropriately employed as categories of the “social and historical” world (Marcuse 1970: 1). More fundamentally, the claim that “psychology today is an essential part of political science” (ibid.: 1) requires a defense. The justification Marcuse promises is not, in fact, delivered in a specific argument or set of theses. Rather, it turns out to be performatively demonstrated through the fluid and mutually corroborating employment of concepts from both social theory and psychoanalysis. To take one example, Marcuse describes a state of affairs in which “the individual’s goals and purposes and the means of striving for and attaining them are prescribed to him and performed by him as something prescribed” (ibid.: 1). In this situation, there is no real freedom: experience is exercised within and channeled through constraints that are determined by general social

forces. Individuals wrongly believe that these constraints are self-imposed. That error is embodied in the ideal of autonomy. And that ideal – just expressed in philosophical and social theoretical terms – is perfectly described, Marcuse thinks, in Freud's notion of the superego which "absorbs the authoritarian models, the father and his representatives, and makes their commands and prohibitions its own laws, the individual's conscience. Mastery of drives becomes the individual's own accomplishment – autonomy" (ibid.: 2). The Freudian language speaks aptly – not merely coincidentally or figuratively – of political phenomena which are of significance for critical theory. Marcuse specifically rejects the traditional form of defense of the incorporation of psychoanalysis or psychology into political theory in which one region is identified as basic and a second one is subordinate to it. The two regions, he maintains, are coextensive rather than hierarchically arranged.

### Beyond Basic Repression

The synthesis of critical theory with psychoanalysis involves a bold move designed to redress what might be described as the political indifference of Freud's work. Freud, obviously enough, makes no distinction between the ordinarily civilized and the totalized. His notion of civilization is unvariegated. And in that respect his anthropology might lend itself to a moral resignation in which the miseries of repression – pleasure forestalled and the attendant phenomenon of social aggression – are facts of any human community. Marcuse acknowledges the difficulties that Freud's evolutionary story is ordinarily seen to present for the ideal of a non-repressive civilization. He notes that "Freud's proposition that civilization is based on the permanent subjugation of the human instincts has been taken for granted" (EC 3). But there is a way beyond the apparent resignation of Freud's position, and it is to be found, according to Marcuse, in Freud's work itself which, he writes, "provides reasons for rejecting his identification of civilization with repression" (EC 4). Marcuse proposes what he sees as a sympathetic evolution of Freudian theory by transforming it into a historical science. In fact, that transformation, as noted earlier, is supposedly in line with an unstated commitment within Freud's work to a more contextual notion of civilization than at first appears.

Marcuse's starting point is the Freudian thesis that the human organism in its pure state is naturally driven to seek the immediate gratification of its desires. This, the pleasure principle, is its sole end. The organism makes no plans and neither organizes nor assesses the implications of acting on those desires. This is an impractical disposition, however, since reality cannot facilitate both endless spontaneous pleasure and the general survival of the organism: the organism must also attend to its vital material needs. As Freud himself puts it: "what decides the purpose of life is simply the programme of the pleasure principle." But there "is no possibility at all of its being carried through; all the regulations of the universe run counter to it" (Freud 2001a: 76). The organism is situated in an environment of what Marcuse glosses as "scarcity." This is an economic thesis that refers to the fact that the goods that we require have to be secured through work; they are not superabundant. Marcuse justifies that gloss by quoting from Freud's *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*:

Society's motive in enforcing the decisive modification of the instinctual structure is thus "economic; since it has not means enough to support life for its members without work on their part, it must see to it that the number of these members is restricted and their energies directed away from sexual activities on to their work."  
(EC 17)

Meeting basic organic needs eventually gives rise to an entirely new form of experience. Immediate satisfaction of desires is repressed, self-preservation is granted priority, and pleasure

is confined to periods when the immediate task of self-preservation temporarily loses its urgency. The organism does not simply adjust to circumstances; it undergoes a dramatic phase of evolution. The ego develops from the chaotic forces of desire as the organizing locus of self-preservation. The reality principle, as Laplanche and Pontalis explain, “emerges as a law which comes from outside” the organism. Its “demands, however, tend to be gradually appropriated by the apparatus itself” (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973: 136). The ego becomes the regulatory force of the organism. As Freud puts it: “An ego thus educated has become ‘reasonable’” (Freud 2001b: 357). The ego that comes into view here is the one that roughly corresponds to what Freud considers the civilized self. This brief account of Freud’s position shows us why he takes repression to be a necessary feature of civilization. Without a reality principle, there is only the self-destructive anarchy of desire. The removal of repression – were it possible – would entail the elimination of the ego and thereby the basis of persons who collectively sustain civilized communities.

### Basic/Surplus Repression, Reality/Performance Principle

Marcuse draws out the critical theoretical significance of the Freudian idea of repression through the innovative claim that there is a distinctive form of repression that marks contemporary capitalist societies. He terms this *surplus repression*. This is not that basic repression which Freud describes as a response to natural reality. It is repression that exceeds what is required for survival in the literal sense. The appearance of surplus repression is nevertheless explained as the result of a process that is essentially the same as that through which Freud accounts for basic repression. Reality bears down on human beings and constrains what they prefer spontaneously to do. In response, human beings adjust their desires to the limitations imposed on them by the realities within which they live. This adjustment is, again, repression. By adjusting repressively the demands of reality, which are initially a contingent matter of external circumstances, such limitations become their norms. The ego then has the mission of regulating the organism to the requirements of its social environment, whatever that happens to be. In this respect, a civilized creature is one who has adapted, so to speak, to the distinctive ecosystem of its social reality. Marcuse holds that the reality principle, as Freud had conceived it, “sustains the organism in the external world” but that in “the case of the human organism, this is an historical world” (EC 34). Social reality is a historically variable “phenomenon” (EC 16). It is not limited to one form and nor, therefore, are the reality demands that can be placed on the ego. This historicization thesis, we shall see, generates a complexity in Marcuse’s position since it tempts him, in one significant line of thought, into construing repression as ontologically historical and therefore without the necessity that attaches to it as a biological phenomenon.

Marcuse gears the notion of repression toward the distinctive inner lives of individuals caught up in the forces of contemporary capitalist societies. We are to think of the repressions generated in that context as of a different species to those of basic repression. Capitalism does not maintain itself by using human beings equipped only with the formation they have received in that basic state. Rather, its human beings are shaped in wholly new ways in order to function effectively within the system (the totalization thesis). Marcuse believes that “the specific historical institutions of the reality principle” found in capitalism “introduce *additional* controls over and above those indispensable for civilized human association” (EC 37). The fact that these repressions are “additional” will offer a kind of diagnostic insight into the somehow inordinate presence of social determination. As Marcuse put it in a 1979 interview, the “degree of repression is decisive” (Marcuse 2011: 228). What is “decisive” comes into view as the “distinction between rational and irrational authority, between repression and surplus-repression” (EC 225). What is normatively reprehensible or irrational,



it seems, is the surplus degree of adjustment that is required. This is a striking thought when placed against the core of Freud's theory. Freud adopts the perspective of biology, of what an organism causally necessarily does in order to survive. This is to be distinguished from his accounts of what we might call individual deformative adjustment articulated through his theories of neurosis and psychosis, in which some unbearable feature of reality is accommodated at the cost of inexplicable behavior. And indeed the content of what is unbearable will be sociohistorical (e.g. social mores, familial bonds). The sort of general adjustment that is a function of civilization, however, belongs to a prior level. A theory which translates the mechanisms of the putatively biological into those of sociology has therefore to provide an account, alien to psychoanalysis, of how those mechanisms might in fact be wrong. That is, it must show that adjustment cannot be neutrally viewed as a natural-causal event because it is one which is induced due to circumstances that are neither natural nor neutral. The form of explanation given to it by psychoanalysis is not enough on its own, if at all, to explain the normative application of the reality principle and its repressions.

Marcuse largely maintains that the imposed denial of pleasure is a wrong other than in situations of unavoidable or unrevisable necessity. It seems, in this regard, that he does not therefore think of basic repression as a normatively significant phenomenon. Perhaps, the absence of wrong in cases of necessity is explained by the fact that those situations cannot be attributed to human action. Surplus repression is, though, an unnecessary violation of an orientation toward pleasure, a situation in which the organism would be free from tensions. It may seem like an imposition to construe Marcuse's interest in surplus repression as one that comes down to its implications for pleasure. Certainly the scope of his critical theory has broader and wider-ranging concerns, concerns which might be fairly encapsulated under the single heading of *emancipation*: liberation from capitalism. However, if the link between repression and pleasure denial is broken, Marcuse's use of the Freudian theory would amount to little more than word play. Repression would be the name for any kind of adjustment regardless of what its costs and advantages were to the organism. But that is certainly not, as we have seen, how Marcuse wants to engage with Freud's work.

By holding that Marcuse's idea of pleasure denial motivates his interest in repression theory, we can place his position within a kind of philosophical hedonism. In fact, Marcuse, from the earliest days of his critical writings, found significant agreements, unmediated by Freudian considerations, between hedonism and critical theory. In an essay of 1938, "On Hedonism," he noted that "the hedonistic trends of philosophy" have sought to redress the rationalistic conditions of the world by "identifying happiness with pleasure." The interest in pleasure is, Marcuse writes, "the materialistic protest of hedonism," which as a contribution to "human liberation" – liberation from a rationalized world – "is linked with the interest of critical theory" (Marcuse 1968: 162). This hedonist positioning gives us some view of the grounds of Marcuse's normative assessment of repression: socially produced repression is a harm to whatever range of dispositions that fall within human sensuality. As he explains in *Eros and Civilization*: "The erotic aim of sustaining the entire body as subject-object of pleasure" – an aim that critical theory must, Marcuse believes, find ways of defending – "calls for the continual refinement of the organism, the intensification of its receptivity, the growth of its sensuousness" (EC 212). Control of pleasure is the target of the reality principle. Marcuse can then explain how freedom or emancipation will lead to pleasure. But the criterion of pleasure will also, as we shall see, place limits on what can be coherently envisaged for non-repressive emancipated civilization.

Marcuse then is adding two fundamental dimensions to Freud's essential theory: a normative one that allows theory to evaluate repression (its "additional" or "irrational" forms), and a historical one in which repression varies according to circumstances that are attributable to human action. Marcuse sets out his historical-normative ideas of repression and the reality principle, as follows:

... the Freudian terms, which do not adequately differentiate between the biological and the socio-historical vicissitudes of the instincts, must be paired with corresponding terms denoting the specific socio-historical component. Presently we shall introduce two such terms:

(a) *Surplus-repression*: the restrictions necessitated by social domination. This is distinguished from (basic) *repression*: the “modifications” of the instincts necessary for the perpetuation of the human race in civilization.

(b) *Performance principle*: the prevailing historical form of the *reality principle*.  
(EC 35)

Surplus repression and conformity with the performance principle of capitalist reality are not simply notions held by individuals of what they ought to do in order to survive contemporary life. They involve adjustment to what individuals literally feel they must do. There is an acquired bodily discipline that predisposes them toward socially validated ways of acting. And since, as Marcuse puts it (in an essay of 1960, “From Ontology to Technology”), all “social repression rests on a ‘biological’ repression,” it follows that “all liberation presupposes a revolution, an upheaval in the order of instincts and needs: a new reality principle.” With that liberation, he explains, there would be a “total transvaluation of values that would affect the being of nature as well as the being of man” (Marcuse 2011: 139). Repression, then, is no Freudian analogue of the notion of ideology or false consciousness. What is repressively imposed is registered at a noncognitive level.

### Civilization with Repression

Marcuse seems at times to be committed to the notion that surplus repression is a secondary repression which is subsequent to the biologically explained basic repression. Basic repression as a nonnormative event, so to speak, is of no concern to critical theory. But Marcuse also maintains that all repression is antagonistic to our biological being – our hedonistic orientation – and that genuine emancipation would amount to a comprehensive transformation of our sensory being. That emancipatory ideal expands, in other words, to include a concern with all repression. We will look at these two options in turn. These are, in essence, the civilization *with* and *without* option.

In the 1979 interview, Marcuse addresses what he claims is a misunderstanding of his position. If it is a misunderstanding, it can probably be attributed to the ambiguity just noted. His critics take him to hold that an emancipated society would be free of all repression. But he responds: “I wouldn’t say that repression today is no longer necessary – *surplus* repression is no longer necessary. That is to say, repression that goes beyond the *basic* taboos and the *basic* prohibitions any and every civilization depends upon” (Marcuse 2011: 228). This moderate claim has the convenience of avoiding conflict with Freud’s account of basic repression. It can accommodate that account by simply banking it and moving on to a secondary level which sits on top of basic – biological, “phylogenetically necessary” (EC 87) – repression. Marcuse may then direct his critical attention to surplus repression, defined as “that portion” of “the repressed personality” “which is the result of specific societal conditions sustained in the specific interest of domination” (EC 87–88). This independent tier of repression is, though, an account of adjustment to an environment that will seem quite different to the environmental responses of basic repression in very fundamental ways. We have already seen their differences captured in terms of those which are phylogenetically necessary and those which are not. But there is an even more significant distinction. Basic repression refers to the conditions in which an ego emerges. This is a primal act, so to speak. Surplus repression operates within the conditions under which the agent who “performs” within capitalism

must develop. A particular kind of socially useful individual is generated. We can already anticipate the different outcomes of emancipation from these conditions: freedom from basic repression is the elimination of the ego, whereas freedom from surplus repression is a return to a noncapitalist ego.

We have seen Marcuse identify surplus repression as a different version of repression, one which is responsive to the performance principle. He is clear that while it "is probably biologically impossible to get away without any repression whatsoever," repression is "not identical with domination" (Marcuse 1970: 81). At the same time, an explanation of the mechanisms that make surplus repression effective is dependent on the story of the mechanisms of basic repression. For this dependence to succeed, each form of repression will need to function in generally the same way. Reality will have to present itself to the organism with a clear sense of threat to its preferences. Rather than persist with those preferences the organism will internalize the demands of reality and make them its own. Marcuse, as we have seen, identifies the pressures of reality in the context of surplus repression as social domination. In examining the structural similarities of the two types of repression, we should expect to find in the notion of social domination the same dynamic effects as natural scarcity if the organism is again to find a self-preserving solution in repression. The conditions of scarcity produce, in Marcuse's accounts, the same dynamic effects as the conditions of domination even though these conditions differ in their sources and in the consequences of defying them. Marcuse nonetheless maintains that the economic thesis (scarcity) is straightforwardly applicable to the level of surplus repression, too. He claims that

[t]hroughout the recorded history of civilization, the instinctual constraint enforced by scarcity has been intensified by constraints enforced by the hierarchical distribution of scarcity and labor; the interest of domination added surplus-repression to the organization of the instincts under the reality principle.

(EC 134)

This will mean that the two forms of repression can be explained by reference to the same dynamic: scarcity.

The supposed similarity of the dynamic effects of scarcity and social domination needs closer analysis. Marcuse commits a considerable amount of attention to identifying the deforming effects of domination, those that are essentially repressive. His notion of domination is multifaceted, in fact, in that among its many aspects are several that do not easily conform to the basic dynamic of scarcity in even the most attenuated sense. The following are representative of the characteristics of domination noted at various points in Marcuse's text. These are characteristics of domination that relate specifically to surplus repression, rather than basic repression.

(i) Throughout the world of industrial civilization, the domination of man by man is growing in scope and efficiency.

(EC 4)

The aggressive attitude toward the object-world, the domination of nature, thus ultimately aims at the domination of man by man.

(EC 114)

Domination here refers to the ruthless system of exploitation and competition familiarly identified by critics of capitalism. It involves the destruction of social relations and nature. This system generates institutions to maintain human beings in an attitude of compliance.

Marcuse sometimes refers to this form of social determinism as “institutionalized repression” (EC 92 et passim). Those institutions, which are not equivalent to basic survival adaptations, are the loci of the specific repressions of surplus repression. Marcuse notes a number of those arrangements:

(ii) For example, the modifications and deflections of instinctual energy necessitated by the perpetuation of the monogamic-patriarchal family, or by a hierarchical division of labor, or by public control over the individual's private existence are instances of surplus-repression pertaining to the institutions of a *particular* reality principle.

(EC 37–38)

The implication in this passage is that the forms of experience which are enabled by these institutions are in some sense harmful. The structured bourgeois family, for instance, constrains the roles of everyone within it; the division of labor is a denial of a range of expressive opportunities in that skills are placed within an order of prestige; social norms govern experience that is lived out in private. It may be difficult to imagine what a reversal of those institutions would amount to but it would, in short, be release from domination. The structure of everyday life and its interactions would no longer be determined by the systematic needs of capitalism. In these ways, Marcuse is expressing an orthodoxy of critical theory. He is more ambitious, however, in his effort to show that domination of this kind – with its worldly external hostility to the organism and its individual-internal repression – somehow reproduces scarcity of the original type:

(iii) domination does not exclude technical, material, and intellectual progress, but only as an unavoidable by-product while preserving irrational scarcity, want, and constraint.

(EC 36–37)

Marcuse has in mind a society in which access to goods is under the control of free market forces. In that sense, goods are not strictly scarce, but nor are they immediately accessible unless one participates in the market. Interestingly, progress – achieved through the dominating institutions noted in (ii) – nevertheless holds open the possibility of liberation: technological advances can free us of the scarcities that produce repressions. But the more significant point from this passage (iii) is that domination is in some sense the cause of a new form of scarcity, i.e. not the scarcity that is characteristic of nature.

The link between scarcity and the repressive dynamic of domination is not yet in view. Marcuse argues that participation in a reality where the performance principle prevails will require a repressive adjustment. Among the features of the performance reality to which surplus repression is a response are, he notes: “competitive economic performances” (EC 44); “body and mind are made into instruments of alienated labor” (EC 46), productivity becomes an obligation, reason “as an instrument of constraint, of instinctual suppression” (EC 159). No doubt each of these phenomena can be portrayed as manifestations of social domination but it is harder to link them with scarcity. That gap is particularly evident in the case of labor. Work, for Marcuse, is not – as we have just seen – simply a matter of securing self-preservation, as it is under circumstances of basic repression. Work involves direct opposition between workers who compete, perhaps, for positions or for prestige. Marcuse connects this competitiveness with the established Marxian idea of alienated labor. As a phenomenon, in Marx's terms, labor corresponds to a misery distinctive to the capitalist production of commodities. It involves the virtual enslavement of the worker, on subsistence

wages, and it destroys the worker's capacities for expressive interactions with nature. In these respects, it is a model of a pleasure-denying reality. Marcuse's invocation of the notion of alienated labor in the context of the dynamic of scarcity is complicated since it is not an account of labor under the conditions of the industrial revolution. Rather, it is employed to capture the qualities of work within the practices of contemporary capitalism. The notion of scarcity is not an immediately obvious entailment of that reality. And that means that an account of contemporary labor that is compatible with the surplus repression thesis will have to rest on a mechanism that departs in some way from the mechanism of basic repression. That mechanism is not however offered in Marcuse's work. A further issue related to work, with implications for the surplus repression thesis, arises from Marcuse's acknowledgment that alienated labor might be pleasurable (EC 220), or at least not miserable. In that case, a criterion other than the hedonist one is needed to explain why some kinds of pleasure are symptomatic of domination (a point of which Marcuse was keenly aware in the early essay on hedonism). The conditions of reality adjustment that are characteristic of the era of advanced capitalism cannot be uniformly spelled out in hedonistic terms: its quasi-imperatives do not always involve an attack on pleasure *per se*.

### **Civilization *without* Repression**

Marcuse also tells the story of domination in a way that lends itself to his other line of thought, namely that repression is a single phenomenon. He sees as "the truth in Freud's generalization... that a repressive organization of the instincts underlies all historical forms of the reality principle in civilization" (EC 34). Freud also, he notes, "expresses the historical fact that civilization has progressed as organized domination" (EC 34). The key point here, which sustains the notion that civilization must be free of repression, is the direct connection Marcuse makes between repression and domination. Even basic repression is to be read as a response to domination. The claim that civilization can function in the absence of repression may be a direct amendment of Freud's official position. Unofficially, however, "Freud's own theory," Marcuse writes, "provides reasons for rejecting his identification of civilization with repression" (EC 4). He also conjectures that historical developments "seem to create the preconditions for the gradual abolition of repression" (EC 5). This is because it has become possible, as we have seen in the notion of technological liberation, to organize the world to meet our basic needs without any compromise of our erotic, pleasure orientations. There are considerations now, Marcuse perhaps thinks, that were unavailable to Freud.

We might wonder how the notion of the elimination of all repression might affect our understanding of emancipation. It cannot, in this context, be restricted to emancipation from capitalism. The point can be illustrated by reference to an oscillation within Marcuse's work about the liberating possibilities of aesthetic experience: the familiar options of a return to noncapitalist basic repression and the elimination of all repression. At various places, Marcuse construes aesthetic experience as a space free specifically of surplus repression and therefore, implicitly, no reminder of a primal past prior to repression. Art offers us a model of experience which stands in oppositional contrast with the requirements of the performance principle. It is, in this regard, that it earns the sobriquet the "Great Refusal," which Marcuse sees as "the protest against unnecessary repression, the struggle for the ultimate form of freedom" (EC 149). The individual self gains an intimation of freedom from the kind of repression that is attributable to the institutions of the totalized society. Marcuse, though, also offers an elimination of all repression view of freedom as an implication of aesthetic experience. That experience provides us with a glimpse of the freedom which reminds us of life prior to repression, not merely surplus repression. Marcuse seems to say that this experience conveys something that has practical significance for us: it points to a space of freedom. Aesthetic "phantasy

(imagination) retains the structure and the tendencies of the psyche prior to its organization by the reality, prior to its becoming an ‘individual’ set off against other individuals” (EC 142). And he specifies that “the entire subsequent history of man is characterized by the destruction of this original unity...” (EC 142). Aesthetic experience, then, speaks to some original phase of our existence, one that is recognizably governed by the pleasure principle.

That second set of thoughts – about pre-individual experience – brings us back to the question of how we are to conceive of the idea of emancipation from all repression. There is a challenge in explaining whose interests are in focus when emancipation involves the release from all repression. Now it may seem that Marcuse avoids this dizzying space by claiming that he is concerned simply with domination-repression. In that case, he is really then concerned with surplus repression. As we have seen, however, Marcuse does not restrict the scope of repression to the “additional” level. And in that case the subject of emancipation is not the individual who has suffered from the performance principle but some human form without ego identity. If liberation involves a transformation of subjectivity then who is to be the beneficiary of this liberation becomes obscure. There is no “I” referent, no subject in any familiar sense who can recognize a space within which existential improvements might be enjoyed. It seems, then, that the Marcusean subject of emancipation seeks not only liberation from capitalism – the theater of the performance principle, the manufacturer of scarcity – but from itself. It does not merely want the overthrow of capitalism, but wants, in fact, the overthrow of the conditions that allow capitalism to persist, and among those conditions is the “ego” subject itself.

## Conclusion

Marcuse’s theory of repression is, as we have seen, an original effort to explain the forms of behavior that are peculiar to the era of advanced capitalism. Its ambitious synthesis of psychoanalytic and political concepts has certainly left its mark on the work of the Frankfurt School of critical theory. If the analysis offered in this chapter is sustainable, then it might be concluded that Marcuse’s theory is, in a quite serious way, impeded by the very explanatory model which largely inspires it: the Freudian notion of basic repression. There are complications produced directly from the isomorphism of basic and surplus repression. The association of domination with scarcity bears a tremendous weight. A different sort of difficulty arises once emancipation is conceived in terms of a non-repressive civilization. That very idea takes us to a space in which those human interests and experiences that motivate political theory – Marcuse’s included – can no longer be seen.

## Abbreviation

EC: Marcuse, H. (1987). *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. London: Ark Edition.

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# CRITICAL THEORY AND POSTSTRUCTURALISM

*Martin Saar*

While it is difficult, if not impossible, to account for the unity or coherence of Critical Theory, the attempt to do so for poststructuralism seems even more futile. Neither the name for a school nor that for an intellectual tradition with clear-cut boundaries, this term has come to refer mainly to the work of a small group of rather diverse French thinkers of more or less the same generation: Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Jean-François Lyotard, and often their predecessors Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser and Jacques Lacan (Münker and Roesler 2012). It is also used to refer to work similar to theirs in their own time (as the variant of deconstruction the Belgian-American literary theorist Paul de Man has developed), but also to contemporary theories inspired and marked by the former but developed in new directions (such as the oeuvres of Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe or Slavoj Žižek). Speaking of poststructuralism therefore refers to, on the one hand, an original body of work with more or less defined historical boundaries, namely the period from the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s, and, on the other hand, its rather broad and unfinished effects or *Wirkungsgeschichte*, and therefore a set of theoretical gestures and concepts that continue to mark a significant part of current theorizing in the humanities worldwide (Stäheli 2000; Schrift 2010).

This fuzziness and underdetermination of the term “poststructuralism” is clearly mirrored in the many uses of the term “Critical Theory,” which is first used as a reference in intellectual history with a clear demarcation (namely the Frankfurt School in its earlier phases), second, as a name for a group of diverse theories somewhat connected to the first two generations, and third, even broader, as the designation for a whole realm of critical social theory in its widest sense (with many poststructuralist works included). While it would be worthwhile reconstructing the intellectual relations between poststructuralism in the narrower and broader senses to all of the three versions of Critical Theory just outlined, in what follows I will only offer a quite limited and partial perspective. In highlighting the resonance of four major *topoi* from classical poststructuralist thinking with canonical reflections from the Critical Theory tradition, I hope to shed some light on the deep affinity between the two styles of thinking. This is not to downplay or deny the many systematic, methodological and even ideological differences that have been articulated by many authors involved in this exchange and by later commentators on their works. What I want to make visible is one strand in the Critical Theory continent, namely its philosophy of critique, problematization and contestation. Highlighting this strand (and therefore, of course, leaving many others to the side) can reveal a deep affinity with poststructuralism that, having emerged from



different intellectual contexts and aiming at different theoretical opponents, can also be characterized by its polemical and antagonistic character.

On a rather abstract level, both paradigms of thought can be read as offering exercises in non-essentialist and anti-totalitarian thinking which reach from purely theoretical and conceptual questions to practical, political, and even militant stances toward contemporary regimes of truth and forms of action. It might well be that in future textbooks on the intellectual history of the twentieth century, they will appear rather as close cousins than rivals within the broader developments in the humanities. The four fields with regard to which this can be argued in an exemplary fashion are the problem of the bounds of sense and language, the problem of the (im)possibility of history and progress, the problem of the entanglement of power and reason, and the problem of the limits and conditions of the subject and consciousness. I will conclude with some reflections on a version of a current and future Critical Theory that embraces its quasi-poststructuralist elements.

### The Bounds of Sense and Language

One of the most foundational moments of poststructuralism as an intellectual movement in retrospect can be found in the early Derrida's confrontations with classical structuralism and progressive philosophies during the mid- and late 1960s and early 1970s (Ingram 2010). Commenting on the theories of language and signification after Saussure, on Heidegger and phenomenology, and on Bataille, Blanchot, and others, Derrida came to advance an argument in two steps. The first step is Derrida's skeptical analysis of the metaphysical or ontological systems of traditional philosophy. Breaking up the more or less closed and dogmatic cages of rationalist or idealist philosophies seemed necessary, but difficult. In painstakingly detailed interpretations of Husserl, Lévi-Strauss, Saussure and many others, Derrida was able to show that even attempts to go beyond the traditional form of metaphysical argumentation remain bound up with dogmatic, foundational gestures. He was thus calling into question the supposedly non-metaphysical nature of even formalist structuralism or vitalist anti-metaphysics. The very way in which these attempts are put forward prevents a complete breakout from the grip of metaphysical thinking.

The second step concerns the very form of philosophical argument or its linguistic basis. All philosophical systems are put forward in a form that is in itself hierarchical or foundational, granting superior status to some terms in binary oppositions and relegating others to an inferior place (as in the oppositions nature/culture, sign/signification, appearance/essence, etc.). There emerges the task of analyzing

all the pairs of opposites on which philosophy is constructed and on which our discourse lives, not in order to see opposition erase itself but to see what indicates that each of the terms must appear as the *différance* of the other, as the other different and deferred in the economy of the same.

(Derrida 1982: 18)

However, on a closer look and under the eye of a relentless interpreter, these oppositions prove unstable and ultimately unfounded. They are dynamic positings within a certain system and produce their own resistances within a given text, claiming the natural or evident status of its main conceptual structures. The seemingly stable hierarchies rest on the dynamic play of linguistic maneuvers, and any attempt to seal off or fix this dynamic is futile, since there is no "center" or "no natural site" for meaning which is "not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play" (Derrida 2001: 353–354).

Therefore, for Derrida it is the nature of language itself that, on the one hand, gives rise to unavoidable pretensions and illusions of structure, hierarchy, and order, and, on the other, undoes them, revealing the deep contingency and lack of ultimate foundations. Whereas the classical structuralism of Saussure had helpfully revealed the arbitrariness of the sign and the dynamic nature of signification, and shown that the meaning of any given sign or term rests on its relation to others, it stopped there. To say that identity emerges out of difference(s), Derrida claims, is not enough. One has to account for the never-present, always fugitive moment of differentiation itself that makes material differences (as differences between different signs) possible without being itself a visible or empirical fact within a given language. Derrida's term of art, "différance," refers to this ever-operative yet elusive play of language itself that wrecks all pretensions of clear meanings or identities. His proposal then is to read the classical texts of philosophy and literature in a certain way, critically, and with an attention to the inner workings of language and the contingent but powerful claims to hierarchy and foundation. This exercise of immanent criticism or deconstruction (in the technical sense) will not completely undo or neutralize these effects but expose them and create the space for subversive interventions and other readings.

Given this short summary of a line of thought characteristic of early poststructuralism, three similarities to certain motives from Critical Theory, and most notably to the work of Adorno, impose themselves. First, like Derrida, Adorno is highly critical of the classical tradition (especially idealism) and keen on exposing the inner violence and forced order within canonical philosophical systems and texts, as well as the ideological nature of their claims. Classical philosophy's pretensions at ultimate and eternal truth are exposed as having a rather contingent origin and function, and this exposure subverts the appearance of absolute objectivity essential to bourgeois thought.

Second, Adorno's critical stance toward traditional philosophy and metaphysics does not lead him to pretend to fully step out of its horizon. As in the case of Derrida, for Adorno the only critical gesture open to late modern thought is to work through the false claims of traditional and modernist theory, and to reveal their inner contradictions and aporias. But this effort is made on the basis of the assumption that these contradictions are, up to a point, unavoidable, that the history of Western philosophy has left us with the heritage of a certain discourse that cannot be just left behind. In this sense, reading and reinterpreting the history of metaphysics is the only way to redeem its falseness; it is the only way to advance in thinking. For this reason, critical philosophy too remains within a certain line or tradition of thought and "[t]here is solidarity between such thinking and metaphysics at the time of its fall" (Adorno 1973: 408). This enigmatic formula from Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* indicates the proximity to deconstruction, which also confesses its intimate link to the very tradition whose grip on contemporary thinking it tries to unsettle: the very project of anti-metaphysics or *Metaphysikkritik* remains an operation within the horizon of terms, gestures and aspirations that come from the history of metaphysics (Wellmer 1991; Baumann, Müller and Vogt 1999).

Third, as in the case of Derrida, Adorno's methodological basis for many systematic claims lies on the level of a theory of language or concepts. Without ever referencing the achievements of structuralism and leaning on more traditional perspectives (from Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche, among others), Adorno advances the view that general concepts contain a moment of abstraction and falsity that pits them against the ever-singular content they are meant to grasp. This moment of elusiveness and non-congruence leads him to the formulation of the famous doctrine of the "nonidentical," mainly elaborated in terms of the philosophy of language (Adorno 1973: 135–207; Seel 2006). It is at this point not difficult to discern a deep affinity between negative-dialectical and deconstructive thought. Both approaches insist on the dynamic and ultimately elusive relation between word and object, signifier and

signified, and both make traditional philosophy responsible for trying to deny the dynamic, ever-shifting play of language in favor of clear-cut identifications and hierarchical thinking. When Adorno attacks the forced identity or “identity’s coercive character” (Adorno 1973: 299; *Identitätszwang*) in conceptual thinking, he points to something that Derrida might have tried to account for with his insistence on the *différance*. Deconstruction or early post-structuralism, as well as Adorno’s Critical Theory, thus share a certain anti-essentialist, anti-identitarian view of language and conceptuality. Both call for an identity critique of the false pretensions of metaphysics, but both also acknowledge their rootedness in the nature of language and conceptual thinking as such (Bertram 2011).

### The (Im)Possibility of History and Progress

Another seminal moment in the development of poststructuralism as a paradigm can be found in Lyotard’s ground-breaking 1979 essay *The Postmodern Condition*. In retrospect, his diagnosis of the end of “the grand narratives” (Lyotard 1984: 38) has proven to be one of the most successful intellectual attempts to formulate the *Zeitgeist* in Western societies in the final decades of the twentieth century. Its core, however, consists in a rather complex philosophical thesis. Lyotard sees a mutual dependence of modern consciousness, modern philosophy of history and the specific sense of legitimacy accorded to modern institutions. Modern knowledge needs a frame of reference to function as the legitimation for modern social arrangements; because we think of institutions in a certain way, we allow them to regulate our lives.

Lyotard sees two main modern narratives or ideologies at work, and both of them are in serious crisis. There is, on the one hand, the idea that the accumulation of knowledge and the advance in scientific mastery of the world will itself generate enlightenment and emancipation. And, on the other, there is the idea that the very process that produces a learned, self-conscious subject (*Bildung* in the strong Humboldtian-Hegelian sense) is an end in itself. Both stories link rationality to liberation, and both suggest an almost automatic, teleological process of, one might say, modernization, presupposing the progress of knowledge and society at the same time. Modern societies under the emblem of Science and Reason are thought to progress by knowing (about themselves and the world) and founding increasingly efficient, transparent institutions at the service of increasingly rational subjects.

For Lyotard, this modern self-image has, however, come into crisis and is torn by an “internal erosion” (Ibid.: 39). New technological developments, forms of storing and processing knowledge, and functions of language and communication have untied the close connection between knowledge and social progress and pluralized the functions of science and *Bildung*. No coherent, unitary narrative or ideology, he claims, can any longer secure the supremacy of reason based on progressive knowledge, transparent institutions and rational subjects. To accept this “heterogeneity of language games” (ibid.: xxv) means to redescribe the very form of modern society, and to say farewell to the dream of social progress coming about on its own in the course of modernization.

It has been passionately debated whether Lyotard’s plea for a resignation from a “universal metalanguage” (ibid.: xxv) means that one should resign from philosophy as a form of thinking, or whether it can be understood as an attempt to propose a radically pluralist, contextualist and non-metaphysical view of reason (Welsch 1996). And of course, Lyotard’s rather experimental political proposals such as demanding “free access to the memory and data banks” (Lyotard 1984: 67) seem hardly tenable (Honneth 1985). But the basic thrust of his diagnosis might have retained its original striking force: there seems to have been an implicit normative consensus in modern Western societies that has lost its grip and persuasion, and that appears as a specific form of progressivism that seems to have been fueled by a

specific philosophical conception of history as teleological process, powered by progressing scientific and social rationality. But this conviction or hope, Lyotard claims, has not only lost its foundation in historical experience, where the progression of knowledge and the advancement of reason have proven to be disconnected, but has also revealed its ideological, justificatory function. It is this conceptual constellation on which the undisputed power of political authorities and the authorities of knowledge and social norms were founded. But this was only one possible and rather partial, by no means universal, view of history.

At this point a striking similarity of this influential discourse with the forms of critique of progress suggested by several Critical Theory authors is hard to deny. In the works of Adorno, Kracauer, and Marcuse, the rejection of certain bourgeois ideals of universality and justice is a recurring theme, and all of them refer these ideals back to a certain bourgeois conception of historical development that tends to prioritize some forms of culture, habitus and status in the social division of labor over others. But nowhere is this theme more prominent and more energetically developed than in Benjamin's reflections on history and catastrophe from 1940. In his fragments on the concept of history, Benjamin attacks what he calls the "conformism" of Social Democratic and Marxist political theorizing (Benjamin 2003: 393). The idea that the working class might benefit from the gradual advancement of science, as well as technological and social reform has proven fateful: "Nothing has so corrupted the German working class as the notion that it was moving with the current. It regarded technological development as the driving force of the stream with which it thought it was moving" (ibid.: 393). Accordingly, a politics accommodated to bourgeois society was determined by a dogmatic concept of "progress of humankind itself (and not just advances in human ability and knowledge)," envisioned as "something boundless (in keeping with an infinite perfectibility of humanity)" and "inevitable – something that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course" (ibid.: 394).

Calling for a "criticism of the concept of progress itself" (ibid.: 395), Benjamin was calling attention to the ideological function this notion played by suggesting an inherent connection between certain historical events and the eventual liberation from the social domination the working classes have suffered from. Therefore, "progress" in Benjamin's eyes plays the role of a legitimating narrative in Lyotard's sense: the fusion of diverse and heterogeneous elements into one grand story of unfolding rationality leaves out real history, which is full of contradictions and struggles and in no way a straight path toward the universal, non-partial liberation of all. The very idea of a historically unfolding universality allows one to deny and make invisible the antagonistic and contingent character of modern (i.e. for Benjamin: bourgeois) society, projecting itself as universal, class-less, emancipated.

Despite many disanalogies which mainly stem from a different emphasis on elements from Marxist theory, the two perspectives of Lyotard and Benjamin share an important concern, namely the rejection of an idealist picture of history and the plea to embrace history's highly contingent, irruptive, discontinuous nature. Only such a critical view of history, liberated from the burden of a God's eye point of view, could, for Benjamin at least, make visible the "open air of history" (ibid.: 395) in which true change might eventually happen. Poststructuralism and Critical Theory might not explicitly share a clear vision of how this goal might be achieved, but they share the commitment to de-essentializing and demystifying history as a condition for thinking a different, possible future (Löwy 2001).

### **The Entanglement of Power and Reason**

The most influential contribution to the humanities by Michel Foucault, perhaps the most prominent poststructuralist author in retrospect, has been his problematization of power and his new perspective on power as an object of philosophical inquiry. Famously, Foucault

claimed not to have developed any general “‘theory’ of power,” but “an ‘analytics’ of power” (Foucault 1978: 82), and was passionately denying that his approach would amount to anything like “an ‘ontology’ of power” (Foucault 2000: 337). This stance implies two fundamental conceptual decisions. The first leads him to reject any essentialist positing of a substance of power, leading to generalizations like the view that power as such is repressive or negative. Instead, Foucault chooses to practice a form of historiography that proceeds from a multifaceted, multidimensional account of different effects and realizations of power, ranging from violence and physical force to the symbolic and discursive regulation of free individuals. In a second step, Foucault takes this pluralization to the historical terrain, diagnosing and assessing different types or forms of power operative in different societies at different times. His diagnosis that power in modernity is becoming increasingly invisible, dispersed and network-like is a thesis about a historical transformation, but not about the nature of power (Foucault 1994). Accordingly, a critical analytics of power has to map the different coexisting relations of power in a given social setting and will try to account for the shifting relations between them. In Foucault’s view, power is not one and never the same.

It is in Foucault’s material research projects that such a relational, strategic, decentered and anti-intentionalist notion of power is put to work. This is the case most prominently during the period of his work connected with the term “genealogy,” roughly from the early to the late 1970s, and with Nietzsche, whose conception of “will to power” seems to have influenced Foucault’s own understanding quite thoroughly (Saar 2007). But as opposed to Nietzsche, Foucault tries to account for the real historical processes in which modern regimes and forms of power have been invented, established, and institutionalized, but also contested, appropriated, and refused. Starting in his inaugural lecture at the *Collège de France* in 1970 and extending his earlier studies on language and discourse, he tries to account for the mechanisms that produce and regulate what is sayable and unsayable in a given context. In the following years, in his work on the penal system, psychiatry, and sexuality, he traces the conjunction of certain forms of (legal, medical, scientific) knowledge with social and material factors, leading to complexes of “power/knowledge” (Foucault 1980). This neologism indicates that power is operative in producing a certain knowledge at the same time that it is dependent on a certain knowledge to fully function.

However, Foucault is highly critical of the traditional attempt to account for this relation in terms of ideology, because for him this is not a matter of false consciousness, of an original knowledge being distorted or repressed (Foucault 1998). Rather, the relationship between power and knowledge is essentially constitutive; a certain form of social regulation brings about and makes possible certain epistemic possibilities for knowledge or “truths.” “Truth is a thing of this world” (Foucault 1980: 131), he argues, and this means it is a social fact all the way down, entangled with social practices, regimes of behavior, exclusion, and highly concrete institutions, surroundings and technologies. Reason as such does not stand against power, but – in the form of specific, highly contextualized and embodied rationalities – is thoroughly entangled with social forces, hierarchies and exclusions (Allen 2010).

It seems fair to say that many of these concerns bind Foucault directly to projects pursued by the first generation of Critical Theory: a dissatisfaction with the classical concept of ideology, a pessimistic diagnosis of the increase in regulation and subjectivation in the course of modernization, and an attempt to develop a more mundane, non-idealist, contextualized and historicized view of reason (Honneth 1991; McCarthy 1991). His own remark about his missed reception of their work is polite: “Perhaps if I had read those works earlier on, I would have saved useful time, surely” (Foucault 1991: 119). In systematic terms, especially on these topics, the elective affinity is evident. Drawing on similar resources (Nietzsche, Weber, Marx) and opposing similar enemies (triumphant idealism), authors like Horkheimer had already tried to give a critical but non-reductive account of reason. What he had called the “eclipse

of reason” was a process of the hollowing out of social relations under conditions of discipline, exploitation and economization reaching into the last vestige of society. To be sure, for Horkheimer “reason” still stands for the emphatic autonomous human faculty whose transformation into mere technical, profit-oriented rationality should be lamented (Horkheimer 1947). Such an emphasis cannot be found in the Foucaultian lexicon (Demirović 1995). Nevertheless, one could say that Horkheimer already paved the way for a perspective on the fate of reason as a thoroughly historical object, subject to change and transformation precisely through its interaction with its social and political context.

The *locus classicus* of such a perspective is of course the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where reason itself is regarded in relation to the very society and history in which it expresses itself. The thesis is “that freedom in society is inseparable from Enlightenment thinking,” but that the theory and practice of the Enlightenment “already contains the germ of the regression which is taking place everywhere today” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: xvi). This is a thesis about the mundane, immanent character of reason which is bound up with the specific form and dynamic of social organization in which it exists. On the one hand, Horkheimer and Adorno seem to explain this in universal, transhistorical terms, as if the practical tendency of the “self-destruction of the enlightenment” had existed from the beginning of human civilization or had been part of the “very concept of that thinking” (ibid.: xvi). On the other hand, this is qualified historically or sociologically. Horkheimer and Adorno claim that this dynamic (of reason turning into unreason, of freedom turning into constraint) is characteristic of a society and form of life that is built on the principle of domination. It should be recalled that the exploitation and functionalization of nature, the historical precondition for capitalist accumulation, for them is “[d]omination itself” (ibid.: 156). This is surely not a diagnosis Foucault could easily subscribe to given his weariness concerning oversimplified pictures of the power structure in a society. For him, there is not one principle structuring society as a whole, but a network of interrelated and yet partly contradictory forces. He shares, however, with the authors of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* the general impetus to decipher the epistemic and social elements within society simultaneously but non-reductively, i.e. the impetus to assess power in reason and reason in power.

Seen from a distance, then, poststructuralist and Critical Theory perspectives on society agree in the critical or diagnostic act of correlating or bringing into constellation the rational and the social. Despite many differences in methodology and normative orientation, there is a problematic common to both critical projects, namely the fact that a society as differentiated as the modern one has also generated new technologies of social control, normalization and destruction. Both opt for accounting for this not in terms of irrationality or self-deception but in terms of reason itself that evolves in a certain way facilitated by the society of which it is a part. The seemingly noumenal entity called Reason has thus turned into an object of empirical-historical enquiry whose entanglement with profane social powers and forces can be revealed and diagnosed.

### The Conditions of the Subject

The work of Jacques Lacan is idiosyncratic, constituting almost a school of its own. Yet almost all the poststructuralists have been influenced by it, and one major trope prominent in it plays a central role for the poststructuralists horizon. Lacan has been the most influential theorist to elaborate an idea that can be traced back to Nietzsche and Freud but that was only fully developed into a theoretical conception in the discussions in the humanities since the 1960s, namely the critique and decentering of the subject (Descombes 1980). Breaking with many traditional assumptions about the integrity and status of the subject, a new discourse on self, consciousness and interiority was founded that treats the subject less as a

foundational category than as an effect or element emerging within a given order or set of practices.

In his early work, Lacan gave this idea a developmental interpretation. Commenting on the “mirror stage” in child development, he tried to account for the moment in which the experience of oneself as a separate entity appears. But this, Lacan claims, only happens when the self is seen from the outside, as oneself that is another, as it were. The sense of self emerges as the perception of a unity forged out of the difference between me and the mirror image:

But the important point is that this form situates the agency known as the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, that will only rejoin the coming-into-being (*le devenir*) of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve as *I*, his discordance with his own reality.

(Lacan 1977: 503)

Dependent and fictional, the truth of the self is outside of itself (Reckwitz 2008: 52–68).

In his later work, Lacan gave various and not always identical explanations of the emergence of the (fictitious unity of the) subject and its inner structure and mechanisms, radicalizing Freud's conceptions of drives and desire. Here too, the supposed unity and foundational nature of the subject is decomposed into a plurality of processes within the self, on the one hand, and decentered toward its outside, the others, language, and the symbolic order, on the other. The subject only becomes what it is by being marked and traversed by forces beyond itself:

if desire is an effect in the subject of the condition — which is imposed on him by the existence of discourse — that his need pass through the defiles of the signifier; [...] then it must be posited that, as a characteristic of an animal at the mercy of language, man's desire is the Other's desire. [...] [This involves] the condition that the subject finds the constitutive structure of his desire in the same gap opened up by the effect of signifiers in those who come to represent the Other for him, insofar as his demand is subjected to them.

(Lacan 2006: 525)

Poststructuralism has come up with a variety of ways to express this thought of the radical dependency of the subject on something that it is not, and not all of them are compatible with Lacan's own heterodox psychoanalytic account. But the core of this proposal has been retained in many different theoretical contexts, namely the conceptual strategy of redescribing the supposed integrity, transparency and autonomy of the subject in the negative terms of lack, absence or heteronomy. The figure of the subject itself, so dear to the rationalist, idealist and phenomenological traditions in modern philosophy, becomes Janus-faced and ambivalent, on the one hand designating the conscious and coherent instance capable of knowing, action and reflecting, while on the other hand being a product of forces preceding and producing it, making it subjected to a certain grammar of speaking, acting and thinking (Althusser 1971: 162–164). Most theories associated with poststructuralist thought from the mid-1960s until today contain, in one version or another, such a post-Lacanian critique of the subject (Žižek 1999; Williams 2001).

On first sight, it seems implausible to align the mature Critical Theory of Habermas with this author; for sure, differences and disanalogies in theoretical means and meta-theoretical

convictions abound. But there is a structural similarity that makes both authors representatives of a thinking beyond the metaphysics of the subject that was a major heritage of modern philosophy (Menke 2003). For Lacan as for Habermas, the subject (or consciousness) can be conceived of neither monadically nor monologically; the self is neither sealed off from the world surrounding it nor isolated from others. Rather, it is traversed by its outside and its others all the way down.

Habermas pursues this route first with reference to G. H. Mead's interactionist conception of the individual (or "theory of subjectivity") for which he chooses the telling formula "individuation through socialization" (Habermas 1992: 149). For Habermas, following the interactionist model and inserting at this point some insights from Hegelian and Piagetian anthropology, subjectivity or selfhood is fundamentally mediated by reference to other subjects, or, differently put, subjective interiority is a product of intersubjective exchange. Only by learning to take the other's point of view on oneself is a sense of self established and can be maintained and assessed; the other comes to inhabit a certain place in the self from the moment that selfhood is experienced or lived.

This developmental conception (that already bears some resemblances to the early Lacanian view mentioned before) is complemented by Habermas in his work on communication and language by an even more fundamental general argument. Discussing the legacy and the limits of the philosophy of the subject, he argues for a strict renewal of the whole conceptual framework of modern philosophy in light of the insights stemming from the linguistic turn, from systems theory, and from the theory of communication and language. The basic argument of this highly complex part of Habermas's oeuvre might be summarized as follows: contemporary philosophy and social theory need to reconceptualize the very elements they start with. Under the influence of the paradigm of the philosophy of the subject, the exercise of reason and the mastery of language appear as individual capacities that relate individuals to one another. Adopting an intersubjectivist, communicative account, however, redirects the gaze. It is now the social practice of sharing a language and a lifeworld, of exchanging reasons and making truth-claims to which others respond, that first constitute these faculties, including their normativity and content. The subject of communication, formerly the supposed ground or *explanans*, becomes the product or *explanandum*. The philosophy of the subject or of consciousness (*Bewusstseinsphilosophie*) is superseded by the theory of communicative action; "communicative reason" replaces "subject-centered reason" (Habermas 1990: 294); the traditional conception of the subject is replaced by "the intersubjective model of the socially produced ego" (Habermas 1992: 170).

While these last points signal serious differences of this approach from the psychoanalytic path and the subversive, more skeptical thought of Lacan, both share the gesture of decentering and replacing an older image of the subject by a newer one. They both substitute a unitary-isolated conception for a pluralized-contextual one. In this sense, most of poststructuralism and much of Critical Theory share a common ground and a common opposition to more traditional and metaphysical approaches. To be sure, they differ radically about whether this new vision of the self dependent on language and the others offers a reconstitution of selfhood and authenticity. While Habermas seems to be confident of arriving at an image of the capable, quasi-sovereign subject, Lacan's revision seems to lead into a much more negative picture centered on absence and lack at the heart of subjectivity.

However, both approaches can be said to offer revisionist, or critical, theories of the de-centered subject. In both approaches, the place and the function of the subject do not disappear, and neither of them is proclaiming a "death" of the subject (Bürger 1999: 12–16). Rather, in both redescriptions, the subject appears against a background or web of relations, linguistic and intersubjective, that is not itself subjective.



## Philosophies of Resistance

My discussion has highlighted four major *topoi* from poststructuralist theorizing that can also serve as points of entry into the theoretical universe of Critical Theory. This is not meant to deny the many – evident – differences between these two traditions. However, it can show that there is a thematic convergence. De-essentializing meaning, rejecting progress, generalizing the notion of power and decentering the subject are critical gestures that define a style of thinking or a form of critique that concerns the core of modern convictions about language, reason, history and the self. Poststructuralism and Critical Theory can be seen as related but differently executed variants of such a critical form of thinking.

Against this background, it is not surprising that the intellectual history of the last forty years has seen a great variety of encounters and points of contact between these two lines of thought, ranging from fierce polemics to attempts at harmonious reconciliation. Decidedly influencing discussions about language and reason (Bernstein 1992; Wellmer 2004), history (Schmidt 1981; Düttmann 1996; Allen 2016), power (Fraser 1989; Honneth 1991) and the self, these controversies about the compatibility or divergence between both traditions were taken up by authors close to Critical Theory, many of which were heavily influenced by the vibrant debates within feminist theory that were often using insights from both sides (Benjamin 1988; Benhabib 1992; Brown 1995). On the other side, authors more aligned with poststructuralism have consistently tried out their affinities with some of the classical texts from Frankfurt School contexts (Lyotard 1974; Derrida 2002; Butler 2005). While Habermas, the most authoritative voice in the early phase of these discussions, has insisted on a deep, paradigmatic disagreement, others have later emphasized convergences and mutual corrections (Hoy and McCarthy 1994; Menke 2006; Saar 2007; Allen 2008). Some more recent developments in Critical Theory such as the turn to liberalism, the rereadings of Kant and Hegel, and the rise to prominence of issues of recognition, justice and justification might seem to differ from the points of convergence discussed here. But at the same time, some other tendencies, like the opening up toward cosmopolitan and postcolonial themes, a reappraisal of Marxism and a rethinking of alterity and transcendence have brought to the fore unexpected proximities, if not in theoretical position then at least in thematic concerns and interest (Sprinker 1999; de Vries and Sullivan 2006).

While methods and normative orientations may vary, both paradigms from their origins share a negative, even destructive side. As the formation of Critical Theory in the Frankfurt School sense was tied to a historico-political moment and project of rejecting dominant “traditional” and bourgeois forms of thought in order to better understand a social reality breaking apart, poststructuralism as a loose intellectual movement was challenging dominant Post-War forms of thinking in the humanities and the social sciences in order to establish a more complex view of social reality. This critical and examining stance toward current forms of knowledge might be less *passé* than some current commentators on the “end of critique” seem to imply (Latour 2004). On the contrary, it might be that in the age of hypertechnological capitalism and the ultracommodification of knowledge, the need for an intellectual stance and practice of critical examination and bold subversion is even greater.

The specific contribution of poststructuralism and Critical Theory to the humanities and the social sciences in the present might lie in the insistence that to say no to what is given, to what seems normal and to what authorities say is where thinking as an activity begins (Caygill 2013). Problematizing, questioning, and undermining certainties, norms and normalities are not ends in themselves, but requirements for a thought that is not fully reconciled with the social reality it encounters. In this, thought is inherently resistant to its outside which it knows itself to be a part of. For many members of the two traditions discussed here, this idea amounts to the credo of resistant philosophizing itself: “I think, there is no other

definition of philosophy than as the spiritual power of resistance,” Adorno (2007: 148) was confessing in the classroom only a few years before the advent of 1968 brought resistance and contestation from the confines of theoretical works into the streets and daily lives of many Western European societies and beyond. The two lines of thinking discussed intersect at this point: the necessity to resist. Their time might not be over yet.

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### Further Reading

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# HABERMAS AND ORDINARY LANGUAGE PHILOSOPHY

*Espen Hammer*

Like some of his most illustrious predecessors in the German philosophical tradition, the work of Jürgen Habermas is a vast, many-dimensional edifice, extending into virtually every corner of the social sciences and theoretical humanities, including ethics, social and political theory, epistemology, philosophy of religion, aesthetics, and sociology. While one might think that such multifaceted theoretical engagement would lead to fragmentation, such that no sustained commitment shows through, the fact is that Habermas throughout his intellectual endeavor has projected a clear and unambiguous vision, capable of inspiring and informing both academic and practical-political orientations. Ultimately, this vision can be summed up as that of defending and articulating the normative structures of modernity, in particular as they are manifest in communally oriented, rational, reflective speech. A liberal-left thinker of deep enlightenment persuasion, Habermas views reason embodied in the capacity for rational utterance as being the very condition of social critique, and also, in its various, differentiated “expert cultures,” as the purpose and culmination of progressive, rationalized modernity.

The interest in exploring the nature of rational speech led Habermas early on to the philosophy of language, and in one school in particular, that of ordinary language philosophy, he found what became the key to formulating the rational core of his theory. If Habermas’s basic commitment can be characterized as that of rational speech in a modern setting, his fundamental tool for theorizing this commitment has been ordinary language philosophy. Ordinary language philosophy is thus situated at the heart of Habermas’s theoretical edifice, offering the instruments that have made his position so distinctive and powerful. Without this philosophy, it is not clear how he could have developed and articulated his view.

The aim of this article is threefold. I first look at how the appeal to ordinary language philosophy helped Habermas in his effort to overcome the subject/object model and its affiliated “philosophy of consciousness.” I then provide an overview of Habermas’s distinct development of ordinary language philosophy, highlighting not only the similarities but also the deep differences between his conception and that of its founder, John Austin. In the final section, I identify objections that, if taken seriously, suggest the need for a different and less validity-oriented approach to the philosophy of language. In particular, I claim that ordinary language philosophy has a certain insight into the dependence of language on individual use and responsivity that Habermas unfortunately ignores.

## Ordinary Language Philosophy and the Linguistic Turn

Throughout his career, Habermas has expressed strong reservations about Cartesianism and its influential distinction between the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa*. On the Cartesian setup, thinking subjects – viewed in isolation from any intersubjective medium – stand before a world of objects that they can either seek to correctly represent or manipulate, and other agents emerge fundamentally as entities to be represented or manipulated. While consciousness provides unmediated access to one's own representations, knowledge of the external world, as well as other minds, is inferentially structured, and only the inner can be non-inferentially known. Cartesian thinking is thus prone to skepticism, its continuous shadow.

According to Habermas, however, we need to recognize a different and competing tradition, going to back to thinkers such as Herder, Hamann, Hegel, Humboldt and, closer to our time, Peirce, Dewey, Mead, and Wittgenstein. Here, the subject/object relationship is not central in the way it has been in the Cartesian tradition. The realist idea of knowledge as some sort of mirroring or representation of a fundamentally mind-independent world is rejected. The subject or consciousness is viewed not as some potentially solipsistic, inner sanctuary but, rather, as essentially mediated by various types of intersubjective spaces and media, including language and culture in its widest sense. Sometimes, as in Mead and Wittgenstein, the understanding of language is central; and using language, and being a competent speaker, are said to involve the acceptance and mastery of normative structures. At other times, as in Hegel, for example, what counts as intersubjective is much wider. On Hegel's view (although Habermas understands his later work to be retreating into a subject/object thinking), it is the concept of spirit (*Geist*) that ultimately delineates the domain of the intersubjective. Spirit includes all forms of socially constituted and sanctioned life: morality and ethics, the sphere of right, as well as knowledge, art, and even philosophical reflection itself.

In the 1960s, Habermas introduced the term “interaction” in order to categorize and explore this intersubjective space. Critiquing Marx for one-sidedly restricting his account of human action and rationality to “labor,” presumably a subject/object relation, Habermas proposed a dualistic view of rationality that included both labor and interaction. “*Interaktion*,” according to the early Habermas, designates the whole sphere of normatively guided action in which agents relate to others as alter egos in a shared, communicatively structured space of symbolic exchange. The intuition behind introducing the labor/interaction dualism reached beyond the sphere of action and rationality to include a neo-Weberian vision of society. For its reproduction, Habermas (1972) argued, any society needs (a) to maintain its metabolism with outer nature via labor and (b) to critique and reflect on its symbolic orders via communicative action.

In the early 1970s, it became evident to Habermas that the dualism of labor and interaction, which had informed his early research, needed to be reformulated. In particular, he became skeptical of the anthropological premise of the distinction, the idea that it somehow tracks an anthropological essence. The new work of the 1970s was more resolutely sociological, incorporating insights not only from Weber but from the neo-functionalist social theories of Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann. However, it was also in search for a more precise and philosophically articulate understanding of the nature of communicative rationality. This is the point at which Habermas discovered ordinary language philosophy.

Before turning to the work of John Austin, however, it should be noted that Habermas increasingly viewed his predecessors in the Frankfurt School as having been overly in thrall to a subject/object paradigm. In his early, programmatic essays, Max Horkheimer,

for example, while following thinkers such as Hegel, Durkheim, and Marx in according a primacy to the social realm, did not refrain from viewing the subject/object relation as key to the outlining of critical theory and its aims. Horkheimer was hardly a representationalist. However, he was deeply concerned with the historicity of both subject and object, pinpointing those categories as central to his critical, social epistemology. Later on, as Horkheimer collaborated with Theodor W. Adorno on the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, it became abundantly clear that traditional categories of subject and object remained central to the articulation of critical theory, and Habermas's claim, which in subsequent publications such as *The Theory of Communicative Action* and *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* was spelled out in painstaking detail, namely that a rethinking of those categories seems called for, appeared warranted.

The early 1970s discovery of John Austin and ordinary language philosophy was, in other words, well prepared for by the ground Habermas had already covered. He had been searching for a philosophy of intersubjectivity and, in particular, of communication. Not only did he seek to overcome the subject/object split, he also wanted to develop a theory of reflective, human speech, while taking into account that rational speech necessarily comprises both a communicative and a reflective stance.

Austin, of course, did not in any way belong to the German tradition of the Kantian and dialectical Hegelian/Marxist theory in which Habermas was steeped. For understanding the shift from first- to second-generation Critical Theory, it is vital that one recognizes how major Habermas's step actually was when he started orienting himself in Anglo-American philosophy of language. Austin was an Oxford philosopher, having his intellectual home in a predominantly analytic environment. However, in much of his work he opposed the empiricism – and especially logical positivism – that surrounded him. Of particular interest to Habermas was no doubt Austin's groundbreaking 1955 William James Lectures, delivered at Harvard University and later published as *How to Do Things with Words*.

While brief, this path-breaking study contains a wealth of ideas, most of which have exerted a profound influence on contemporary philosophy. Perhaps its most far-reaching claim is that language must be understood and theorized in its multifarious *use*, rather than simply as a vehicle of representation. Language should be approached as an activity – the activity of *doing things with words*.

In the semanticist tradition from Frege to Russell and later Davidson, language had been viewed in terms of either sentences or propositions (and occasionally assertions). In Frege, for example, the guiding idea of the proposition is that, if meaningful, it has a truth-value. It is, according to the principle of bipolarity, either true or false. Meaning, Frege and later theorists in the semanticist tradition argue, is a function of truth-value: we know the meaning of a proposition when we know what it is for it to be true. To know the meaning of "Snow is white" is to know what it is for snow to be white. Propositions, moreover, are timeless objects, endowed with a logical structure. How they are used, and for what purpose, is immaterial to their meaning.

Austin was not really interested in providing a theory of meaning. However, he did draw attention to the fact that sentences expressing such propositions – indicative sentences, that is, with truth-value, which purportedly are used to refer to a particular state of affairs – comprise only a small part of the range of sentences and utterances being employed by human agents in everyday life.

In the 1958 *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein had been pointing to the multiple uses of language, which he claimed would resist any attempt at unifying a theory of language under one master category such as that of truth. In addition to purporting to state or express truths, and thereby establish a relation to the world, language is being used in all sorts of

ways – to promise, to baptize, to express aversion or approval, to impress, to scare, to excuse, and so on, *ad infinitum*:

There are *countless* kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we call “symbols,” “words,” “sentences.” And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once and for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten.

(Wittgenstein 1958: 11)

No philosophical system seems able to unify this multiplicity.

In order nevertheless to categorize the notion of language as use, Austin (1975: 6) introduced his important term *performative*. Unlike *constatives*, which are used to describe, predicate, or characterize, and hence to express truth, performatives do something else than merely express that thus-and-so is the case. Performatives are modes of action, ways of doing things with words that carry a certain force. If someone says “I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*,” and the circumstances are appropriate in ways that Austin argues are constitutive of the success of the speech act, then the act of baptizing the ship has been performed. As such, the utterance “I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*” is neither true nor false. However, like all performatives it can, as Austin puts it, be felicitous or infelicitous according to whether the rules outlining the proprieties associated with its correct use have been adequately observed. For example, if someone tries to baptize a ship without having the requisite authority, or if they jumble the words, then the ship will not have been baptized. The baptizing, it turns out, involves a kind of promise: the speaker promises to have undertaken the commitments necessary for the ship to be baptized. In a way that no other previous account had noted, speakers are claimed to be responsible for their words and for making themselves intelligible.

Austin distinguishes between *locutionary*, *illocutionary*, and *perlocutionary* acts. As opposed to the act of saying something, which Austin calls a locutionary act, an illocutionary act is the act performed *in* saying something. A perlocutionary act is the act performed *by* something. In the baptizing scenario, the baptizer utters certain words with a propositional intent (the locutionary act), thereby, if the relevant conditions are satisfied, performing the act of baptizing (the illocutionary act), while also achieving the end of actually getting the ship baptized (the perlocutionary act). Typically (but not always), an illocutionary act contains a first-person expression addressed to a second-person (I promise, assure, request, know, etc.) followed by a propositional clause containing a referential term and a predicate.

By means of these simple yet powerful distinctions and definitions, Austin manages to draw attention to the institutional and normative dimension of language – how language draws speakers together, attributes certain responsibilities to them, and achieves its purposes within the framework of concrete life-forms and practices. To make oneself intelligible, on Austin’s view, is eminently a *social* achievement. It is not just an achievement based on paying attention – perhaps as a speaker isolated from any community – to the referential function of language. While language may in special instances be used solely for the purpose of tracking the world, it generally allows one to act in certain ways, relying while doing so on one’s tacit and socially conditioned understanding of the proprieties characterizing the particular speech act in question.

In Habermas’s view, this (as well as Wittgenstein’s related emphasis on rule-following and language games) amounted to a great step forward. By utilizing insights adopted from Austin’s philosophy of the performative utterance, he believed to have a strategy for overcoming the logocentrism and representationalism involved in the traditional subject/object model.



A philosophy of intersubjectivity and communication started to emerge. However, as will soon become evident, Habermas's overall theoretical commitments and goals were quite different from those of Austin.

### Habermas's Account of Ordinary Language

Perhaps the most important peculiarity regarding Habermas's appropriation of ordinary language philosophy is his goal of amalgamating the fundamental insights of Austin (and also, to some extent, John Searle, another influential contributor to the discourse of speech acts) regarding the social and practical dimension of language with what is essentially a neo-Kantian vision of context-transcending validity. In the tradition from Kant to Hermann Lotze, Heinrich Rickert, Emil Lask, and later twentieth-century neo-Kantians, a central concern of philosophical reflection has been to reconstruct the conditions under which speakers are able to make objective (or universal) validity claims. Austin, to be sure, takes virtually no interest in the idea of context-transcending validity. His lesson, rather, is that all speech acts, including the making of assertoric claims, are social achievements, requiring for their success a set of social conditions that invariably remain local and indexed to particular social practices. A performative may be felicitous in one context while impossible to bring about in another. While Habermas agrees that speech acts are social achievements, he is adamant that they nevertheless purport to transcend their local contexts of emergence and claim universal validity. Indeed, in every speech act, he argues, an implicit claim to universal validity is present, a claim to which hearers in order to understand will have to rationally (that is, by attending to the reasons provided in favor of the utterance) relate.

The second major revision of Austin's account undertaken by Habermas consists in turning the orientation toward ordinary language into a full-fledged theory of meaning. Although he tended to believe that meaning resides exclusively in propositional content, Austin never purported to establish such an account. Moreover, it is not likely that Austin, who always remained skeptical of the philosophical demand for generality, ever believed that it could be provided. According to Austin, rather than establishing sweeping generalities meant to cover all language use, the philosopher of language should respond to particular quandaries, arising in particular situations presenting obscurity and misunderstanding. As for the later Wittgenstein, philosophy should be understood less as a constructive than as a therapeutic exercise. Habermas, however, argues that meaning precisely is constituted at the illocutionary level of the speech act. This, he argues, is the level at which speakers relate to each other with a shared interest in achieving mutual understanding.

Unlike Austin, Habermas does not think that the distinction between the locutionary and the illocutionary is best thought of as characterizing different *acts*. As Austin himself came to realize, though not in the stage-setting opening sections of *How to Do Things with Words*, even the making of assertoric claims takes place in illocutionary acts (which are socially regulated acts of "doing things with words"); hence, the idea of the locutionary act as being separate from the illocutionary act does not make sense. According to Habermas, the locutionary is better thought of as the propositional component of the illocutionary act – the proposition being utilized *in* the illocutionary act. The perlocutionary, however, rather than, as Austin thinks, being the act achieved by performing the illocutionary act, is by Habermas defined as the effect an illocutionary act has on other(s) within a teleological action context. For perlocutionary effects to occur, the speaker must, as it were, instrumentalize the illocutionary act and use it with the intention of strategically influencing other agents.

At this point, certain noteworthy difficulties arise. Of great importance for Habermas is the idea that while illocutionary acts are fundamentally communicative, the attainment of perlocutionary ends is fundamentally strategic. While to the communicative orientation

there corresponds the category of communicative action, to the strategic orientation there corresponds the category of strategic action. Both types of action take place in what Habermas calls social action situations. They must both be distinguished from instrumental action, which neither occurs in social action situations nor is mediated by language. However, it is not immediately clear what it means to say that illocutionary acts can be instrumentalized for the sake of achieving perlocutionary ends. Habermas seems not to be able to claim that illocutionary acts can function as mere means for the sake of obtaining an external end. He holds, after all, that illocutionary acts are oriented toward achieving mutual understanding.

The problem with strategic action, one might argue, is that it hovers somewhere between purely instrumental action and communicative action. In that it treats other agents' response to one's own utterance as a means to furthering one's own end, it is affiliated with instrumental action. However, in that it depends on the successful performance of a communicative act, it gets close to being a communicative action. Habermas's way out of this quandary is to claim that the strategically acting agent is covering up his intentions. He deliberately does not disclose to the hearer that the illocutionary act is used strategically. It is thus the speaker's attitude that decides whether an act is communicative or strategic. One may wonder whether this is satisfactory. Perhaps all apparent communicative action actually is strategic. Perhaps there is no use of language that is not aimed at influencing behavior. If so, the very distinction collapses.

In the early formulations of the theory, Habermas also ran into difficulty by claiming that communicative action, unlike strategic action, is non-teleological: it is conducted for no external purpose. However, Habermas has later admitted that all action is teleological; thus, even communicative action is performed for the sake of an end, in this case mutual understanding (*Verständigung*). Here, the end is obtained cooperatively as dialogically oriented agents seek mutual understanding or agreement concerning the claims at stake.

It is important to step back for a moment from the development of Habermas's argument to see exactly what's at stake regarding the distinction between strategic and communicative action. In the case of strategic action, agents objectify each other; while the context of action is social, the accompanying attitude is success oriented (or instrumental). In the case of communicative action, agents treat each other as accountable and ultimately free to rationally engage with the claims and arguments at stake. Thus, Habermas employs the philosophy of language in order to reformulate an essential Kantian commitment to the potential autonomy of all rational agents. As participants in rational discourse, agents recognize each other as both free and equal – free to respond rationally to a claim, and free in so doing, while also equal (formally) in the capacity to do so. Moreover, insofar as agents relate to each other on these terms, they view each other as ends in themselves, dignified members, as it were, of a quasi-Kantian kingdom of ends, united by a shared, unavoidable commitment to the value of reason itself. This, if anything, is the rational core of humanity itself – a core that Habermas, following Kant, believes will be cultivated under conditions of enlightened modernity. Habermas's view thus contrasts starkly with that of many of the earlier Frankfurt School thinkers. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, in particular, considered enlightened modernity as a barely disguised framework for exercising instrumental reason. Enlightenment, they famously argued in their coauthored 1944 *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, reverts back into myth, an order marked by domination and ideology.

Yet to what exactly does the rational dimension of everyday discourse amount? What does it mean to say that communicatively oriented agents behave rationally? Why is it that everyday discourse can be said to have this rational component? Habermas's answer is that the understanding of utterances depends on being able to take up a rational stance toward the claims to validity that necessarily accompany them. For understanding to be possible, a

hearer must relate to the reasons supporting the utterance. Without this rational stance, no understanding would be possible.

I noted earlier how Austin (and later also Habermas) opposed the truth-theoretic, semantic approach to meaning found in Frege, Russell, and others. On such a view, the meaning of a proposition is its truth-conditions. However, as Michael Dummett points out in his anti-realist critique of truth-theoretic accounts of meaning, since we know the meaning of many propositions whose truth-conditions we will never be able to ascertain, a theory of meaning should focus not on truth but on “assertibility” or justification. We know the meaning of an utterance, Dummett claims, when we know what it means to rationally accept it in light of reasons or evidence. In Dummett’s (1976: 110) formulation,

an understanding of a statement consists in a capacity to recognize whatever is counted as verifying it, i.e. as conclusively establishing it as true. It is not necessary that we should have any means of deciding the truth or falsity of the statement, only that we be capable of recognizing when its truth has been established.

Habermas adopts a version of this view, arguing that understanding an utterance is to engage with the reasons for its possible rational adoption. In the absence of such engagement, the utterance remains unintelligible. Although an explicit reflection on such reasons is the prerogative of so-called discourses (*Diskurse*), which Habermas distinguishes from everyday communication in which speakers against a vast background of agreement take the rational support of each other’s utterances for granted, the intelligibility of an utterance is a function of its rational acceptability.

Habermas accordingly thinks that this means that speakers, in performing communicative acts, necessarily have to claim validity for their utterances. They have to claim – implicitly or explicitly – that the reasons that, if called for, can be adduced in favor of adopting an utterance are of such a nature that the utterance deserves to be rationally accepted by all rational speakers. In *constative* speech acts, speakers lay claim to universal truth about some state of affairs; in *regulative* speech acts, they lay claim to universal normative legitimacy; while in *expressive* speech acts, they lay claim to truthfully manifesting their subjective (inner) thoughts and feelings. (Unlike constative and regulative speech acts, expressive speech acts are not backed up by means of conceptually articulated reasons; rather, what supports them is the consistent behavior of the speaker over time.) To the various types of speech acts correspond differing “formal worlds” – an objective, a social, and a subjective – while a pervasive background of tacit knowledge will have to be shared among participants in a communication community for actual communication to be possible.

When validity claims are being raised, hearers are put in a position of being able to freely answer “yes” or “no” based on the reasons provided. They then rationally accept or reject the utterance. In engaging with reasons, partners in communication experience what Habermas refers to as a “peculiar non-compulsive compulsion of the better argument” (*einer eigentümlicher Zwangloser Zwang des besseren Arguments*). Reasons motivate, but only insofar as agents freely consider their force in the light of already existing principles and commitments. Unlike causal impact, to let oneself be motivated by reasons is to act freely: it is to commit or determine oneself on the basis of reasoning alone.

Despite claiming otherwise, it should be noted that Habermas hardly provides an account of sentence-meaning. The reason is that in order to be employed in speech acts, sentences (or propositions) must already be meaningful. How might hearers start engaging with reasons adduced in support of an utterance unless they already have some grasp of the propositional content being expressed in it? The close tie between understanding and rational

engagement also seems problematic. While an utterance might be fruitfully understood in the light of its reasons for acceptance, agents normally do not seek justification before they claim to understand. Rather, they first understand – or at least possess some comprehension of the utterance – and then seek to justify. Yet if that is correct, then how can Habermas account for such everyday understanding? Given his rationalist, anti-realist theory of meaning, he seems forced to leave this question open.

Of course, a deeper understanding may occasionally require scrutiny of what it is that might motivate rational speakers to rationally accept the utterance. However, a deeper understanding of this kind – perhaps what hermeneuticians such as Gadamer ask us to obtain when reading a text – is quite different from simply getting at the surface meaning. Habermas seems to require too many conditions to have been satisfied for understanding to be possible.

Habermas's theory of ordinary language contains a number of sophisticated and highly developed sub-domains. The most important by far is his account of formal pragmatics, which is both a priori and a posteriori science of presuppositions of argumentation, or norms, that rational speakers necessarily have to assume are satisfied when seriously entering into, and participating in, rational discourse. Habermas has made a number of efforts trying to specify exactly what these norms are. To engage in a detailed discussion of formal pragmatics would exceed the limitations of this chapter. However, for the picture to be at least roughly complete it must be mentioned that in addition to semantic-level rules specifying logical consistency requirements and the like, Habermas identifies rules stipulating inclusiveness, openness to argument, and a prohibition of all forms of coercion. The claim is not that these rules are always followed when agents enter into discourse with one another. Rather, anyone who seriously engages in discourse must implicitly accept the rules, regardless of whether they actually are being observed or not. The rules, in other words, are valid "counterfactually." They specify what would count as an ideally rational discourse while also constraining speakers in nonideal contexts.

Discourses specialize in the task of rationally redeeming validity claims. Overtly argumentative, they typically take place in settings such as scientific, legal, or moral debate. Over the course of his career, Habermas has viewed such discourses as validity-tracking exercises. By providing participants with opportunities to be freely oriented toward the best possible arguments, they are, even when nonideal, islands of reasoning in a world often plagued by deliberately nonrational forms of engagement such as ideological group-thinking or propaganda. It should be noted, however, that on Habermas's view such discourses are not common occurrences. Not only do they require a highly developed attentiveness to reasons and reason-giving, which is something that only certain institutional frameworks (such as those of science or law) encourage, but engaging in discourse is possible only when agents have, as it were, bracketed much of their everyday, tacit understanding of things. Of course, no agent can ever completely set aside all such tacit lifeworldly knowledge. The lifeworld is the inherited background from which one can never fully extricate oneself. Yet in discourse an agent is supposed to divorce a claim from its normal use and focus on it solely with a view to see whether it lends itself to rational justification.

Thus, discourses sanitize claims. When subjected to discourse, claims about religious phenomena, for example, which play an important role in ritual practices and invite a number of affective and emotional stances, are treated as purely cognitive, demanding a rational justification purporting to hold good for all rational speakers. Likewise, responding adequately to moral claims (as I will soon refer to in more detail) requires a commitment to the priority of thin over thick concepts, permitting a proceduralist search for universalizable moral norms. Engaging in discourse turns language away from the ordinary contexts in which words normally are intelligible.

In the older tradition of ordinary language philosophy, the attempt to use words outside the ordinary was viewed not only with suspicion but as a central source of confusion. According to Stanley Cavell, who draws on Wittgenstein, such “extraordinary” employments of words tend to generate skepticism. Rather than accepting the ordinary conditions of sense-making, to speak out of the ordinary is tantamount to seeking an alternative source of intelligibility, in Habermas’s case one based exclusively on an appeal to “reason.” Habermas, in other words, because of his rationalism, is a deeply ambivalent philosopher of ordinary language. On the one hand, he follows Austin in recommending a return to the way in which words are used in institutionally regulated ways of sense-making. On the other hand, however, his intuitions about rationality lead him to construct a wedge between ordinary communication and discourse such that being rational starts to seem at odds with the desire to make full sense.

### Ordinary Language Philosophy and Formal Pragmatics

For Habermas, a paradigm case of making sense – of acting intelligibly – is when a speaker raises a controversial claim to validity to which a hearer, on the basis of rationally responding to the reasons offered (or at least implicitly offered), is able to answer “yes” or “no.” Meaningful utterances are determinate and cognitively bipolar: they appear either as valid or invalid, and their meaning is a function of the hearer’s engagement with the reasons why they are the one or the other. “Yes, what you say is true because...” or “No, what you say is untrue because....” In both cases the hearer, to the extent that he or she has understood the meaning of the utterance, will have viewed the utterance in terms of its capacity for being either valid or invalid.

I mentioned that Habermas admits that in everyday life, when their shared background accounts for much of their integration and action coordination, participants in communication tend not to engage explicitly in the language game of giving and assessing reasons. However, even in cases where reasons remain implicit, the meaning of an utterance is supposed to be a function of its rational acceptability in terms of reasons adduced. I also mentioned that Austin does not assign to ordinary language philosophy the task of providing a theory of meaning. For Austin, if ever there is a task for such a theory, it is to provide an account of what it is for propositions or sentences to be meaningful, independently of the force with which they are used in illocutionary acts. At the end of *How to Do Things with Words*, however, Austin points out that the earlier distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts makes no real sense: locutions, being embedded in contexts of action, are always used *in* performing certain acts. Sentences, for example, are being used to make statements; thus, they will be put forward, not only as locutions with a claim to being true, but also in illocutionary acts as they are presented with a certain force. According to Austin (1975: 139),

Once we realize that what we have to study is *not* the sentence but the issuing of an utterance in a speech situation, there can hardly be any longer a possibility of not seeing that stating is performing an act.

The statement “It is hot in here,” when made in the living room of someone’s private home, may refer to the temperature and so be viewed as a simple locution. However, depending on the context and the expectations and interpretations the communicating agents have of each other, in short of the sensibilities they possess, it may also be taken as an exhortation (to open a window, to turn on the air-conditioner), an expression of irritation, disappointment, or dismay (if someone habitually overheats the room), or perhaps as a remark on the sexual atmosphere (if the interlocutor is in a state of undress, looking invitingly at the speaker). In all these cases,

there are shared norms and proprieties appealed to in making the utterance, and they must count as instantiations of illocutionary speech acts. However, the speaker can hardly be said to refer directly to rules supposed to govern the utterance. As Wittgenstein (1958) argued in the *Philosophical Investigations*, appeals to the application of a general rule would never be sufficient to explain our capacity to go on with words in ever new ways. At best the rule would have to be interpreted to fit the specific case. Yet since the act of interpretation would generate an infinite regress of interpretations, with each new interpretation having to be interpreted, the capacity to continue in ways that are normatively secured – “correct” or “adequate” – must instead rest in the shared responses and judgments of speakers belonging to the same life-form. “Knowing how to go on,” as Wittgenstein occasionally puts it, is a matter of belonging to a community, being socialized into it such that one is capable, in particular cases, of appearing to others as a representative speaker. Concepts are not (or at least not totally) circumscribed by rules; rather, their adequate application in judgments is a matter of sensitivity – not primarily to the meaning of the concept itself but to what it is that the particular situation calls for. In speech, therefore, agents reveal their sensibilities to each other – the extraordinarily fine-grained ways in which they are attuned (and, in some cases, not attuned) to the features and salience of what it is they are faced with. According to Habermas, speakers reveal their capacity to use concepts by understanding how their application is rationally licensed by other discursive commitments that they may have. In this sense, the meaning of concepts is exhausted by the material inferences licensing their application in particular cases. In the contrasting view of classical ordinary language philosophy, represented by Austin and Wittgenstein, attentiveness to reasons alone, when reasons are supposed to motivate the acceptance or rejection of the utterance as universally valid, is not sufficient to constitute a mastery of concepts. To make oneself intelligible in a particular situation – that is, to make what Austin calls a linguistic move – requires a sensibility irreducible to discursive reason-giving.

Following Alice Crary (2007: 21), I would argue that Habermas submits his account of ordinary language to an abstract epistemological requirement: the regularities constitutive of a sound conceptual practice, as Crary (2007: 21) puts it, “must transcend the practice in the sense of being discernible independently of any subjective responses characteristic of us as participants in it.” Speech acts, by claiming universal validity on the basis of reasons purporting to be acceptable to all rational speakers, are in Habermas’s view presented as always already being in the process of transcending, or abstracting from, the subjective (perceptual and affective) endowments we draw on in thinking and acting. The epistemic goal of speech acts is, for Habermas, the establishment of universal validity, and only insofar as they aspire to such a status do they emerge as intelligible. Speech acts unsupported by such context- and subjectivity-transcending claims to validity are simply unintelligible.

If we accept, however, with Austin and Wittgenstein, that the mastery of concepts is essentially dependent on the exercise of subjective forms of responsiveness, then the picture looks very different. Rather than viewing our entitlement to objectivity as dependent on the acceptance of the abstraction requirement, it becomes possible to understand it as mediated by our subjective propensities (qua individuals) to employ concepts in specific cases.

In order to further clarify the contrast between these two (in my view competing) accounts of ordinary language, I will turn at the end of this paper to the nature of moral judgment. According to Habermas, who is a deontologically oriented formalist and cognitivist along Kantian lines, valid moral judgments aspire to be universal: they should rest on reasons that every rational speaker could accept independently of subjective dispositions and ethical background. Although Habermas believes that a performative attitude is required for agents to be able to relate discursively to such judgments, the structure of moral discourse is intended to provide a neutral space for dealing with moral concepts. According to Habermas, a rational speaker attentive to the relevant reasons for adopting a particular

moral judgment should in principle be able to recognize correct and incorrect applications of a moral concept even if he or she has no grasp of the attitudes in terms of which the concept may become intelligible in the first place.

In his attempts to mediate between Kant and Hegel, universalist formalism, and an ethics of ethical life and situatedness, Habermas admits that participants in moral discourse cannot be viewed as mere noumenal subjects, pure creatures of reason putting forward claims without any membership in actual communities: they do have ethical identities as well as a commitment to systems of value that necessarily will have been mediated historically by the ethical experiences of concrete communities. However, participants in moral discourse can only be accepted as rational to the extent that they aim to transcend such identities and affiliations. It is in the turn to the supposed objectivity (or validity) generated by an exclusive orientation toward good reasons, where good reasons are reasons that purport to be rationally persuasive to all rational speakers, that such participants undertake the difficult yet, in Habermas's moral theory, required transcendence of their own concrete ethical commitments:

Participants in processes of self-clarification cannot distance themselves from the life histories and forms of life in which they actually find themselves. Moral-practical discourse, by contrast, require a break with all of the unquestioned truths of an established, concrete ethical life, in addition to distancing oneself from the contexts of life with which one's identity is inextricably interwoven.

(Habermas 1993: 1)

Ultimately, a moral norm is valid only when it deserves the rational assent of all speakers. It is by withstanding all possible rational criticism that such norms prove their acceptability. On this view, what distinguishes episodes of thought and speech as moral is the use of moral concepts in ways that are indifferent to the sensitivities that, according to classical ordinary language philosophy, are necessary in order to employ concepts intelligibly. However, by excluding subjectivity or by viewing subjective response as generative *merely* of subjective or contingent properties, the view recommends a withdrawal from the moral world itself.

The readiness to accept an abstraction requirement has been shared by more thinkers identifying with the ordinary language movement than Habermas. According to Searle (1969: 12), the aim of ordinary language philosophy is to express generalities that can be formulated as rules. In his view, to master a language is to master rules for the correct application of words in particular circumstances. Nothing about these rules refers to individual responses or attitudes. For Cavell, on the other hand, who draws more directly on the works of Wittgenstein and Austin, the task of ordinary language philosophy culminates in the attempt to rethink what it is we say when, and the implications thereof. This endeavor does not rest on an appeal to impersonal rules. Like a phenomenological investigation, its authority can never be greater than what the individual is able to vouch for. According to Cavell, the responsibility a speaker has for making himself or herself intelligible cannot be forfeited.

For mutual understanding to be possible, there must be a life-form in which there is, as Wittgenstein puts it, agreement (*Übereinstimmung*) in judgments. It is true that we generally agree in our responses. However, the life-form, as Cavell (1976: 52) argues in a famous passage, does not universally guarantee that we find each other intelligible.

We learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing

routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation – all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls “forms of life.” Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this.

Following Cavell and developing his view, Crary suggests that as speakers are applying moral terms in ways that reflect their subjectively mediated response to, and acknowledgment of, a situation or context at hand, they can be said to express a moral worldview. The way you respond to morally salient events reveals how the world morally appears to you. If this is true, however, it follows that learning to master a language is, as Crary (2007: 43) puts it, “inseparable from the adoption of a practical orientation toward the world – specifically, one that bears the imprint of the speaker’s individuality.” Such a practical orientation, rather than aiming for a neutral point of view, includes the speaker’s particular emotional attachments and the things he or she cares about and value – and how he or she speaks will be a function of those commitments. Thus, in Leo Tolstoy’s novella “The Death of Ivan Ilych,” for example, the reader is being asked to look at death not in terms of plain moral doctrine, but rather in terms of how one emotionally responds to the various characters, in particular Ivan Ilych himself. It is the response to death that matters, not the judgment passed on it, and the characters become intelligible to us insofar as we relate to their actions and responses. The simple solicitousness displayed by the peasant Gerasim suggests a different moral worldview from that of Ivan Ilych’s friend, Peter Ivanovich, who refuses to be implicated in the realities of Ivan’s predicament. True moral behavior always harbors an individual or subjective component – a form of judgment that is responsive to key features of the concrete situation or task at hand.

### Concluding Remarks

I have suggested that Habermas’s claim to be a philosopher of ordinary language in the tradition from Austin and Wittgenstein can only be true if a number of qualifications are attached. If the original impetus behind the turn to ordinary language was to consider language in the context of its actual use, rejecting all abstraction requirements, then Habermas, with his orientation toward constitutive idealizations and context-transcending validity claims, is at odds with this tradition.

I have not claimed that a principled moral stance of the kind defended by Habermas is necessarily incoherent. It may well be successful. The thrust of my reflections has rather been that it sits uneasily with a commitment to ordinary language philosophy, at least if this commitment is informed by an agreement with central tenets of the teachings of Austin and Wittgenstein.

It is worth keeping in mind, however, that Habermas’s theory of rationality is comprised of a number of commitments. Although Habermas’s vision is clear and well articulated, the way he argues for it is no doubt eclectic. Eclecticism can be good thing when thinkers manage to construct a promising theoretical edifice out of elements that turn out to cohere with one another. Sometimes, an eclectic thinker is able to move the discussion forward in deeply original and compelling ways. However, if the elements do not cohere, or are too disparate, eclecticism can be a dangerous approach. It may encourage false or problematic reconciliations of theoretical viewpoints that in fact are at odds with another. The tension between ordinary language philosophy and neo-Kantian theories of rationality may in Habermas be of the latter nature: they simply do not fit together very well.



If one looks at the history of the Frankfurt School more broadly, the turn toward an account of intersubjectivity, cashed out in terms of a theory of language, seems to have been a justified move. The philosophical theorizing of the early Frankfurt School remained largely indebted to the monological subject/object tradition harkening back to Descartes and Kant. This is especially true of Horkheimer and Adorno, in whose works one scarcely finds any reflections on intersubjectivity, at least not of the kind that one finds in Habermas. Habermas's great vision has its historical origin in the Enlightenment. It is that of a critical public space in which reason is exercised through the use of speech. The vision is no doubt highly laudable. However, to think that its full articulation requires the incorporation of ordinary language philosophy may have been a step too far.

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## Further Reading

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Part IV

# SPECIFICATIONS



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# THE PLACE OF MIMESIS IN THE DIALECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Owen Hulatt

## Introduction

The title of this chapter, rather like Adorno's use of the concept of 'mimesis' more generally, presents us with a deceptively difficult task. Put simply, it is not immediately clear what place mimesis occupies in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. This is a local example of a general problem in Adorno's work. Everyone is very confident that mimesis is a crucial and important concept in Adorno's philosophy, but the closer one draws to the concept the more difficult it becomes to fix precisely what it amounts to. Two simple facts help establish why this might be. First, Adorno uses the term 'mimesis' to signify a great many different concepts and meanings. Many of these can be harmonized; at least a few are flatly incompatible. Andreas Huyssen proposes a list of five different meanings (Huyssen 2000: 66–67); this is likely a conservative estimate. In the first instance, then, the term as used by Adorno is hardly stable in meaning.

Secondly, although mimesis is often held to be an utterly central concept, Adorno in fact uses the term remarkably sparingly. While this is a crude metric, this can be illustrated neatly by the fact that *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, *Minima Moralia*, and *Negative Dialectics* taken together only offer only 21 pages where the term 'mimesis' and its cognates directly appear, out of a combined total of 985 pages. (The posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*, by contrast, offers a wealth of uses of the term.) As a consequence, different commentators offer radically different readings of the nature of mimesis, and its role in Adorno's philosophy. We will touch on some of these readings as we go.

At least some of these difficulties emerge because mimesis is, for Adorno, a historical concept. By this I mean that Adorno takes it that mimesis has a history of development, receiving different expressions, and being embedded in and responsive to different structures, at different points in human history. Mimesis has different meaning and exhibits different behaviour at different points in its development. To get clear on the meaning of this concept more broadly, then, we are obliged to deliver a narrative, rather than a static definition. We are required to acquire a grasp of what it is that mimesis does, and how it mixes (or refuses to mix) with other, equally historical, phenomena.

The place of mimesis in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is, in this sense, doubly historical. It represents perhaps the first significant appearance of Adorno beginning to make use of a concept which rarely if ever received a fully settled and successful definition or account across Adorno's work – the beginning of the history of Adorno's attempt to employ and

clarify this concept. It also represents Adorno's most concentrated attempt to give the history of mimesis, and the history of its role in human cognition. For these reasons, despite the elusiveness and complexity of the status of mimesis in Adorno's work overall and in the *Dialectic* in particular, the *Dialectic* is the best place to begin in starting to arrive at a proper understanding of what mimesis' function is in Adorno's work, and how it relates to Adorno's other central concerns.

### Mimesis as the Non-Origin of Human History

Adorno's treatment of mimesis in the *Dialectic* is oblique; mimesis is rarely invoked by name, and the discussion delivered is intermixed with borrowings from a number of anthropological and quasi-anthropological sources, most importantly Hubert and Mauss' paper 'Esquisse d'une Théorie générale de la Magie' (incorrectly cited under the shortened title 'Théorie générale de la Magie' by Adorno and Horkheimer), James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, Sigmund Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (although *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* also has a significant role, as we will see), and Roger Caillois' papers 'La Mante Religieuse' and 'Mimétisme et psychasthénie légendaire'. The emphasis on anthropology in connection with this concept is no coincidence. For Adorno and Horkheimer, mimesis is an intrinsic, likely organic, capacity – and the origins of human culture in general, and instrumental reason in particular, cannot be comprehended apart from it. This might imply that mimesis is a structured tendency – like abstraction or reason – which has an internal movement towards complexity and differentiation. This would be incorrect. While mimesis is crucial for comprehending the origin of rationality, instrumental reason, and human accomplishment more generally, it is not itself that origin; mimesis, by itself, is not the source of human accomplishment. Rather, it is against mimesis, and through conflict with mimesis that these achievements (and harms) were made possible. To grasp why this might be, we need to look again at how Adorno (with Horkheimer; but for economy I shall refer to Adorno alone for the remainder of this piece) makes use of these anthropological resources.

The majority of the attempts to cash out and define mimesis in the *Dialectic* come through quotation and reuse of other author's remarks. One particularly stark example of this comes with the citation of Hubert and Mauss' definition of 'sympathy' (which Adorno and Horkheimer take to be a cognate of mimesis) in 'Esquisse d'un Théorie générale de la Magie',

L'un est la tout, tout est dans l'un, la nature triomphe de la nature.

(Hubert and Mauss 1902–1903)

What is here being described, in the course of an account of 'sympathetic magic', is an absorption of the individual into and by the environment; a breaking down of the boundaries between the particular and the universal. This melding, or assimilation, is held to be the essence of mimetic behaviour. This is curious enough – and we will return to this notion presently. What we should here note is that mimetic behaviour is not governed by concepts or abstraction – it is rather a way of merging with nature, with the agent's external environment. This is accordingly an epistemic relationship which involves complete openness to particulars, without any use of conceptual intermediaries.

Conventional experience, for Adorno, is of course entirely governed by conceptual intermediaries. On Adorno's view, we always relate to particulars primarily by placing them under concepts. Accordingly, we experience (and try to know) the world primarily through concepts. This is a source of regret for Adorno, who is convinced that this causes us to misconstrue the world. Our concepts are imperfectly calibrated, and so do not capture all of the properties of the objects they apply to. This means we only know objects incompletely,

missing those 'non-identical' features which do not show up under the conceptual categories applied to them. As concepts for Adorno also do double duty, making possible the structure and texture of both our knowledge and our experience, this means that we are also increasingly cut-off from full experience of the world as it really is. For these reasons, we might think that raw mimesis is a salutary corrective to conventional experience – that we should seek to revert to a kind of preconceptual mimetic openness. The mimetic state, then, would have a kind of Edenic promise – a pre-Fall way of relating to objects which does not misconstrue or distort them. Our error, on this reading, would be taking up instrumental rationality; the solution would be a valorization of mimesis.

But all of this is false. It should not be ignored that raw mimesis (by which I mean mimesis as it first appeared, before the generation of reason) is understood by Adorno to be a threat – a counterproductive and damaging form of experience and knowledge. This claim appears in two key places: one clear, the other requiring some exposition. The first appears fairly early in the *Dialectic*:

For civilization, purely natural existence, both animal and vegetative, was the absolute danger. Mimetic, mythical, and metaphysical forms of behaviour were successively regarded as stages of world history which had been left behind, and the idea of reverting to them held the terror that the self would be changed back into the mere nature from which it had extricated itself with unspeakable exertions and which for that reason filled it with unspeakable dread.

(Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 24)

The link drawn here between mimesis and 'purely natural existence' is notable. Note also that of the 'successively regarded' stages of world history, mimesis appears first. Note further that civilization had to 'extricate' itself out of mimesis; raw mimesis is a state to which civilization is opposed, and indeed one which is regarded with dread. Of course, here we are being told that 'for civilization' any such reversion is loaded with dread; this leaves open the possibility that Adorno held that civilization is mistaken in this position. We will now close this possibility.

Near the close of the *Dialectic*, a surprising link is offered between mimesis and criminality:

[Criminals] represented a tendency deeply inherent in living things, the overcoming of which is the mark of all development: the tendency to lose oneself in one's surroundings instead of actively engaging with them, the inclination to let oneself go, to lapse back into nature. Freud called this the death impulse, Caillois *le mimétisme*.

(Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 189)

This comes embedded in a broader discussion of shifting notions of criminality. What is of interest here is the link between a 'tendency to lose oneself in one's surroundings' with counter-civilized behaviour (criminality) and, importantly, Freud's notion of the death drive. Equally important is the fact that mimesis appears through a mention of Roger Caillois' notion of mimesis (*le mimétisme*).

Freud's death drive is an organic propensity towards a reversion into a primitive unity with the world. For Freud, all instinct operates through a drive towards repetition (Freud 2001: 36). The death drive, in particular, seeks to repeat not an event in the life of an organism, but the state from which organisms emerge; namely, lifeless matter

on our hypothesis the ego-instincts arise from the coming to life of inanimate matter and seek to restore the inanimate state.

(Freud 2001: 44)

The death drive is a drive towards the absence of action, and the disappearance of the boundaries between oneself and the material world. The death drive (which Adorno is here claiming stands in for mimesis more generally) is a dangerous part of our mental economy, which stands opposed to complexity, discipline, and rationality. Indulging it in a direct, unsublimated way leads not only to asocial behaviour but ultimately to the absence of reason and self-destruction.

Adorno reviewed a collection of Roger Caillois' essays – *La Mante Religieuse: Recherche sur la nature et la signification du mythe* – in issue 7 of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. And the reference to Caillois above in the *Dialectic* demonstrates that Adorno takes Caillois' account of mimesis to be cognate with his own. Caillois has had a deeper influence on Adorno than perhaps has been hitherto appreciated. I pursue this theme in greater depth elsewhere (see Hulatt 2016c), but we can here remark on some of the important connections which help to further clarify Adorno's account.

Like Freud, Caillois understands mimesis to be a tendency which runs counter to the well-being of organisms. In *Mimétisme et psychasthénie légendaire*, he writes,

[We are prevented] from viewing mimicry as a defensive reaction [due to its inefficacy]... It seems we must therefore conclude with Cuénrot that this is an 'epiphenomenon,' whose 'usefulness as a form of defense appears to be nil'... We are therefore dealing with a *luxury* and even with a dangerous luxury, as it does occur that mimicry makes the mimetic creature's condition deteriorate.

(Caillois 2003: 97)

Mimesis, then, is not explicable in terms of survival value. In common with Freud's account of the death drive – hence the parallel drawn by Adorno – mimesis in fact serves as a recurrent instinct or drive which is incompatible with and hostile to self-preservation:

[My account] simply suggests that alongside the instinct of self-preservation that somehow attracts being towards life, there proves to be a very wide-spread *instinct d'abandon* attracting them towards a kind of diminished existence.

(Caillois 2003: 102)

Adorno makes direct reference to both of these accounts – Freud's and Caillois' – in order to clarify and disambiguate the core nature of raw, unalloyed mimesis. From this, we can infer that Adorno's view is that mimesis, in and of itself, is intrinsically a dangerous state, not desirable for its own sake. And so raw, unalloyed mimesis is not a corrective to reason, nor is it a state we should seek to recapture.

### Mimesis and Self-Preservation

The *Dialectic* is a narrative about the emergence of human culture, rationality, and instrumental reason. The account of mimesis we have discovered above shows that mimesis is an intrinsic drive, which produces nothing. It drives the organism which possesses it into an open, immersive relationship with its environment, and seeks to sink into that environment. It produces passivity, and a complete, unmediated openness to objects.

This explains my remark above that mimesis plays a role in the origin of human culture and rationality, but is not that origin itself. Mimesis, by itself, is not a source of increasing complexity in behaviour, nor of increasing finesse in our grasp of and relation to the world. Its chief virtue – complete openness to objects, without conceptual mediation – is completely undercut by its hostility to the very flourishing and cognition of the organism it is

found in. Nothing proceeds from mimesis – and so we cannot (as has been attempted – see Huhn 1997: 250; Jameson 2007: 161) see Adorno's account as deriving human history from mimesis by itself.

This then raises the question of what the origin of this human history in fact is. Adorno traces a genealogy of instrumental reason, as first emerging out of sympathetic magic and sacrifice, and then becoming progressively more refined until the procedures of abstraction implicit in magic become dominant, to the extent that instrumental reason – together with its chief drawback, the occlusion of the 'non-identical' – is produced. If this does not proceed from the intrinsic drive of mimesis, where does it proceed from?

You will recall that neither Freud nor Caillois posited mimesis (or its alleged cognate, the death drive) as the *only* governing principle of the human organism. For Caillois (on whom I will focus), for example, mimesis was made coeval with 'an instinct of self-preservation', to which it was opposed. We find the same view in the *Dialectic*, where self-preservation is found to be 'a natural drive like other impulses' (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 72). While we have sparing reference to mimesis and mimetic behaviour, far greater emphasis is laid on the core role of a drive towards self-preservation:

The system which enlightenment aims for is the form of knowledge which most ably deals with the facts, most effectively assists the subject in mastering nature. The system's principles are those of self-preservation... reason is the agency of calculating thought, which arranges the world for the purposes of self-preservation and recognizes no function other than that of working on the object as mere sense material in order to make it the material of subjugation.

(Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 65)

Indeed, self-preservation is allotted the central role in the production of the unified, rational self:

The self wrests itself from dissolution in blind nature, whose claims are constantly reasserted by sacrifice. But it still remains trapped in the context of the natural, one living thing seeking to overcome another. Bargaining one's way out of sacrifice by means of self-preserving rationality is a form of exchange no less than was sacrifice itself. The identical, enduring self which springs from the conquest of sacrifice is itself the product of a hard, petrified sacrificial ritual in which the human being, by opposing its consciousness to its natural context, celebrates itself.

(Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 42)

*This* is the origin of human culture, not mimesis. It is the playing out of self-preservation, and self-preservation's demands, which underwrites Adorno's narrative of the production of rationality – its narrative of the movement out of mimesis, into magic, and then forward again into instrumental reason.

This might suggest that mimesis is simply a victim in this narrative; that Adorno's account in the *Dialectic* gives mention to mimesis only as an illustration of a state and tendency which was overthrown entirely. But this would be too quick. Mimesis, as was mentioned, has a great many functions in Adorno's work, and also has a history of its own. What we have examined so far is raw mimesis – mimesis as an unalloyed state and mode of relating to the world. Adorno's narrative in the *Dialectic* is one of, initially, cooperation and then struggle between the twin drives of mimesis and self-preservation. Their interrelation, and the nature of mimesis, accordingly requires a more detailed account, to which we now turn.



## Mimesis and Magic

Caillois, in '*Mimétisme et psychasthénie légendaire*', notes of mimesis that

Indeed, certain [mimetic] potentialities appear to subsist in man that strangely correspond to these phenomena [of mimesis in animals running counter to self-preservation]. Even setting aside the issue of totemism, which it would be far too venturesome to address from this angle, there still remains the vast domain of mimetic magic according to which like produces like, and which is more or less the basis of all incantatory practice. It would be useless to rehearse every fact at this point; they have been sorted and classified in the classic works of Tylor, Hubert and Mauss, and Frazer... The crucial point is that 'primitive' man still has an urgent inclination to imitate, coupled with a belief in the efficacy of this imitation. Such an inclination remains quite strong in 'civilized' man, for it persists as one of the two processes whereby his thought pursues its course when left to itself.

(Caillois 2003: 97–98)

We will return to this closing thought from Caillois, about the modern recrudescence of mimetic thought where people's thought is 'left to itself', in the context of Adorno's account of modern art. But what is presently important is Caillois' claim that mimesis is able to find expression in magic, a complex and quasi-conceptual practice based on associations drawn between objects, ideas, and magical practices. This finds similar expression in Frazer's *Golden Bough*, to which Adorno approvingly refers in *Philosophy of the New Music* (Adorno 2007: xiii, 107). Frazer's account of sympathetic magic is as follows:

For the same principles which the magician applies in the practice of his art are implicitly believed by him to regulate the operations of inanimate nature; in other words, he tacitly assumes that the Laws of Similarity and Contact are of universal application and are not limited to human actions. In short, magic is a spurious system of natural law as well as a fallacious guide of conduct; it is a false science as well as an abortive art.

(Frazer 1963: 11)

In the tight collection of sources on which Adorno is drawing – which are partly listed by Caillois above – magic is seen as not an irrational practice, but in fact a 'false science' comprised of an unwieldy conglomeration of mimetic and rational elements.

For Adorno and Horkheimer, likewise, magic is a species not of irrationality, but of 'cunning' (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 40–42). This 'cunning' is partially continuous with rationality, and indeed rationality is held to emerge from magic (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 42–43). However, together with this 'cunning', magic also sees a modified form of mimetic comportment. The assimilative behaviour of raw mimesis has been conjoined to the demands of self-preservation; the magician imitates the natural world not in order to sink into it, but rather in order to control it. Here, then, mimesis and magic are intermingled, and reciprocally influence each other. Mimesis is changed by its shifting relationship to the growing supremacy of self-preservation, and mimesis in turn affects the nature of the expression of self-preservation. Magic represents an amalgam of the two dominant drives in the human organism, as Adorno understands them in the *Dialectic*. Mimesis is suborned by self-preservation and used to help satisfy its demands. Self-preservation requires a fixed and structured epistemic relationship to the world (in seeing the world as comprised of identifiable, persistent objects), and a fixed and structured practical relationship to the world (in

seeing these objects as manipulable and comprehensible). These two demands, which are mutually reinforcing, are incompatible with the kind of assimilatory practices which raw mimesis demands; they rather require the generation of universals, of concepts, which can divide up (rather than mimetically merge with) the world, structuring it into collections of object-types and causal laws which govern those types. Being furnished with these kinds of distinctions and these kinds of explanatory laws, consciousness is then in a position to control its environment and to predict its behaviour. Magic goes some way towards realizing this demand of self-preservation, by offering consciousness a means of controlling the natural environment through magical practices like sacrifice and ritual. Adorno, like Frazer, sees this as a 'spurious system of natural law':

What is done [by the shaman] to the spear, the hair, the name of the enemy, is also to befall his person; the sacrificial animal is slain in place of the god. The substitution which takes place in sacrifice marks a step towards discursive logic. [...] Magic like science is concerned with ends, but it pursues them through mimesis, not through an increasing distance from the object.

(Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 6–7)

Its aims are not entirely distinct from the natural sciences, but it goes astray by believing that natural processes can be controlled through the imitative use of sympathetic magic.

Magic, then, is an epistemic and practical form of relating to the world which is driven by self-preservation, but which seeks to make use of mimetic activity in order to realize its ends. It is a coalition between the two dominant drives of human consciousness – the mimetic attempt to fuse with the world and the self-preserving attempt to divide the world into predictable and identifiable object-types and laws. This coalition, however, proves unstable. The rational elements of magical practice increasingly come to dominate, with the consequence that magic is overthrown, and the lineaments of modern, instrumental reason emerge at this very early stage in the history of human culture. Mimesis and reason at this point become substantially disentangled.

What is the cause of this? Here, we return our attention to Caillois' original account, on which Adorno draws, of the fundamental antagonism between mimesis and self-preservation. The former is essentially passive and unstructured, engendering a completely unmediated submergence into nature which Adorno elsewhere terms a state of 'terror' (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 10–11; for an explanation of this identification of the mimetic state with 'terror', see Hulatt 2016a, Chapter 1). Self-preservation, by contrast, firmly delineates the boundaries between the self and the external world, and through abstraction produces concepts and laws which make this environment comprehensible and controllable (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 31). Magic contains the beginnings of abstraction, and mimesis is tolerated by self-preservation only insofar as it serves the self-preservation of the human organism. With an intensification of abstraction, yet more sophisticated, and more accurate, forms of control than magic are made possible. Mimesis is antagonistic towards these newer forms of abstraction; it represents a continual tendency towards the weakening of the boundary between the self and the external world, and a continual drive to undermine and weaken the forces of abstraction. Once it becomes apparent that abstraction can be intensified without the use of mimesis, mimesis loses its function. Accordingly, Adorno sees modern reason as entirely free of any explicit use of mimesis. Indeed, he now sees instrumental reason as 'repressing' mimesis wherever it is found (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 44).

Mimesis' time as a central motor of the majority of human endeavour is accordingly brief. From Adorno's account of the 'originary terror' of mankind, it would seem that mimesis is one of, if not the dominant, original means of relating to the world. Bereft of any conceptual

distinctions – aiming at the kind of fusion Freud describes in his ‘death drive’ – raw mimesis is a conceptually ungoverned state. Adorno’s remarks on the terror of childhood, and its links with the origins of human culture (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 26), give cause to think that raw mimesis would be the kind of undifferentiated, ‘blooming, buzzing confusion’ which William James attributed to the experience of infants (James 1950: 488). Given that magic demonstrates the far superior ability of abstraction to satisfy self-preservation’s desiderata, it is no surprise that mimesis is discarded as a workable approach to the epistemic and practical demands of consciousness, and that mimesis is replaced with a fully abstract, instrumentalized version of reason.

This very overthrow of mimesis is not an unqualified victory, for Adorno. Adorno takes it to be the case that while the world may not be capturable through raw mimesis, it is not capturable through fully abstract reason, either. Adorno understands concepts to operate through subsumption; to apply a concept to an object is to be committed to the claim (no matter how implicitly) that the object and concept reciprocally satisfy each other. To claim that a blade of grass is green is to assert that it satisfies the abstract property of greenness, an abstract property which is equally satisfied by other green objects. The dominant problem, for Adorno, is that the world simply does not match up with the schematic structure of our concepts; it contains irreducibly particular properties which concepts cannot capture. A further problem is that, in Adorno’s view, such concept use contains a confidence in the ahistoricity of facts; that the objects described by concepts (particularly thick concepts like ‘justice’, ‘history’, or indeed ‘truth’) will always exhibit the same properties, and hence always satisfy concepts in the same way. Adorno, however, believes that the world demonstrates a high level of historical mutability in many areas. Those objects and practices which satisfy the concept ‘just’, ‘beautiful’, or ‘ethically mandatory’ at time  $t^1$  will in all likelihood fail to satisfy them at time  $t^{10}$ . As instrumental reason has relinquished mimesis, it has also relinquished openness to the world and to those features of the world which are not capturable by conceptual schematism. While instrumental reason offers many immediate improvements over magic and raw mimesis, its consequent failure to fully comprehend the full layout of the world has dramatic consequences. We are increasingly unable to respond to the genuine layout of the world, including the ethical demands laid out in it; as a consequence, self-preservation is increasingly undermining itself. Failing to understand the world fully entails failing to understand ourselves (as members of that world), and accordingly the systematized and schematized forms of knowledge and praxis which derive from our approach to knowledge and practical wisdom increasingly fail to respond to our needs for flourishing. This is the historical irony picked out by the idea of a ‘dialectic of enlightenment’ – mimesis was sacrificed in the name of self-preservation; but increasingly, this move has come to greatly undermine the prospects for the survival of the human species (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 43).

The *Dialectic* proposes a sketchy anthropology, much of the detail of which is alluded to, compressed into references, or left implicit. The central outline of this anthropological account has been given above – human consciousness is possessed of at least two core drives, the confluence of which is the origin of human culture. Self-preservation has intensified its demands; and the incompatibility of raw mimesis with these demands generated first the short-lived composite known as magic, and latterly the removal of mimesis as a driving force from the structures of human knowledge and behaviour.

Mimesis, however, is an intrinsic drive; it cannot be destroyed as such. It is also clear that mimesis offers a partial mirror image of the deficiencies of instrumental reason. Instrumental reason makes possible detailed and discursive forms of knowledge, while increasingly forfeiting contact with the particularity of the experienced world. Raw mimesis makes impossible detailed or discursive knowledge of the world, and yet maintains an immediate and

assimilative contact with the external world. For these reasons, more remains to be said about the career of mimesis, after its overthrow by instrumental reason.

### The Remnants of Mimesis

At the end of his brief definition of mimesis and its relationship to magic, Caillois wrote,

The crucial point is that 'primitive' man still has an urgent inclination to imitate, coupled with a belief in the efficacy of this imitation. Such an inclination remains quite strong in 'civilized' man, for it persists as one of the two processes whereby his thought pursues its course when left to itself.

(Caillois 2003: 97–98)

Given that Caillois holds mimesis to be an intrinsic inclination – as Adorno does, and not without influence from Caillois, in my opinion – it is no surprise that Caillois sees mimesis still exercising a strong influence in the present day, long after the discarding of the 'primitive' belief in the efficacy of magic. Crucially, mimesis in Caillois' view reappears wherever civilized humans are permitted to allow their thought to pursue 'its course when left to itself'. Mimesis, then, is subject to a kind of hydraulic pressure in modern life, and the relaxation of this pressure allows it to re-emerge. The nature of this pressure – given that Caillois allows only two 'processes' of thought, the self-preserving and the mimetic – should be clear. It is where the demands of self-preservation are relaxed, that mimesis is given free range to exercise itself.

Adorno, in a very oblique and implicit way, carries over Caillois' account in this respect wholesale. Throughout the *Dialectic*, we are constantly assured that modern society continually forces self-preservation as a continual task. Wage labour, and the very nature of capitalist societies, presses us into constant attention to the requirements of our own advancement and our own preservation:

The countless agencies of mass production and its culture impress standardized behaviour on the individual as the only natural, decent and rational one. [...] [The individual's] criterion is self-preservation, successful or unsuccessful adaptation to the objectivity of their function and the schemata assigned to it.

(Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 21–22)

However, for a congeries of reasons this emphasis on self-preservation is not total. There are a number of areas where self-preservation is not given paramount importance – and indeed, it is in these areas that Adorno sees the impulse towards mimesis – an assimilative surrender to objects – as being allowed to be satisfied. Chief among these is art. Adorno writes, in the context of music, that

music is separated from this same society by the deepest of all flaws produced by this society itself. [...] Music, however, insofar as it did not submit to the command of the production of commodities, was in this process robbed of its social responsibility and exiled into an hermetic space.

(Adorno 2002: 391–392)

Adorno often refers to art as a refuge for mimesis (Adorno 2004: 69). This has led some to understand mimesis' banishment to the artwork as being due to a fundamental incompatibility between mimesis and reason (e.g., Zuidervaat 1994: 133). This is flatly inaccurate, not

least due to the fact that Adorno sees the artwork as entirely rationalized, making use of rational processes of construction and composition (Adorno 2004: 370). Rather, mimesis is found in the experience and creation of art because it is here that the social totality relaxes its self-preserving demands; art is a kind of nature reserve, as it were, for features of human experience incompatible with self-preserving calculation. This is what underlies Adorno's claim above that art is separated from the self-preserving demands of society by society itself. This is a contingent fact about social life, and indeed one which Adorno sees as increasingly revoked, with pop culture increasingly commodifying art and experiences of art into means of generating profit and signifying membership of social groups. In this respect, mimesis' ability to find expression in art is increasingly under attack, and in Adorno's view likely to soon die out, along with art itself (see further Hulatt 2016b). In advance of that eradication of mimesis in art, and of art itself, we find licence in the art-sphere to assimilatively fuse with art-objects in an unguarded and self-abnegating way. Here, the original impulse of mimesis returns to the fore, and is given an opportunity to be exercised. What is of significance is that Adorno does not understand this to be merely a cathartic means of satisfying a long discarded mimetic instinct – rather, this execution of mimesis in the artwork is socially critical, and vouchsafes the artwork's status as true. For example,

Philosophy and art converge in their truth content: The progressive self-unfolding truth of the artwork is none other than the truth of the philosophical concept.  
(Adorno 2004: 172)

Adorno sees artworks as able to bear truth-content; to be critical of social conditions; and as to contain features which are both critical of given philosophies and as demonstrating epistemic virtues which philosophy should also itself, ideally, exhibit, even if in a different fashion (Adorno 2004: 74, 172). (For a curious example of this, see Adorno's comparison between Beethoven's use of motivic composition and Hegel's philosophy; a comparison in which Hegel comes off worse, and Beethoven is held to be more Hegelian than Hegel (Adorno 1998: 13–14).)

These claims from Adorno are not intended to be allegorical or rhetorical; there is a genuine parity, if methodological difference, between the truth content of artworks and philosophical texts. Artworks in Adorno's view exhibit a structural relationship between particularity and universality (for example in music between the demands of the compositional resources, and the broader compositional norms in which they are embedded) which philosophy is obliged to mirror, if it is not to relapse into mere instrumental reason and continue to obscure the 'non-identical'. The artwork's ability to mobilize mimesis is a key enabling condition for the artwork's ability to be true, and to have these salutary features. Mimesis for Adorno is therefore not merely an archaic remnant which can be found wherever the demands of self-preservation are relaxed, but something of crucial importance for philosophy and knowledge, and which needs to be added to them. This can only seem puzzling, given the rather unimpressive career of raw mimesis, and the previous attempt to combine mimesis and abstraction in magic.

### The Promise of Mimesis

While this is an accusation which has largely died off now that familiarity with Adorno's key concerns has deepened more widely, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* has been accused of advocating irrationalism. It can seem that Adorno and Horkheimer are simply inveighing against the evils of abstract reason and modern culture, and the natural inference to draw from this is that something other than reason is held to be desirable. The fact that Adorno

is advocating the importance of mimesis for knowledge – in light of the fact that mimesis is tightly associated in his account with magic and art – can seem to give support to this accusation. As has been made clear above, this cannot be so – mimesis in and of itself cannot be desirable, and in and of itself cannot sustain a satisfying epistemic relationship to the world. Even if we are not being asked to revert to pre-rational forms of life and knowledge, we certainly are being advised that instrumental reason is by itself insufficient and that it requires modification in a number of ways, not least of which is contact with mimesis. How can we avoid the charge of irrationalism, if Adorno is apparently claiming that instrumental reason requires modification by extra-rational resources?

To get clear on this, we need to refer to Adorno's conception of an 'emphatic' concept. Conventional concepts seek to model the presented properties of objects as they exist presently. Emphatic concepts, by contrast, aim at *future* states – they have a normative core to them. Emphatic concepts do not match up with objects as we find them, and this is precisely what allows emphatic concepts to ground criticism of the world as we find it. Adorno gives the concept of 'freedom' as an example of this:

Emphatically conceived, the judgement that a man free refers to the concept of freedom; but this concept in turn is more than is predicated of the man, and by other definitions the man is more than the concept of his freedom. The concept says not only that it is applicable to all individuals defined as free; it feeds on the idea of a condition in which individuals would have qualities not to be ascribed to anyone here and now.

(Adorno 1973: 150)

If we made the concept 'freedom' purely descriptive and nominalist, then it would mean whatever the society it was applied to held it to mean. And so we could imagine states in which grossly mistreated people – through the influence of an ideology, or an imposed definition of the term – thought of themselves as perfectly free. This is why we require an emphatic concept of freedom, which goes beyond present-day conditions and points towards a future state of perfected freedom. This allows us to criticize harmful social conditions, even if under those conditions people would term themselves free.

The concept of rationality is, for Adorno, an emphatic concept. It is a statement of how things should be, not a description of what people presently call rationality. What people presently call rationality is, in Adorno's view, in fact irrational. We have already explored why this might be – fully abstract instrumental rationality cuts us off from full epistemic and ethical contact with the world. Concepts come to obscure, rather than disclose, the genuine layout of the environment.

This is important just because it allows us to see exactly why Adorno's remarks about mimesis are not in fact irrationalist, but firmly in favour of rationality. Present-day 'rationality' is, according to Adorno's emphatic concept of rationality, irrational; in recommending modifications to this irrational epistemic practice he is attempting to heighten its rationality, to improve its rational status. Neither instrumental rationality nor mimesis is fully rational, but a confluence of them could be.

### A Confluence of Mimesis and Instrumental Reason

The original confluence of mimesis and instrumental reason was magical praxis. Needless to say, while Adorno advocates an adulteration of instrumental reason by mimesis, he is not recommending a reversion to magical thinking and nor does he think that magical thinking is the emphatic rationality at which we are aiming. Recall again that for Adorno all

categories are historical, especially those of reason and mimesis. The way in which mimesis is and can be employed develops across history, and so too do the capabilities of rationality. While mimesis and instrumental reason, at the outset of their careers, could only be crudely combined to produce the rather desultory result of magic, this is no longer the case.

Instrumental rationality is, at base, an expression of self-preservation. Adorno goes so far as to claim that logical bivalence contains an oblique reference to, and ultimately derives its strength from, the demands of self-preservation (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002: 23). In the first instance, this demonstrates that instrumental rationality, by itself, is not rational; its ultimate aim is not the truth, but rather the furthering of the pragmatic demands of the human organism. Of course, servicing these needs matches up with the truth to a great extent. To adequately realize my ends in my environment, I need to be able to not mimetically merge with it, but to comprehend its structure, make predictions, arrive at an understanding of types, and so on. This naturally leads onto the formation of concepts, which allow me to have a stable and epistemically complex relationship to the world around me. Self-preservation, then, allowed for the generation of a conceptually fine-grained relationship to the world. However, these concepts were and remain couched in a project of control – of subsuming the external world under the demands of self-preservation. As a consequence, whenever the pragmatic demands of self-preservation and the genuine layout of the world diverge, concepts tend to distort and occlude that world. The full particularity of objects, for example, is not relevant to our abstract conceptual schemes of control over objects. As a consequence, these particular features simply fail to show up conceptually, in thought or in experience. Adorno derives a great deal of the failings of modern society – up to and including the holocaust – from this conceptual failure of responsiveness to particularity.

While self-preservation produces and sustains an entirely vital set of epistemic structures, it also ensures they fail to be rational; their complexity is bought at the price of failing to fully understand and model how the world really is. Instrumental rationality, then, is not rational.

Mimesis, similarly, is not rational. It allows for full, unmediated contact with the real makeup of the world around us. In this sense, mimesis is on speaking terms with the goal of genuine rationality – a proper and full relationship to the full particularity of the world around us. However, by virtue of being unmediated, mimesis cannot produce understanding; only a hollow imitation of and ‘merging’ with the world around it.

What is required is clear; a means of harnessing the complex conceptual structures produced by self-preservation and giving them a mimetic turn; obliging them to serve not the drive of self-preservation, but rather the mimetic drive of modelling and fully grasping objects in the world.

Adorno drew deeply on anthropology, particularly sources which saw mimesis and human cognitive life more generally, as driven by impulse. Indeed, Adorno goes so far as to claim all cognitive activity, even pure reason, has its ultimate roots in impulses and drives, and continues to be fed by them:

Because even its remotest objectifications are nourished by impulses, thought destroys in the latter the condition of its own existence. [...] It is true that the objective meaning of knowledge has, with the objectification of the world, become progressively detached from the underlying impulses; it is equally true that knowledge breaks down where its effort of objectification remains under the sway of desire. But if the impulses are not at once preserved and surpassed in the thought which has escaped their sway, then there will be no knowledge at all[.].

(Adorno 2005: 122)

The problem this raises is that mimesis and self-preservation, as we have explored and Caillois made explicit, are drives which move in opposed directions. While talk of creating a confluence of mimesis and instrumental rationality sounds like an elegant and neat solution, looked at in more detail it is difficult to see what this might amount to.

This is one of the governing problems of Adorno's epistemology, which Adorno was content not to solve, but rather to flag up. Emphatic rationality is produced by resolving the opposed demands of instrumental rationality and mimesis, and allowing each to make a contribution (structural complexity, and contact with particularity, respectively) to the other. Adorno characteristically talks about a measured syncopation of these two cognitive moments. For example, in what Adorno calls 'exact fantasy',

An exact fantasy: fantasy which abides strictly within the material which the sciences present to it, and reaches beyond them only in the smallest aspects of their arrangement: aspects, granted, which fantasy itself must originally generate. If the idea of philosophic interpretation which I tried to develop for you is valid, then it can be expressed as the demand to answer the questions of a pre-given reality each time, through a fantasy which rearranges the elements of the question without going beyond the circumference of the elements, the exactitude of which has its control in the disappearance of the question [...] thinking which aims at relations with the object, and not at validity isolated in itself, is accustomed to prove its right to exist not by refuting the objections which are voiced against it and which consider themselves irrefutable, but by its fruitfulness [.]

(Adorno 1977: 131)

Adorno's remarks here are promising, but also deeply incomplete (see also Adorno's account of 'metaphysical experience' (Adorno 2006: 373–374)). They represent both the most promising and most difficult moments in his body of epistemic thought. Resolving the problems here would require a far longer discussion (for an attempt, see Hulatt 2016a). But what they have allowed us to see is that Adorno's fragmentary and, at points, fugitive remarks about mimesis in the *Dialectic* are far more significant than their collected page count may suggest. There is no end of ambition in Adorno's quasi-anthropological account of the emergence of reason; it quite clearly underwrites and informs the complex passages from *Negative Dialectics*, published some nineteen years later, excerpted above. It also has a great deal of import, I should mention, for Adorno's various remarks about the fate of art, and a possible end of art, but I have explored these elsewhere (Hulatt 2016b).

In closing, Adorno's account of mimesis in the *Dialectic* is delivered largely obliquely in the course of the passage of the book. The deepest and most important details must be unriddled from Adorno's account of the generation of instrumental reason, which is his chief object of investigation, and still more from the small family of sources most often drawn on wherever Adorno develops his account of mimesis directly. What emerges is, I believe, a conception of mimesis which is substantially second hand (derived in chief part from Caillois, Freud, and Frazer), yet ultimately reset into a complex, historical, and provocative account of rationality as we know it, and rationality as it may yet be.

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# ADORNO AND LITERATURE

*Iain Macdonald*

## Art as Writing

A central difficulty of Theodor W. Adorno's views on literature, quite beyond the breadth and depth of his writing in this area, is that the literary work of art is a social object whose aesthetic content cannot be reduced to its possible adherence to any particular convention, tradition, or genre. This opens onto an ontological problem to the extent that art "itself" has, for Adorno, no fixed essence or potentiality that it should somehow come to actualize in specific works or even specific media (Adorno 1977, 2003). No ontology of art is available to us and *a fortiori* no ontology of literature. Rather, what makes an artwork art—including works of a literary character—depends, in part, upon the possibility of relativizing or even dispensing with apparently ontological or essential identifying marks. Thus, while it is impossible to provide a definition of art in the traditional sense, there remains the possibility of understanding the openness of art to its lack of fixed essence. In other words, art is most "itself" when it ventures onto the terrain of what it has not yet expressed—where the content of this "not yet" is left open, while yet remaining historically situated. The "definition" of art is therefore volatile: "art is in each case outlined by what art once was, but is legitimated only by what art became in its openness to what it wants to, and perhaps can, become" (Adorno 1997: 3).

More particularly, successful artworks, on Adorno's view, express a kind of surplus, a "more" (*Mehr*) that lies not so in their purported "message" (nothing of the sort is necessary, in any event), but in the way in which the work transforms art as it currently exists through hitherto unrecognized possibilities of expression (Adorno 1997: 78). To cite a common example, the exploration of dissonance in the Second Viennese School was the actualization of previously unacknowledged aesthetic possibilities, of something that art had not yet become—something that could not have been foreseen as belonging to art's so-called essence prior to its actualization (Adorno 1977: 294). Art establishes itself in the very process of liberating itself from established practices, from what had become aesthetic second nature. However, for reasons that will gradually become clearer, what remarkable works achieve is not merely a relative freedom from staid forms and conventions, as though the aim were merely to broaden the category of what counts as art. Rather, great works depend upon a more specific kind of expression, a kind of "writing" that conveys substantive social content.

Adorno frequently refers to the unforeseeable historical development of art in terms of what finds itself "written" into artworks. Their "writing," on his use of this term (*Schrift*, usually), is the manifestation of their "more." Thus, he will say that "all artworks are writings, not just those that come about as such; indeed, they are like hieroglyphics for which the

code has been lost—a loss that contributes to their substantive content [*Gehalt*]. Artworks are language only as writing” (Adorno 1997: 124). In this way, successful works are said to be “eloquent” in the production of their “more”: “Their transcendence is their eloquence, their writing, but without meaning or, more precisely, with broken or veiled meaning. . . . Art fails its concept when it does not achieve this transcendence; it loses the quality of being art [*wird entkunstet*]” (Adorno 1997: 78).

Thus while Adorno refuses to say what art *is* in and of itself, he nevertheless describes what it *does*: it expresses a surplus or a “more” through a writerly organization of moments that applies to both literary and nonliterary works. But again, this expressive surplus, while “written” and “language-like,” is precisely not the communication of some judgment or propositional content embedded into the work by the artist (Adorno 1997: 124). The language of artworks, Adorno says, is “unintentional”: “The truth of the new, as the truth of what is not already used up, is situated in something unintentional [*im Intentionslosen*]” (Adorno 1997: 26). How does this eloquent though unintentional hieroglyphic writing play itself out concretely? And how is it realized in literary works?

### Benjamin and the Baroque

Many of the issues just outlined originate in Adorno’s reception of the writings of Walter Benjamin. As is well known, this reception, though sometimes critical in tenor, was nevertheless essential to Adorno’s intellectual development and his works bear its traces indelibly. In this vein, an important model for Adorno’s view of art and literature is to be found in Benjamin’s *Origin of the German Mourning Play* (1928), which focuses on the seventeenth-century dramatic works of Gryphius, Lohenstein, Opitz, and others.

On a general level, Benjamin, like Adorno after him, stresses the pointlessness of defining artistic production by way of induction or identifying marks, which can easily obscure what is peculiar to a given work or series of works. The point of criticism or of the philosophy of art is not to construct a unifying concept under which very different works can be classified, often rather awkwardly—e.g., “tragedy” (Benjamin 1998: 38–44). Nor is the point to compare works to some standard, according to which so-called minor works may be found wanting, whether the standard appealed to is, e.g., Aristotle’s theory of tragedy or the genius of authors such as Shakespeare and Calderón (Benjamin 1998: 48–50). Rather, for Benjamin, even comparatively deficient works—as in the case of German Baroque drama—can nevertheless become important insofar as they succeed, often unconsciously, in expressing the animating “idea” of historical phenomena that are otherwise recalcitrant to our attempts to understand them (Benjamin 1998: 34). The German mourning play is expressive in this specific sense. It says *more* than can be said at the level of dramatic content or authorial purpose. As such, the truth it contains is “unintentional,” i.e., it does not take the form of “an opinion developed on the empirical level; [rather,] it is the power [*Gewalt*] that first stamps the essence of the empirical” (Benjamin 1998: 36).

Thus, something is written, as it were, into these works that is neither commensurable with their authors’ intentions nor directly expressible in the familiar opinions or forms of experience proper to that period. For Benjamin, this something resides within the melancholy of the seventeenth-century Lutheran worldview and its obsession with the transience of life, as these take shape in the literature of the period and, especially, as reflecting a deep belief in the impotence of human activity in the face of fate. This belief might be summarized, albeit somewhat reductively, as the ineffectuality of good works in the face of the final judgment of God. However, what was not immediately evident to the inhabitants of this world was the social construction of this belief. The possibility of such knowledge is at best replaced by patient faith, for example, which may assuage but does not overcome discouragement and

suffering; it papers over the futility of a life that might have been different. As Luther writes, commenting on Romans 8: 18–30:

if we hope for that which we see not and neither have nor hold, then we wait with patience for it, for hope that is deferred discourages the soul. Likewise the Holy Spirit also helps, by causing us to pray with deep groanings, our infirmity ..., our impotence, and inability. For we know not ... what, insofar as the object of our prayer is concerned, we should pray for as we ought, insofar as the attitude and manner of our prayer are concerned; but the Holy Spirit asks for us, makes intercession for us, with groanings that cannot be uttered, that no man can express in words and none except God can feel.

(Luther 1961: 256–257)

Faith promises to dissolve impotent hope into patient waiting; but since impotence and suffering persist, the latter serves merely to mask the former, which finds other ways of expressing itself. Such theological views thereby inevitably distort and seek to suppress the suffering that they nevertheless also express, turning the problem of earthly suffering into our subjection to an inscrutable divine plan.

What is unintentionally written into these plays, therefore, and what they thereby express *allegorically*, as Benjamin puts it, is precisely the *unquestioned, natural* character of this “subjection to fate,” *i.e.*, the apparently ineluctable submission to what appears to be the structure of divine creation itself (Benjamin 1998: 138). Benjamin frames the issue as follows:

Whereas the Middle Ages present the fragility of world events and the transience of the creature as stations on the road to salvation, the German mourning play withdraws into the hopelessness of the earthly condition. Such redemption as it knows resides in this dark destiny itself rather than in the fulfilment of a divine plan of salvation.

(Benjamin 1998: 81)

It is the debilitating and disempowering notion that things cannot be otherwise that organizes these works; but this organization also suggests an unconscious resistance, an inkling that the denial of objective happiness or, in short, suffering as fate is an object worthy of melancholic presentation.

However, crucially, it matters little whether knowledge of the social construction of this hopelessness was given as such in experience or not (*i.e.*, in the form of what Benjamin calls the “empirical”). In fact, generally speaking, conscious awareness of this situation and any thought of overcoming the apparent futility of life was instead short-circuited by faith and simple moral principles. And yet, at the same time, what could not be dissolved into faith and morality instead made its way into literary form as an unconscious protest against “existence as a rubbish heap of partial, inauthentic actions” (Benjamin 1998: 139). Life, whatever its defects, cannot be reducible to its apparent futility. In this way, the mourning plays are to be read as the expression of a surplus of meaning over the more familiar, readily communicable beliefs that circulate within the confines of the seventeenth-century Lutheran worldview. The belief that things cannot be otherwise as accompanied by faith and the obscure possibility of redemption is precisely the thought—however repressed and distorted—that they nevertheless ought to be otherwise.

Adorno takes this reading to provide a model of sorts for artistic and literary interpretation, first and foremost in his reference to the unintentional surplus of artworks, *i.e.*, the indirect presentation of an “idea” that does not correspond to the surface of experience.

There can thereby coexist two levels of “content” in works of art, one in which the ordinary content (*Inhalt*) of a work—e.g., “plot” or “color”—is not idealistically assimilable to some allegedly universal concept—e.g., “tragedy” or “painting”—but instead points toward a “more,” i.e., a more substantive content (*Gehalt*), of the kind that Benjamin finds to be obliquely presented in the tradition of the mourning play: “in poetics, Benjamin’s study of the German Baroque [rejects] the confusion of subjective intentions with substantive aesthetic content [*Gehalt*] and, ultimately, the alliance of aesthetics and idealist philosophy [which gives priority to universal concepts]” (Adorno 1997: 145–146).

Adorno’s writings on literature bring these notions into play in a variety of ways. In the present context, which is necessarily quite limited in scope, three different examples will be considered: Huxley, Hölderlin, and Beckett. These examples hang together insofar as Huxley shows us the unintentional social content of defective works, Hölderlin the way in which historical works can bequeath a surplus of meaning to contemporary actuality, and Beckett the redemptive possibility of looking hopelessness in its gray, cataractal eye.

### Huxley and the Fate of Progress

Just as Benjamin took seriously the relegated form of the mourning play in order to tease out of it the unconscious idea animating the Lutheran world, Adorno too thinks that “even defects may become eloquent” (Adorno 1997: 211). Indeed, he says explicitly that “the truth content of many artistic movements does not necessarily culminate in great artworks, as Benjamin demonstrated in his study of German Baroque drama” (Adorno 1997: 25). Generally speaking, of course, Adorno tends to write about artists and authors whose works’ greatness is openly recognized, e.g., Goethe, Heine, Proust, and Kafka. However, as we have seen, their importance cannot lie in their participation in some aesthetic canon. Conversely, even minor works can eloquently albeit unintentionally express a truth content that exceeds their manifest content.

The essay “Aldous Huxley and Utopia” was first published in 1951 and then taken up in the *Prisms* collection, whose first edition appeared in 1955. However, the essay has its origins in a private seminar on need (*Bedürfnis*) held in Los Angeles in 1942, for which Adorno wrote his “Theses on Need” (Adorno 2017; see too Horkheimer 1985a, 1985b, 1996). The overall point of the seminar was to analyze the meaning and possibility—or rather, impossibility—of real social progress under capitalism. Adorno’s published essay on Huxley contains modified passages from his contribution to the seminar.

The trouble with *Brave New World* (1932), on Adorno’s view, lies not so much with Huxley’s sense of the increasing impotence of the individual in contemporary society. Nor does Huxley give in to a “childish faith” in social progress through technological prowess (Adorno 1981: 99). Regarding the individual, Adorno essentially agrees that “spontaneous experience, long corroded, [has been] stripped of its power” through increasing conformity and uniformity, which Huxley portrays in the form of biological, chemical, and social conditioning (Adorno 1981: 98–100). As for technology, Adorno frequently acknowledges that its bourgeois incarnation puts us on a path to destruction: “Insecticide pointed toward the death camps from the outset” (Adorno 1991c: 270). Furthermore, he acknowledges that the attempt at the domination of nature by human beings could well end in the domination—i.e., the annihilation—of human beings by nature, in catastrophic events such as nuclear war and irreversible climate change (though Adorno only speaks of the former). As he puts it, any talk of “progress from the slingshot to the megaton bomb” would have to be punctuated by “satanic laughter” (Adorno 1998: 153).

Rather, the problem lies with Huxley’s vision of the future, in which these contemporary tendencies lead inexorably to an imagined extirpation of human dignity and culture.

For Adorno, Huxley fails to recognize the profound ambiguity of progress and the social mechanisms that generate it. In large measure, this is due to Huxley's essentially reactionary attachment to bourgeois culture and an attendant devotion to individuality, and this in spite of his skepticism as regards other tenets of bourgeois existence, especially the belief in the inevitability of progress through technological advancement. However, for Huxley, these turn out to be two sides of the same coin: the intrinsic worth of bourgeois culture and individuality has no need for technology or the so-called progress it promises—and whose controlling tendencies may in fact degrade, if not destroy, the possibility of individual flourishing and cultural development. As Brecht succinctly puts it: “the more iceboxes, the less [H]uxley” (cited in Horkheimer 1985a: 561).

Against Huxley's defensive skepticism, Adorno underscores another side of technology. Thus, while it is patently absurd to speak of “progress” from the slingshot to the megaton bomb, “it is only in the age of the bomb that a condition can be envisaged in which violence might vanish altogether” (Adorno 1998: 153). This is a version of one of Adorno's most recurrent claims concerning progress and technology—namely, that the possibility of eliminating need is quite real albeit socially suppressed: “Material needs, which long seemed to mock progress, have potentially [*potentiell*] been eliminated; given the present state of the technical forces of production, no one on earth need suffer deprivation anymore” (Adorno 1998: 144). The paradox, of course, is that if needs “have been eliminated,” it is only *in potentia* or at the level of social *possibility*, while deprivation remains the *reality* because of socially perpetuated injustices. In the essay on *Brave New World*, the ambiguity of this insight is directed against Huxley, essentially because, while he well understands the dark side of progress, he remains blind to its utopian promise, *i.e.*, the elimination of socially unnecessary suffering.

This blindness takes a number of forms, according to Adorno, all connected by at least two highly questionable postulates: that there exists a natural opposition between the individual and society, and that technology follows a historical teleology that pits progress against human beings. In both cases, Huxley doubts the potential for a real, universal, socially mediated happiness that does not trample on individual human dignity and cultural values. In the book, the point is made early on and brutally: “that is the secret of happiness and virtue—liking what you've got to do. All conditioning aims at that: making people like their unescapable social destiny” (Huxley 2004: 26). This, then, is a future in which the happiness of the individual is ruined by being entirely dissolved into a totalitarian whole and its reified, incontestable mechanisms of social conditioning. True, the criticisms leveled by Huxley against pseudo-happiness retain a trace of utopian content, insofar as they remind us—correctly—that happiness and conditioned social conformity are at odds with each other. Yet while such criticisms may thereby seem promisingly “subversive,” they in fact hide a reluctance to embrace universal happiness as a real social possibility (Adorno 1981: 103–111).

Thus, for Adorno, the negative portrayal of objective, *i.e.*, social, happiness is as ideological as the critique of pseudo-happiness is socially relevant (Adorno 1981: 110–111). Part of the problem is that Huxley thinks that the satisfaction of material needs dispenses with the struggles and suffering that give humanity its pluck and fiber. Against this view, Adorno critically remarks that Huxley turns “the cult of suffering [into] an absurd end in itself” (Adorno 1981: 107). Or to frame the issue even more explicitly, Huxley perversely insists on the necessity of suffering for life to have meaning precisely when the elimination of socially unnecessary suffering had become technically possible. But Huxley remains ignorant of this tension in his self-assured defense of a humanity of suffering individuals, represented by John, “the Savage,” who speaks in favor of Shakespeare and a humane but self-centered individuality focused on personal sentiment and the acceptance of suffering: “I don't want comfort,” he says, “I want God, I want poetry I want real danger, I want freedom, I want

goodness. I want sin. ... I'm claiming the right to be unhappy" (Huxley 2004: 215). Suffering is the index of his freedom.

The question, of course, is whether Huxley can lay claim to such an opposition: the natural, suffering individual (who, though flawed, is at least a genuine individual) *versus* reified social forms that dissolve the individual into a false state of socially mediated happiness. Through this opposition, Huxley takes a stand against the society that seeks to alleviate suffering, claiming that such a society would have to be based upon a totalitarian suppression of individuality. Adorno, for his part, is quick to denounce this abstract opposition as the real source of reification in *Brave New World*: "Huxley construes humanity and reification as rigid opposites .... [He] cannot understand the humane promise of civilization because he forgets that humanity includes reification as well as its opposite" (Adorno 1981: 106). In other words, the problem is not that individual consciousness has lost something essential in becoming reified through social mediation ("conditioning"), but that we should defend an abstract and questionable ideal of humanity (e.g., the noble "Savage") against social mediation in general, whereas such mediations might yet make humanity's—and not just the individual's—happiness possible. Huxley's "conditioning" is not the only possible outcome of the dialectic of individual and society, nor the natural end of technological progress.

As such, the universal satisfaction of material needs that the novel portrays in no way "moves inexorably into insanity, into mechanical bestiality" (Adorno 1981: 111). On the contrary, it is here that Huxley inadvertently reveals his blind adherence to the "idea" that animates his bourgeois perspective: the objective, almost metaphysical, impossibility of a happiness both "subjectively consummate" and universal (Adorno 1981: 111–112). Adorno does not shy away from drawing the parallel to Benjamin's analysis of the mourning play, with a nod to Weber: Huxley suffers from "the ominous 'It shall not be otherwise' that is the result of the basic Protestant amalgamation of introspection and repression" (Adorno 1981: 117). As such, the alternative to the future described by Huxley

amounts to the proposition that humankind ought not to extricate itself from the calamity. ... No room is left for a concept of humankind that would resist absorption into the collective coercion of the system and reduction to the status of contingent individuals.

(Adorno 1981: 113–114)

Huxley's view not only depends upon the convergence of unnecessary suffering and the denial of the social possibility of its overcoming for the better but also depends upon a dystopian variant of a mainstay of bourgeois philosophies of history: the linearity of progress unfolding in time. Thus, even though Huxley refuses the bourgeois myth of progress through technology, he does so in order to show us that technology leads inevitably to pseudo-happiness in linear fashion, *i.e.*, without the possibility of bifurcation. For him, as for the bourgeois philosophy of history but with dystopian intent, history moves in an unbroken, straight line. But this requires a distortion of the present: Huxley "drives observations of the present state of civilization out of its own teleology so as to make its monstrous nature immediately evident" (Adorno 1981: 99).

What Huxley cannot imagine is that he remains trapped, once again like the melancholic inhabitants of the Lutheran world, within the postulates of his historical existence. The possibility of questioning them, let alone transforming them, is precisely ruled out by them:

The monolithic trend and the linear concept of progress, as handled in the novel, derive from the restricted form in which the forces of production developed in "pre-history." The inevitable character of [Huxley's] negative utopia arises from projecting

the limitations of the relations of production—the profit-oriented, glorified apparatus of production—back onto the human and technological forces of production, as though the former were an intrinsic property of the latter.

(Adorno 1981: 114)

Adorno here invokes Marx's talk of capitalism as part of the prehistory of emancipation, which comes into its own only when we succeed in exploding the myth of "natural" class divisions and the relations of production they entail, under which the forces of production remain fettered, along with the possibility of eliminating socially unnecessary suffering (Marx 1987: 263–264). But it is just this myth, which also produces the vision of the individual as powerless in the face of social destiny, to which Huxley tacitly subscribes in his view of progress as catastrophic fate. Adorno therefore concludes,

It is not for its contemplative aspect as such, which it shares with all philosophy and representation, that the novel is to be criticized, but for its failure to contemplate a praxis that could explode the heinous continuum [of prehistory].

(Adorno 1981: 117)

### Hölderlin, Polemics, and Parataxis

Adorno's reading of *Brave New World* shows how unintentional but significant social content can filter through the narrative line of a literary text, in spite of, but also because of, its defects. The case of Adorno's reading of Hölderlin is somewhat different and more complex. Here, Adorno is not dealing with a minor work, but with one of Germany's most important poets, whose legacy, he thinks, should be wrested from the influence of conservative philology, grandiose philosophy, and German nationalism (recalling, among other facts, that the Hölderlin Society had been founded by Joseph Goebbels in 1943). In particular, he thinks that Hölderlin's poetry should be given its due as a poetic liberation from, rather than a veneration of, mythical lost origins and forgotten destinies—of the German people in particular, but also of philosophy more generally. In this regard, he is above all interested in freeing Hölderlin from the orbit of Heidegger's readings.

"Parataxis: On Hölderlin's Late Poetry" was originally presented as a lecture at the 1963 annual meeting of the Hölderlin Society. It appeared in print a year later before being taken up in 1965 in the third volume of Adorno's *Notes to Literature*. It was not published in the proceedings of the meeting, as would normally have been the case. Indeed, the initial lecture was the subject of much controversy, with one or more of Heidegger's supporters causing some kind of commotion in the lecture hall and possibly storming out. Adorno himself did not attend a formal discussion of his talk that had been planned to take place the next day, during which his reading was contested. (For a summary of the event, see Betzen 1963–1964; Binder 1963–1964; Savage 2008: 97–99.) Heidegger himself, who had spoken at the 1959 meeting, heard about Adorno's lecture at some point but did not comment on it publicly. Subsequently, Adorno went on to publish an extended critique of Heidegger's thought in *Jargon of Authenticity* and *Negative Dialectics*, published in 1964 and 1966, respectively (Adorno 1973a, 1973b). Heidegger, for his part, did not care to learn the details of Adorno's critique (Wisser 1977: 283–284). Instead, he put himself above the fray. However, in 1968 he canceled his Hölderlin Society membership, claiming that "the present age [was] no longer able to hear Hölderlin's voice" (Pfizer 1977: 194–95), which for him had always been associated with "the future of the historical being of the German people" (Heidegger 2000: 48; see too 2014: 201–202). In this context, then, it would seem clear that Adorno's reading of Hölderlin is not merely about his poetry, but about its political and philosophical reception. Hölderlin,



in this sense, is a site of contestation and part of Adorno's attempt to deal with what he labeled "Heideggerism" (Adorno 2002: 424).

Adorno begins "Parataxis" with an emphasis on the "unintentional" layer of Hölderlin's poetry. As we have seen, this means that interpretation cannot limit itself to what appears at the level of poetic form in relation to content (*Inhalt*) in the normal sense of the term, where "content" refers to the author's intentions, historical references, and so on. There is a surplus in Hölderlin's poetry that philological reconstruction, while invaluable, cannot fully grasp without recourse to philosophy—and specifically to a philosophy that understands this surplus as an animating "idea" that the poet may only glimpse, as it were, but for which poetic language is a conduit. This gives certain poems a

strangeness [that] stems from something objective, from the disappearance of substantive material content [*Sachgehalte*] from expression, from the eloquence of something that has no language. What has been poetically composed could not exist without this content falling silent, any more than it could without what it falls silent about.

(Adorno 1992: 112)

In this way, a "configuration of moments" comes to signify "more than the structure intends" (Adorno 1992: 113). Adorno adduces the example of "The Nook at Hardt," which depicts the natural environs in which Ulrich, Duke of Württemberg, hid while fleeing those he had maltreated. What Adorno emphasizes in the poem, and what traditional philology cannot master on its own, on his view, is the notion of a nature that has more to say than what appears in the use to which it is put by human designs—a nature that is "quite able to speak for itself" (*nicht gar unmündig*), as Hölderlin puts it. This claim partially appears in the content of the poem, especially in the image of a place that is more than the use to which it was put (*an übrigem Orte*), suggesting a sense of nature as "residue" or "remnant," as it were, and as the bearer of a "great destiny" (*groß Schicksaal*) that is not reducible to that of Ulrich (see Hölderlin 1994: 390–391). Thus, beyond the historical references discernable in the work lies the more general idea that language itself—and the language of the poem in the first instance—might serve such remnants in a way that exceeds intentional content. The question, then, is what it might mean for language to unintentionally serve nature, or nature as remnant.

It is here that the disagreement with Heidegger reveals its importance, for Heidegger too claims that we have overlooked or forgotten a certain surplus within being itself (*Sein*)—a surplus that was never mastered in the history of philosophy, with its one-sided emphasis on beings or its search for a supreme being. As he puts it in his *Elucidations of Hölderlin's Poetry* (1944, third edition 1963), the language of the poet serves precisely to encourage a return to the lost origins of everyday language, carrying the reader beyond the level of banal content toward a hidden remnant of primordial  $\phi\upsilon\sigma\iota\varsigma$  that he calls the "clearing" (*Lichtung*) of being (Heidegger 2000: 60, 78–79, 107). More concretely, Heidegger also suggests that the destiny of the German people remains conserved in Hölderlin's poetry, which becomes a trace of the origin that must one day be recovered: "poetic activity, ... in the secure destiny of Germany's future history, festively shows the ground of its origin" (Heidegger 2000: 171).

As such, Adorno sees Heidegger as illegitimately enlisting Hölderlin in an attempt to recover a notion of being that is entirely archaic and mythological. He therefore strenuously refuses what he calls a "cult of origins," counter-citing Hölderlin's "The Journey": "But I am bound for the Caucasus!" He adds,

As though Hölderlin's poetry had anticipated the use to which German ideology [i.e., Heidegger] would later put it, the late changes made to "Bread and Wine" put

out a sign opposing irrationalist dogmatism and the cult of origins at the same time: "May the one who has tested it believe it! for the spirit is at home / Not in the beginning, not at the source."

(Adorno 1992: 117; Hölderlin 1994: 414–415, 1946–1985: 2,2: 608)

Adorno's point is not simply to oppose Heidegger on such questions of interpretation, but to actualize Hölderlin in such a way that we correctly inherit the "more" that his poetry generates in writerly form. Consequently, Adorno argues that Hölderlin presents us with something undissolved within history—namely, the promise of a future that is different and better than what we now know. True, this may seem close to Heidegger's aim (with his talk of Hölderlin as the poet of future Germans), but there is one telling difference: Adorno is asking us to build a utopian future from out of the ruins of the present—in the sense of a discontinuous, genuinely progressive future of the kind that Huxley was incapable of imagining—yet without succumbing to the myth of an archaic origin or first principle, according to which all else must be organized. In this respect, what Adorno says of Heine holds true of Hölderlin as well: "there is no longer any homeland other than a world in which no one would be cast out any more, the world of a humanity emancipated in reality" (Adorno 1991a: 85). Adorno sees this better future as *discontinuous* with "prehistory," as already mentioned, not as a return to its roots, which are those of ancestral injustices. By contrast, Heidegger, in spite of a purportedly anti-metaphysical stance, still subordinates human existence to a necessary re-grounding of our understanding of being. This is what he calls the "other beginning" starting in the 1930s, an almost cosmological beginning deeper than any discovered hitherto, from which human existence—and the German people in particular—might finally draw its most essential power.

The concept of parataxis developed in Adorno's essay is meant to name the way in which poetic form articulates a refusal of such an "other beginning." What it invokes in Hölderlin's poetry are precisely the elements that refuse to be synthesized or ordered "hypotactically," that is, in a relation of dependence upon some other principle or element. (Hypotaxis is the subordination of one linguistic or poetic element to another, while parataxis is the absence of such subordination.) Adorno refers, for example, to the caesura in "Bread and Wine," which places antiquity into tension with Christianity or, alternatively, to the irresolvable tension between the two stanzas of "Half of Life" (Adorno 1992: 132–133; Hölderlin 1994: 262–273, 392–393). What such nonhierarchical structures show, according to Adorno, is not a synthetic unity of elements organized around a founding principle, but a broken unity, "a unity [that] indicates that it knows itself to be inconclusive" (Adorno 1992: 136). Or to put it another way, what Hölderlin's paratactical form promises—unconsciously, as it were—is a form of reconciliation in which the Many is not subordinated to the One. In Adorno's reading of "Conciliator, you that no longer believed in..." (later "Celebration of Peace"), this comes to the fore explicitly, in the claim that

insofar as the only-begotten son of the god of the theologians ought not to be made into an absolute principle—but instead "there would be others beside you" [*neben dir noch andere sei'n*]—, mythic authority over myths, the idealist rule of the One over the Many, is abandoned. Reconciliation is that of the One with the Many. That is peace.

(Adorno 1992: 146; Hölderlin 1994: 450–451; see too 1954: 21, 25)

Parataxis is the expression of this substantive content (*Gehalt*) seeping into literary form, in contradistinction to the mere propositional content or specific imagery deployed in a given poem (which are on the level of *Inhalt*). Parataxis in Hölderlin is the formal, poetic

expression of that which history, with its ancestral injustices and obsession with domination, has not yet realized. It names a tension between now and a better future that is unsolvable through any attempt to return to an original source of greatness.

### Beckett and the Catastrophe

What the critique of Huxley and the anti-Heideggerian reading of Hölderlin have in common is their “physiognomic” character: “Artworks are enigmatic in that they are the physiognomy of an objective spirit that is never transparent to itself in the moment in which it appears” (Adorno 1997: 128). In this way, “what these works say is not what their words say” (Adorno 1997: 184). In the case of Huxley, the surplus resides in the gap that Adorno underscores between Huxley’s quite legitimate worry about so-called progress coinciding with disaster and his utterly uncritical acceptance of the axioms of a society that perpetuates unnecessary suffering. In the case of Hölderlin, the physiognomic aspect takes on even greater historical breadth: Hölderlin’s poetry not only provides us with resources that enable us to counter certain currents of its political and philosophical reception but also sketches a view of “nature” as remnant that exceeds the human ends and uses to which it is subordinated, including, ultimately, the metaphysical quest for a lost original nature. On Adorno’s view, then, nature is not a material first principle, but simply a name for that which can surge up within experience as nonidentical with our beliefs, *i.e.*, that which invalidates them and obliges us to reconfigure them. As such, nature is the “other” of spirit, but only as that which drives spirit—*i.e.*, the network of human beliefs, customs, and institutions—to evolve; and so nature is neither merely its material counterpart nor its mythic wellspring. Nature, in Adorno’s sense, could just as well be the auto graveyard that indicts industrial society as the melancholy that betrays the Baroque world’s inability to diagnose the social construction of the futility of life.

Expressing this “natural” surplus is the work of language, whether as art or as philosophy—or even as the wordless facial contortion of socially unnecessary suffering, to which art and philosophy can sometimes do justice. Language is thereby more than the mere communicative circulation of existing concepts, beliefs, and worldviews. As Adorno puts it in an essay on lyric poetry,

For the substantive content [*Gehalt*] of a poem is not merely an expression of individual impulses and experiences. Those become artistic only when they come to participate in something universal by virtue of the specificity they acquire in being given aesthetic form, ... by making manifest something not distorted, not grasped, not yet subsumed. ... This is why the lyric reveals itself to be most deeply grounded in society when it does not repeat what society already knows, when it communicates nothing [familiar], when, instead, the subject whose expression is successful reaches an accord with language itself, with that which language would like to reach from out of itself.

(Adorno 1991b: 38, 43)

It is at this level that the work of art expresses its truth content.

Adorno’s reading of Beckett takes up these issues from yet another angle. “Trying to Understand *Endgame*,” begun in 1960, was first published in 1961 in the second volume of *Notes to Literature*. Adorno had seen a performance of Beckett’s *Endgame* in Vienna in 1958, after which he arranged a meeting with Beckett that took place later that same year (Müller-Doohm 2005: 356–357). “Trying to Understand *Endgame*” is dedicated to the memory of this first meeting (Adorno 1991c: 241). The posthumously published *Aesthetic*

*Theory*, which was to have borne another dedication to Beckett, also contains a number of passages relating to him (Adorno 1997: 366). Additionally, there are many entries in Adorno's personal notebooks relating to Beckett's works (published in Tiedemann 1994), as well as a transcript of a televised discussion in which Adorno speaks at length about Beckett (Adorno et al. 1994), and occasional references are to be found in Adorno's collected works. In short, Adorno's engagement with Beckett's work was intense and sustained throughout the final decade of his life.

In terms of Adorno's approach and to frame the question in relation to what we have already seen, one could say the following: if the substantive content of the literary work of art is to be found in the "nature" or "idea" that it enacts, then Beckett's *Endgame* is an allegory of the exhaustion of nature as it is translated into the etiolation of human experience. As Adorno puts it,

The situation in the play ... is none other than that in which "there's no more nature." The phase of complete reification of the world, where nothing remains that has not been made by human beings—the permanent catastrophe—, is indistinguishable from an additional catastrophic event caused by human beings, in which nature has been wiped out and after which nothing grows any more.

(Adorno 1991c: 245; Beckett 1992: 8)

The point here is not merely to raise the question of the destructive capacity of human beings, and certainly not if nature were to be understood by the spectator or reader as the passive material counterpart of human activity. Nature is rather that which has migrated into human experience as destroyed, such that the catastrophe that Beckett depicts is not merely the devastation of outer, material nature, but the ruin of inner experience as well. As such, the content of destroyed nature is coextensive with the subjectivity that can no longer think this ruination. They are of a piece. This is the central thrust of Adorno's reading of Beckett.

For this reason, Adorno strenuously resists existentialist interpretations that put the emphasis on the human individual as stranded or somehow challenged to survive in a godless, meaningless universe (compare Magee and Barrett 1978: 74). Such readings retain a notion of substantial human individuality standing against a devastated nature or an absurd reality, when it is precisely such fantasies of individuality that Beckett's works mock—often by portraying the literal disintegration of human subjectivity and corporeality. As such,

the catastrophes that inspire *Endgame* have shattered the individual whose substantiality and absoluteness was the common thread in Kierkegaard, Jaspers, and Sartre's versions of existentialism. ... The individual is revealed to be a historical category, both the outcome of the capitalist process of estrangement and a defiant protest against it, yet also something transient.

(Adorno 1991c: 249)

However, lest we think that this protest is something actively chosen and empowering, he adds that "Beckett's characters behave in precisely the primitive, behavioristic manner appropriate to the state of affairs after the catastrophe, after it has mutilated them so that they cannot react any differently—flies twitching after the fly swatter has half-squashed them" (Adorno 1991c: 251). Such twitching is the only protest still possible, and yet it is a protest. In what does it consist, then, *qua* protest, if there are no longer vital and autonomous subjects, but only half-dead, already decaying bodies and worn-out, enervated tropes and habits? The answer lies in understanding that the process of decay is another expression of nature as remnant, the sign of something to be remembered and to which we should do justice.

One might refer here to the terrifyingly concise main character in Beckett's "The End," a decrepit homeless man on the verge of dying who finds himself at one point to be the subject of a socialist's textbook discourse on the evils of charity (Beckett 1995: 94–95). But the thunderous promise of emancipation has no more effect on the old man's situation than the charity for which he begs. His reply consists not in a political rejoinder, but in retreating to a shed where he lies dying:

The sea, the sky, the mountains and the islands closed in and crushed me in a mighty systole, then scattered to the uttermost confines of space. The memory came faint and cold of the story I might have told, a story in the likeness of my life, I mean without the courage to end or the strength to go on.

(Beckett 1995: 99)

What history has served up to the individual is not liberation, but a retracting, failing subjectivity merged into its return to nature, unable to tell the story that would do justice to what it has undergone. Homelessness and poverty, stripped of all effective social meaning, are indistinguishable from bodily decay. Such is the apparently natural consequence of a historical process that is already well advanced in late capitalist society. Indeed, the "perfectibility" of the catastrophe is all that we seem to have left (Beckett 1990). And yet there remains the memory, however impotent, of a story that might have and indeed *ought* to have been tellable. As Adorno puts it, Beckett's writing "signals the retreat from a world of which nothing remains except its *caput mortuum*," i.e., its apparently useless residue, the seemingly worthless social by-product of people literally decaying into caricatures of themselves (Adorno 1997: 31). However, such by-products are also the trace of what was not taken up, of what might yet be said or done. This is nature as remnant, the possibility (currently blocked) of reconstructing and freeing ourselves from what has happened to us.

The trouble is that we seem not to possess the means to tell the story, to diagnose this situation adequately: "History is put out of play because it has dried up consciousness's power to conceive it, the power to remember" (Adorno 1991c: 247). The core of Beckett's works is thereby not that we subsist without meaning in an absurd world, but that decrepit subjectivity has not got the strength to see bodily decay and meaninglessness for what they are: residues, remnants of "nature" that reveal the socially unnecessary suffering that is forced upon us. True, Beckett succeeds in telling a version of the story that needs to be told, though only in the mode of aesthetic semblance. This is his great merit, according to Adorno:

The historical inevitability of this absurdity makes it seem ontological: that is the context of delusion proper to history itself. Beckett's drama demolishes it. The immanent contradiction of the absurd, the nonsense in which reason terminates, opens up the emphatic possibility of something true that cannot even be conceived of anymore. It undermines the absolute claim of that which simply is the way it is.

(Adorno 1991c: 273)

Thus, the catastrophe described by Beckett is not the death of nature as such. The real catastrophe is rather that the social processes by which something like autonomous, critical subjectivity has come to deteriorate have been obscured to such a point that we have forgotten that there is absolutely nothing natural or necessary about them. The catastrophe is that we have naturalized, and are consequently unable to contest, the catastrophe. Beckett's works put this loss of language on display, the inability to tell the story of a life in which "nature"—here signifying that apparent naturalness of damaging social processes—crushes meaning out of existence by its "mighty systole." As Adorno puts it in *Aesthetic Theory*,

Art emigrates to a standpoint that is no longer a standpoint at all because there are no longer standpoints from which the catastrophe could be named or formed, a word that seems ridiculous in this context. *Endgame* is neither a play about the atom bomb nor is it without content; the determinate negation of its content [*Inhalt*] becomes its formal principle and the negation of content altogether.

(Adorno 1997: 250)

The destruction of manifest content (*Inhalt*) is the play's substantive content (*Gehalt*).

Benjamin, from whom Adorno inherits much in his use of the concept of catastrophe, had already noted in the late 1930s: "That things should just 'carry on' as they are is the catastrophe" (Benjamin 1999: N9a,1). Adorno sees this thought reflected in Beckett: "Prehistory lives on; the phantasm of eternity is precisely its curse" (Adorno 1991c: 273).

### More Writing

For Adorno, Beckett provides what he takes to be one of the only effective contemporary condemnations of the history of decaying experience. This takes place in literature, *i.e.*, in the aesthetic realm, because everyday social subjectivity cannot manage it. It is precisely this inability that Beckett's works register and, for Adorno, above all *Endgame*. More generally, the presentation of such substantive content on the basis of a destruction of manifest content (outer nature, bodies, actions, beliefs, etc.) is part of what separates literature and other artistic forms from the mere communication of recognizable intentions, allowing us to say, if only obliquely, what the integrated taboos of late capitalist society prevent us from saying. Adorno's readings of other literary figures evince the same traits:

As conceptual and predicative, language stands opposed to subjective expression; by virtue of its generality, it reduces what is to be expressed to something always already given and known. The poets rise up in opposition to this. They incessantly strive to incorporate the subject and its expression into language, to the point of its demise.

(Adorno 1992: 136)

Like Hofmannsthal's Lord Chandos, who can no longer speak in the language of familiar commerce with people and things, literature seeks to speak

a language none of whose words is [previously] known to [it], a language in which mute things occasionally speak to [it] and wherein [it] may one day, be it in the grave, have to justify [itself] before an unknown judge.

(Hofmannsthal 1952: 141)

Such a language invokes justice and the possibility of redemption, yet without giving in to either a cult of origins or "sacrosanct transcendence" (Adorno 1973b: 17). In taking up this language, literature and art more generally provide us with a "sundial telling the time of philosophy and of history" (Adorno 1991b: 46, 1991c: 269).

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# ADORNO, MUSIC, AND PHILOSOPHY

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Theodor W. Adorno is unique among the first generation of the Frankfurt School for his intensive focus on music and the problem of its interpretation. But what is the significance of this focus for his approach to critical theory as a philosopher and sociologist? I argue that it was his experience of music as a fundamentally interpretive and self-reflective art that became the point of reference for his conception of a critical philosophy as interpretation. I also propose that his notion of “autonomous” art music as a non-propositional, non-conceptual mode of critical reflection can only make sense when understood dialectically in relation to the contradictions of music’s social situation.

## Music, Composition, Philosophy

As a writer Adorno was prolific, and nearly half the twenty volumes that make up his *Gesammelte Schriften* (GS12–19, and parts of GS10 and GS20) are directly occupied with music, while frequent references are scattered across his other writings. In addition, there are also uncompleted musical projects from Adorno’s *Nachlass* that have either been edited and published since his death in 1969 (including *Beethoven: Philosophie der Musik* and *Zu einer Theorie der musikalischen Reproduktion*, both of which exist only as fragmentary notes and drafts), or are still in the process of being issued. Adorno also sought to reach a wider public as a music critic and was quick to embrace the media, giving talks on music on the radio as early as 1930 during the period of the Weimar Republic and then in West Germany in the post-war years following his return from exile in the United States, when he also often took part in television discussions on music and the arts. The greater part of his writings on music, both from the *Gesammelte Schriften* and from the *Nachlass* (which also includes transcripts of academic lecture series as well as radio talks), has now been translated, especially into English. As a result, his work in this area has become widely read and highly influential internationally. At the same time, it remains contentious, particularly within academic musicology and philosophy, in spite of the broader interest it continues to arouse.

There are some frequently encountered misunderstandings about the standing of the writings on music within the totality of Adorno’s work. Three of these seem to me to be particularly dominant. One is that Adorno was an important philosopher, sociologist, and indeed a psychologist, but the writings on music are just the product of a private passion or hobby, and therefore can be safely ignored, because the really significant work lies elsewhere in his voluminous output. Another version of this misunderstanding is that, as well as being a philosopher and sociologist, Adorno was a musicologist, and that the writings on music

belong to the discipline of musicology. In both cases the view is the same: the writings on music can safely be left to the specialists. Another misunderstanding is that as a critical theorist Adorno applied his already worked out cultural theory to many different things, one of which was music – and in particular popular music seen as part of Adorno's critique of mass culture and the culture industry. In what follows, I propose that music was not simply a sideline for Adorno, but that the writings on music are central to his work, that Adorno was decidedly not a musicologist, and that the writings on popular music are perhaps the least important and least convincing part of his output, and accordingly do not play a key role in my account here – I have in fact addressed Adorno's critique of popular music at some length elsewhere (see Paddison, 1982, 201–218). It is my view that Adorno's practical experience of music played a decisive role in the shaping of his unique and idiosyncratic version of critical theory. I want to start by focusing on the musical context of Adorno's thinking and his activity as a composer.

### **Adorno in a Musical Context**

Adorno wrote on music as a philosopher and social theorist, but one informed by a practical and professional musical education at a level rare among philosophers. Above all, he wrote as a composer. He never regarded his writings on music as musicology, and indeed musicology as a discipline has frequently been suspicious or dismissive of Adorno's approach to music, particularly because of its social and political implications. It is ironic therefore that since Adorno's death in 1969 musicology has been happy to lay claim to his thinking on music in order to lend the discipline a broader cultural and sociological credibility. In a radio discussion in 1970, the musicologist and aesthetician Carl Dahlhaus commented wryly,

If musicology in recent years has wanted to claim some prestige in literary intellectual circles, then it is indebted in no small part to Adorno, who in the outside world has been counted as a musicologist, although he was at one with [the musicologists] at least to the extent that he insisted that he was not one of them.

(Dahlhaus, Finscher, Kaiser, 1971, 439, my trans.)

Adorno saw himself rather as a musician and, in particular, as a composer who was also a philosopher. The extent to which his experience of music shaped his philosophy, and the extent to which he understood music as a mode of philosophizing without concepts (as Schopenhauer had also conceived it), becomes clear once we see how closely music and philosophy are entwined in his thinking. For Adorno, artistic creation held the promise of utopian freedom that was now at odds with what he called the "totally administered world," and his own period of activity as a composer, which lasted from his teenage years up to the mid-1940s, should be seen in this light, because it informs not only the writings on music but also his work overall as a philosopher and sociologist.

### **Adorno as Composer**

As is well known, Adorno came from a highly musical background. He had an early musical training as pianist (he studied piano with Eduard Jung at the Frankfurt Hoch Conservatory, and subsequently went on to study with Eduard Steuermann, who had given many first performances of music by Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School), while as a composer he studied in Frankfurt with Bernhard Sekles (the Director of the Hoch Conservatory and Paul Hindemith's teacher), and then privately in Vienna with Alban Berg (see Müller-Doohm, 2005, 38–39, 82–94). The period he spent as a pupil of Berg immediately

following the completion of his philosophy doctorate at Frankfurt University was undoubtedly formative, and although he remains a minor figure as a composer, especially when seen in the larger context of the enormous influence exercised on twentieth-century music by the Second Viennese School, Adorno's small compositional output does nevertheless have credibility in its own right. The scores of a selection of his works edited by Heinz-Klaus Metzger and Rainer Riehn have been published in two volumes (Munich: edition text + kritik, 1980), including songs, chamber music, choral music, and orchestral works, most notably the Six Short Pieces for Orchestra op.4 (1924–1929), which in 1968 he revised for publication by Ricordi of Milan. There are also a number of other pieces in the Adorno Archiv still to be published, some of them juvenilia dating from his youth, including works for string quartet and also for piano solo.

A number of Adorno's pieces have now been performed and recorded, including the Two Pieces for String Quartet op.2 with the Buchberger String Quartet, and the Six Short Pieces for Orchestra op.4 played by the Frankfurt Opera Orchestra under Gary Bertini (CD: Wergo, 1990), while the Leipzig String Quartet have recorded two very early works from his teenage years, Six Studies for String Quartet of 1920, and also a rather unconvincing four-movement String Quartet of 1921 that shows a distinct influence of Bartók's First String Quartet but is overextended (CD: CPO, 1996). It is immediately apparent, however, that his most successful pieces overwhelmingly invoke the pre-1914 freely atonal period of Schoenberg, Webern, and Berg that Adorno admired so much, rather than the music these composers were actually writing by the mid-1920s when he first became actively involved with their circle. This is strongly evident when the pieces written by Adorno in the 1920s are juxtaposed in performance with freely atonal pieces by Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern. This was demonstrated very effectively by the pianist María Luisa López Vita in an illuminating recital given in 1999 in Munich entitled "Adornos Kompositionen für Klavier allein im Kontext der Zweiten Wiener Schule", supported by the Adorno Archiv (Prinzregententheater, 22.11.1999, recording in the Theodor W. Adorno Archiv, made available courtesy of Rolf Tiedemann, who also published an extended programme note: "Adorno, Philosoph und Komponist" for the occasion). Adorno's Three Piano Pieces (1924) were sandwiched between Berg's Piano Sonata op.1 (1908–1910) and Schoenberg's Six Little Piano Pieces op.19 (1913), and followed by other piano works by Adorno like the Three Piano Pieces (1927–1945). The affinities are remarkable, with the harmonic world of the Adorno pieces moving between the chromatically extended tonality of the early Berg (like his op.1, and also his Four Songs op.2) and the free atonality that emerges in the final movement of Schoenberg's Second String Quartet op.10 (1908), and the piano pieces op.11 and op.19. This affinity is particularly apparent in Adorno's songs, which are influenced by Berg's Four Songs op.2 (1910), by his *Altenberg Lieder* op.4 (1912), and by Schoenberg's song cycle from Stefan George's *Das Buch der hängenden Gärten* op.15 (1909–1910). Adorno also set poems by Stefan George in his op.1 (1925–1928) and op.7 (1944), and by Georg Trakl in his op.5 (1938–1941), and these settings represent some of his most successful work as a composer.

### Composition, Freedom, and the Flight into Order

But the 1920s were also characterized across the arts by a retreat from the experimental freedom of the immediate pre-war years into new forms of order, which in music included neoclassicism on the one hand and the twelve-tone technique on the other (indeed, although often regarded as irreconcilable opposites at the time, both were in effect combined in Schoenberg's early serial pieces, like the Suite for piano, op.25). In spite of his admiration for these composers, Adorno saw this retrenchment as a betrayal of the experimental upheaval of the early years, and in the opening paragraph of the late and unfinished *Ästhetische*

*Theorie* (1970) it is clear that he still saw the period 1908–1914 as the high tide mark of aesthetic modernity. He writes,

The sea of the formerly inconceivable, on which around 1910 revolutionary art movements set out, did not bestow the promised happiness of adventure ... everywhere artists rejoiced less over the newly won realm of freedom than that they immediately sought once again after ostensible yet scarcely adequate order.

(Adorno, GS7, 1970b, 9; 1997b, 1)

Nevertheless, even though Adorno's music recalled the harmonic world of radical pre-1914 music on its path towards atonality, it has to be said that structurally his pieces often reflect the tendency of much new music in the 1920s to fall back on pre-existing forms and genres. Of the Six Short Pieces for Orchestra op.4, no.3 is a gigue and no.5 is a waltz; on the other hand, although Adorno does sometimes make use of the twelve-tone technique, as in the first piece of his Two Pieces for String Quartet op.2, he does so freely and without following strict serial principles. Nevertheless, however one may judge the artistic merit of Adorno's compositions, they are not the work of a dilettante, but of a musician immersed in the Austro-German tradition at the period of its greatest ferment and ultimately perhaps of its disintegration. Noting that after the mid-1940s Adorno wrote no more music, apart from revising some earlier pieces, the composer Mathias Spahlinger writes, "There is much to indicate ... that for Adorno philosophy belonged more to the realm of necessity, while music belonged – *in solidarity with metaphysics in the moment of its fall* – rather to the realm of freedom" (Spahlinger, 1989, 35). Adorno considered that freedom in music was no longer possible because of the unfreedom that prevailed in social reality, so that, as Spahlinger puts it, "the philosopher ... murdered the composer in 1944" (Spahlinger, 1989, 35, my trans.).

### The Composer as Philosopher

A strong case has been made for the importance of Adorno's compositions in the context of his subsequent development as a philosopher, and in 1963, in a *Festschrift* in honour of Adorno's sixtieth birthday, the conductor and music theorist René Leibowitz had written that "the fact that [Adorno's] compositions have remained largely unknown says nothing about their significance; if we had not had this unknown music then we would also not have possessed his well-known writings [on music]" (Leibowitz, 1963, 359, my trans.). In his article "Adorno, der Komponist als Philosoph," Martin Blumentritt has written that in Adorno's case, "Thinking and composing – each in its own way an expression of social labour of which the Subject is unconscious – illuminate each other reciprocally" (Blumentritt, 1989, 19, my trans.). As a young composer in the period following the First World War, Adorno was faced with the state of musical material as he found it, and it was to this material, at its most extreme stage of technical and expressive development through the works of the Second Viennese School composers, that he responded. In itself this interaction between composer and handed-down material is not primarily a conceptual matter but a practical relationship, where something new is made and in the process subjectivity is exteriorized as an object – the musical work. It is this process that Adorno came to theorize increasingly just as his practical engagement with composition as a practice began to diminish as his activity as philosopher and sociologist increased. What was initially seen as essentially a practical relationship in the intensive correspondence between Adorno and the composer Ernst Krenek in the period from 1929 to 1932 (see Adorno & Krenek, 1974) is viewed sociologically in the course of the 1930s, in particular in "Zur gesellschaftlichen Lage der Musik" ("On the Social Situation of Music") (see Adorno, GS18, 1984, 729–777), and by the 1940s, it is developed in

philosophical terms most extensively (and polemically) in *Philosophie der neuen Musik* (see Adorno, GS12, 1975).

### Philosophy of Music/Music as Philosophy

The focus of Adorno's music philosophy is the "objective content" (*Gehalt*) of music, the way in which subjectivity as what he calls the "supra-personal Subject" relates to the handed-down forms and genres, which are social and historical in origin. Adorno argues that this relationship between the "I" (*Ich*) and forms (*Formen*) changes historically, and furthermore that in the modern age this relationship becomes increasingly strained and fractured. In an early article published in the journal *Pult und Taktstock* in 1924, "Zum Problem der Reproduktion", and clearly under the influence of Georg Lukács's *Theorie des Romans*, Adorno writes,

If the objective existence of a musical work – not its "what," its intended [content], but the supra-personal communal beingness to which it relates – if this objective existence is guaranteed through the power of the *forms* which control the musical Subject and contain it within them, and, furthermore, if the power of the objective forms is extinguished, frozen and broken in loose congruence with the course of musical history, then insight into the kind of objectivity and its historical determinedness might at least lead to some findings that could frame the problem area of interpretation.

(Adorno, GS19, 1984, 440–441, my trans.)

However, all interpretation is partial and incomplete. This is particularly so with music because it is a temporal art. The experience of temporality in music is that of the intensity of the present moment just passing, and while we may attempt to construct a sense of the musical work as a whole through recollection of what has passed and through anticipation of what may still be to come, the totality as such is never immediately present to us. For Adorno, the relationship between part and whole unfolds in music as a process in movement, something that, so he argues, it shares with critical philosophy, which also only has access to the totality through the part. The musical metaphor of the relation of part to whole continued to occupy him philosophically, and many years later he writes in *Negative Dialektik*,

The resistance of philosophy needs to unfold... Even in music – as in all art, presumably – the impulse animating the first bar will not be fulfilled at once, but only in further articulation. To this extent, however much it may be phenomenal as a totality, music is a critique of phenomenality, of the appearance that the substance is present here and now. Such a mediate[d] role befits philosophy no less.

(Adorno, GS6, 1970, 27–28; 1973, 16)

In his 1953 essay "Über das gegenwärtige Verhältnis von Philosophie und Musik" ("On the current relationship between philosophy and music"), Adorno writes of the closeness of music (that is, autonomous art music) to philosophy since the late eighteenth century, to the extent that both have been characterized by critique and self-reflection. In the case of contemporary music, however, he argues that "this critique ... becomes manifest as that which it has secretly always been: the formal law of the works themselves" (Adorno, GS18, 1997, 164; 2009, 473). In this, we can see that Adorno proposes not only that music should be the object of interpretation and critique, but also that music can itself be a manifestation of the

critical and self-reflective impulse. Nevertheless, this immanent musical critique practised by music itself through its form is paradoxical because it is non-conceptual in character and speaks to us as a kind of non-propositional “language of things” that still calls for a second level of interpretation on our part through concepts. You could say that at a first level of musical interpretation the performance of a musical work can never be the final, ultimate, and correct interpretation of the piece, because other interpretations are always possible. It is likewise the case with our attempts to understand and interpret a piece of music through concepts, where there are many possible interpretations, some more convincing than others, but none that can be considered completely sufficient or final.

It was in a paper from 1931, “Die Aktualität der Philosophie” (Adorno, GS1, 1973, 325–344), delivered as a lecture on taking up the position of Privatdozent in the Philosophy Department of Frankfurt University, that Adorno first spells out the terms of what is later to become in the 1960s his “negative dialectics”. This concerns the unavoidable situation in which philosophy found itself in the 1920s, caught between the two dominant schools of thought – on the one hand, the phenomenological existentialism of Heidegger, and on the other, the logical empiricism of Schlick and the Vienna Circle. Adorno claimed that both these schools of thought denied the historicity of our knowledge of reality. He argued that philosophy can now only be interpretive and that there are no fixed meanings hidden behind the surface of reality. Interpretation must now seek to illuminate the shifting figures of history in the objects of investigation (see Paddison, 2016, 141–144). It is this that underlies his approach to the interpretation of music as historically and socially mediated.

### The Social Situation of Music

The immanent critique practised by music at the level of its autonomous form constitutes one pole of Adorno’s interpretive approach. If taken in isolation, however, Adorno’s position could easily be mistaken for a version of formalism, as epitomized, for example, in the case made by the nineteenth-century Viennese music critic Eduard Hanslick in his famous treatise *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen*. But the autonomy of music is seen by Adorno as an aspect of its reification, an effect of social and economic forces. He argues, furthermore, that it is through its autonomy that music becomes a form of non-conceptual cognition, and it is through its distance from direct involvement in utility and function that it becomes a form of critique. But the emergence of such a notion of autonomy is thoroughly historical and is an aspect of the development of capitalism and the division of labour. Music’s autonomy is regarded by Adorno as fundamentally social in origin, and is contradictory: its formal integrity and consistency is fractured and compromised because of the contradictions of its social situation.

In the opening lines of “Zur gesellschaftlichen Lage der Musik” (“On the Social Situation of Music”), Adorno writes,

Wherever music is heard today, it marks in the most precise lines possible the contradictions and fractures that run right through contemporary society, while at the same time music is separated from this same society by the deepest fracture of all – the fragmented totality produced by this society – without, however, that society being capable itself of absorbing more than music’s refuse and ruins.

(Adorno, GS18, 1984, 729, my trans.)

In this passage, Adorno identifies what he sees as the contradictory aspects of music in contemporary society: on the one hand, the commodity status of all music (whether high art or popular music), which is an aspect of its reification, and on the other hand, the critical

character of the most uncompromising advanced contemporary music as “new music” which, so he argues, resists commodification but in so doing alienates itself from society. It is this alienation of musical works as reified musical artefacts that calls for interpretation, not simply through restoring the rejected social context, but through revealing how the social and historical inheres – that is to say, is mediated – in musical objects. An excursion into the concept of mediation is relevant at this point.

### Mediation

It is the mediatedness of *objects* as well as subjects that provided the key for Adorno’s dialectical interpretations of cultural artefacts – something also clearly apparent in the cultural and literary analyses of Walter Benjamin and Leo Löwenthal during the same period. For them, commodities are not simply the mediated relations between people that become seen as “things”; they are mediated *within* themselves as objects. This perception opened a door to a way of reading musical works, pop songs, novels, popular fiction, paintings, and so on, as apparently self-contained monads permeated by the social, political, and historical currents of their time.

The concept of mediation (*Vermittlung*) is fundamental to Adorno’s philosophy overall, and I would endorse Norbert Rath’s comment that “Adorno’s philosophy can be understood as the construction of mediations; the concept and process of mediation stand at the centre of his thinking” (Rath, 1982, 137, my trans.). But while the concept of mediation has been most obviously associated with sociology, it has considerable implications for the aesthetics of music on the one hand and for musicology on the other, two disciplines traditionally content to leave any concerns with social relations to the social sciences. Left on its own, however, the discipline of sociology – at least as empirical sociology – is notoriously ill-equipped to tackle the structural particularity of art works, the conceptual generality of philosophical aesthetics, or the problematic subjectivity of the aesthetic experience, and risks reducing all issues concerning art and aesthetics to questions of identity-creation, communication, social relations, or ideology. I would say that *Vermittlung* for Adorno is also not to be subsumed under a general concept of metaphor or homology, in spite of the determination of some literary theorists to argue that it should be. *Vermittlung* as a concept must be addressed philosophically, but in music it needs to be understood in specifically musical terms as something *material*: that is to say, it calls simultaneously for a concept of musical material that recognizes that it is permeated by the social totality. This is not to suggest, however, that what we are dealing with in Adorno’s case is a matter of systematic empirical research into socially determined material: as Peter Uwe Hohendahl has pointed out, “his essays rarely uphold rigid methodological distinctions. Through the dialectical structure of their argument they prefer to explore invisible, even seemingly improbable connections, frequently using a minor detail as a point of departure” (Hohendahl, 1995, 167). Adorno holds fast to his Hegelian principle of using the part to illuminate the dialectical relationship to the whole, while at the same time avoiding identifying with the whole.

### Sociology of Music

Seen in this larger context, the frequently cited section 7 from the 1967 essay “Thesen zur Kunstsoziologie” (“Theses on the Sociology of Art”) remains illuminating and definitive, in that it makes it clear that Adorno’s concept of mediation is to be philosophically conceived while at the same time being applied in a sociological context to the specificity of art works, and furthermore that it is defined in opposition to the prevailing identification of mediation with communication. And Adorno further emphasizes where he sees mediation as being

located in relation to art works: “What I mean, in other words, is the very specific question aimed at products of the mind [*Geist*], as to how social structural moments, positions, ideologies and whatever else, assert themselves in the works of art themselves” (Adorno, 1972, 128; GS10.1, 1977, 374). What Adorno calls “mediation” is, by his own admission, an extremely complex and difficult concept, in that it brings together art-specific, sociological and philosophical moments which, even though they can each be addressed separately, can only profitably be understood in relation to each other – a relationship that is not one of the resolution of antinomies, but rather of their intensification. Indeed, the social mediation of the art work for Adorno comes down to what seems at first sight its irreducible opposite: its autonomous form. He writes concerning the aim of his music sociology,

I [have] brought out the extraordinary difficulty of the question quite deliberately and without reducing it, and thereby the difficulty of a sociology of music which is not satisfied with external arrangements, not satisfied with the position of art in society, with the effects it has in society but which wants to know how society objectivates itself in works of art.

(Adorno, 1972, 128; GS10.1, 1977, 374)

This remarkable inversion of the usual priorities of a specialized sociology of music, from the effects and function of music in society towards the mediated manifestations of society in music, returns us to the problem of how to interpret the social content of music. As we have seen, this, for Adorno, is a philosophical problem, and he argues that “sociology was born as philosophy” and that “it still needs today, if it is not to remain quite a-conceptual, the type of reflection and speculation that originated in philosophy” (Adorno, GS10.1, 373; 1972, 127). This also brings us back to the question of interpretation – in this case of the idea of musical works as critical reflection on historically transmitted musical material.

### **New Music and Historical Material**

Adorno’s notion of a historical dialectic of material is derived in large part from Schoenberg’s conviction that the composer must respond to the historical necessity carried by the musical material. Because of this it has led to criticism that Adorno’s whole philosophy of music is entirely centred on the historical tradition of Austro-German music and the autonomy aesthetic that goes with this. These kinds of criticisms are usually based on a rather one-sided reading of *Philosophy of New Music*. As becomes clear from Adorno’s historical-philosophical interpretation of the music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, he sees the “historical tendency of musical material” as characterized by discontinuity, not simply by a smooth continuity of historical progression stretching unbroken from Bach to Schoenberg to Stockhausen and beyond. Adorno’s perception that the historical progress of musical material (which in large part is progress in technique and technology) is at every stage accompanied by the disintegration of material and, in particular, of forms is illuminating. His discussion of Berlioz in relation to Beethoven is particularly instructive in this respect (see Paddison, 1993, 233–242) and should serve to counter monolithic readings of Adorno.

### **Musical Material**

In brief, Adorno claims that the material of music is itself socially and culturally pre-formed, before any individual act of composition even begins. The material consists of handed-down, previous engagements with the material, as musical works, forms, genres, style systems, compositional procedures, and conventions. It could also be said to embrace techniques and



developments in musical instrument technology, tonal systems, and tuning systems. It involves modes of performance and reproduction. Importantly, it also now embraces recording techniques and studio technology, together with electro-acoustics, sound production, and diffusion. All of this now constitutes musical material in ways that Adorno perhaps could not have predicted, but which nevertheless may be understood as “sedimented society” and thus as part of the material transmission of social norms.

The concept of artistic material can be located in broad terms in the early part of the twentieth century, and it is clear that it was a general concern for artists across all the arts at a time when traditional forms and traditional materials were fragmenting and being thrown into question. It is in critical dialogue with a number of his contemporaries, in particular the composers Arnold Schoenberg, Paul Hindemith, Hanns Eisler, and Ernst Krenek, that Adorno formulated his own theory of material in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The influence of Schoenberg’s music and his theorizing is most obvious and pervasive. Indeed, Adorno’s understanding of developments in Schoenberg’s music was also undoubtedly influenced by his reading of the composer’s *Harmonielehre* of 1911 (although probably in its 1922 revision). In this work are to be found many suggestions regarding the historical and dialectical character of musical material which were taken over directly by Adorno and elaborated within the context of his larger social theory. Also significant is the now-neglected August Halm, who in his *Von zwei Kulturen der Musik* of 1913 had put forward a historical and developmental theory of music through analogy with changes in social consciousness. The influence of Halm, together with that of Ernst Bloch in his *Geist der Utopie* and later in his *Prinzip Hoffnung*, pervades Adorno’s notion of the historical dialectic of musical material as progress of Spirit (*Geist*) towards freedom (see Paddison, 1993, 65–107).

Adorno had shown an interest in the music of Eisler and Krenek from the start and had published a number of reviews of early performances of their work in the 1920s. I suggest that what particularly drew Adorno to them was their readiness to discuss the compositional process as part of a larger cultural context, both social and historical. With Eisler, Adorno later (in the 1940s) collaborated on the book *Composing for the Films*. With Krenek, there developed, through correspondence, radio discussions, and published articles, the important debate on the concept of musical material and the relationship of the composer towards it which enabled Adorno to bring the various strands of his developing theory into focus. This theory is first outlined in 1932 as part of a larger social theory of music in his essay “On the Social Situation of Music.”

Adorno’s theory of musical material has been one of the most criticized aspects of his music philosophy and sociology – another being his critique of popular music. It is my view that the theory of material only makes sense when we consider it not as a theory of integration and continuity, which has been the grounds for most of the attacks it has sustained, but instead as a theory of the *disintegration* of musical material in the face of the absolute need on the part of the composer to attempt to achieve the opposite – the *integration* of the musical composition as structure. In his critique of popular music, on the other hand, Adorno argues that the available material is simply the degenerated material of art music (he uses the term *Verfall des Materials*) and that popular songs (he is rather vague when it comes to distinctions between types and genres of popular music) are designed by the culture industry from the outset as commodities for passive consumption. Whereas radical art music – the “New Music” – may, to varying degrees, resist commodification through its critical relation to its material at the level of its form, Adorno can conceive of no circumstances under which popular music, whether as jazz or rock music, might also have a similar relationship to its material. Most of Adorno’s writings on popular music date from the 1930s and 1940s, and it is possible to argue, as I have elsewhere (Paddison, 1982), that much popular music at that period was highly standardized, and this can explain Adorno’s rather dogmatic views on the

subject. However, when he revisited the discussion in 1962 in the “Leichte Musik” chapter of his book *Einleitung in die Musiksoziologie* (*Introduction to the Sociology of Music*) little had changed from his perspective, although popular music itself was changing rapidly in the course of the 1960s. He writes in the revised edition that appeared in 1968, “To this day, pop music has scarcely participated in the evolution of material that has been going on in serious music for more than fifty years” (Adorno, GS14, 1973, 203; 1976, 24–25).

Although Adorno was not the first to address the concept of material in relation to the New Music, he was, I suggest, the first to examine the concept of material critically, and to do so at a time when composers in the West could no longer take a received notion of appropriate musical materials as a given, because everything had been thrown into question and solutions, sometimes desperate, sometimes radically innovative, were already being sought. This locates the historical emergence of a specific concept of material quite precisely. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno suggests that “the concept of material may first have taken conscious shape in the [nineteen] twenties” (AT, 148). This is certainly the period after initial, perhaps intuitive, experimentation when artists begin to ask themselves what it is that they were doing, and to set about rationalizing in some way or other their course of action. The examples are well known: Schoenberg’s rationalization of free atonality in the form of the twelve-tone technique appears in the early 1920s; Stravinsky and neoclassicism begin to stabilize (to use a term from Adorno’s article “Die stabilisierte Musik” from the 1920s) their technical procedures and stylistic models, although the writing about this is left to others at the time; the painter Paul Klee sets about rationalizing and systematising his approach to painting and, notably, drawing in the famous *Pedagogical Sketchbook* (1925); and then in the 1930s, Hindemith, the *enfant terrible* of the early twenties, thoroughly rationalizes his own approach to harmony in 1937 in his *Unterweisung im Tonsatz*, even to the extent of re-composing certain significant (and already successful) earlier works like the song cycle *Das Marienleben* to bring them into line with his newly systematized theory of harmony. This is also the period in which Adorno himself began to examine the concept, first of all in his early concert reviews of works by his contemporaries Schoenberg, Berg, Webern, Stravinsky, Bartók, Hindemith, Weill, and Eisler, among others, and then in the remarkable correspondence with Ernst Krenek between 1929 and 1932 about problems relating to contemporary composition, technique, and material.

### Debates on New Music

The debates with Krenek concerned the nature of the composer’s relation to musical material: Krenek took the line that the composer was the sovereign creator who selected the material as needed from among all available possibilities, whereas Adorno’s position was that the composer’s choice was severely limited by the historical stage reached by the material and that not all possibilities were actually available. Indeed, he insisted that the material itself made historical demands to which the composer had no choice but respond. Adorno also linked the concept of “consistency”, or “coherence” (*Stimmigkeit*) with the idea of progress and progressiveness in relation to musical material – that is to say, those composers who responded to the objective demands of the handed-down material were progressive and, by implication, their music was “authentic” (at this period he employed the term *echt*, later *authentisch*). In an article from 1930 which grew out of this debate, “Reaktion und Fortschritt” (“Reaction and Progress”, to which Krenek wrote a companion article entitled “Progress and Reaction”), Adorno argued that

it is only in its immanent consistency that a work proves itself as progressive. In each work the material registers concrete demands, and the movement with which

each new work manifests these is the sole obligatory shape [*Gestalt*] of history for the author. A work that meets these demands completely is consistent [*stimmig*].  
(Adorno, 1974, 176, my trans.)

A further aspect of the relation to material discussed by Adorno and Krenek is the long-standing debate as to whether musical material is to be regarded as of natural or historical/cultural origin. Adorno argues that all that is meaningful in musical material is historical and social in origin, and that indeed musical material is not nature but is culturally pre-formed, so that what the composer engages with when composing is sedimented history and society. He writes, “Whatever nature might be to start with, it receives the seal of authenticity [*Echtheit*] from history. History enters into the constellation of truth” (Adorno, 1974, 179, my trans.). And yet material is also always historical, it is always “used”, second-hand, and in spite of appearances (for example, the harmonic series, tuning systems, scale systems) it is never natural. As he puts it, “Thus material is not natural material even if it appears so to artists; rather, it is thoroughly historical” (Adorno, 1970, 223; 1997, 148). It is this historicity that the composer works with, and which, argues Adorno most controversially, constitutes, in very Schoenbergian terms, its “historical necessity” and its “historical tendency”.

From the start, Adorno’s concept of material is characterized above all by a single dominating idea: that musical material is dynamic, in a process of change, development, and decay, rather than static and ontologically fixed. It grows old, and there is a historical degeneration, debasement, and disintegration of materials. An adequate understanding of this fundamental idea would appear to lead in two opposing directions: (1) that Adorno’s concept of material is a liberating concept, offering perspectives that open out on to areas perhaps undreamed of by Adorno, but which nevertheless are implied in his idea; and (2) that Adorno’s concept of material underpins a modernist position from which it cannot be separated. The implications of this latter point are that the concept of material in Adorno marks a philosophical position: that material is not static, but rather a process of becoming – that is, changing through acquiring new material features from current usage – but that it is not to be understood apart from a concept of form which is conceived as critically self-reflexive and as a mode of cognition. For Adorno material is always already pre-formed, and is then formed again in the structure of individual works. This constitutes the self-reflexivity of form, and contained here, in the critical relation to handed-down material, is his radically modernist aesthetic.

## Conclusion

In view of all this, what has the example of Adorno’s musical writings contributed to the way we are able to talk about music now? Carl Dahlhaus has argued that Adorno

was really the first ... who, in the most unrestricted sense, was both a musician and a philosopher. Great philosophers have seldom understood much about music beyond the measure of the bourgeois notion of a generalized cultural education. On the other hand, musicians were seldom philosophers.

And he concludes,

it was just this that made such a profound impression on our generation. And I see Adorno’s importance to a large extent as lying in the fact that he established a level at which it was possible to write about music.

(Dahlhaus, Finscher, Kaiser, 1971, 436)

What Dahlhaus is proposing is that Adorno, as well as being able to talk about music in its own terms as a musician, was also able to interpret intra-musical processes both philosophically and sociologically without betraying the autonomy of the music by reducing musical works or processes to the level of social or historical documents. It is tempting to say that the writings on music are a special case of the sociological and philosophical concerns of Adorno's overarching approach to critical theory and that they address, thematically and conceptually, the same problems applied to music. At the same time, however, the relationship between the development of his approach to critical theory and his thinking on music is reciprocal. That is to say, it is not only that he approaches music as a critical theorist, but that his approach to critical theory has also been shaped by his experience of music, and especially by his practical experience as a composer. For Adorno the shared factor is that critical theory is necessarily an interpretive practice rather than simply a body of knowledge, just as music, whether as composition, musical performance, or music criticism, is an interpretive practice and not simply the contemplation of a canon of great works of the past. Indeed, as we have seen, Adorno claimed that music itself can also be a form of cognition and critical reflection.

When Adorno argued that the role of all music today is "exclusively that of a commodity" (Adorno, 1978a, 128; GS18, 1984, 729) – and in saying this he made no exceptions – what was significant for him was the position taken by music faced with its social situation: that is to say, whether to accept its role as commodity or to resist it. He maintained that the autonomous instrumental music of the bourgeois period was both reflexive (through its relation to its autonomy of form) and critical (through its relation to its historically and socially mediated material). He regarded music therefore not only as demanding critical reflection through philosophy and social theory, but also, in the case of autonomous music and in particular radical "new music" in the social context of Western capitalism, as being itself a non-conceptual mode of critical reflection through its form. Already in 1932 he talks of a type of music that "without consciousness of its social location or out of indifference toward it, presents and crystallizes its problems and the solutions thereto in a merely immanent manner" (Adorno, 1978a, 132; GS18, 1984, 734). I have pursued his dual conception of the relation between music and philosophy – that is, on the one hand, the philosophical and sociological critique of music and, on the other hand, the idea of music itself being a form of conceptless critique – while also placing it in the larger context of critical theory. I have argued that it is the field of tension that characterizes the experience of so-called "autonomous" or "absolute" music (and which could be formulated as the conflict between on the one hand the extension of the experience of music through concepts and on the other hand the resistance of music to conceptualization), that becomes itself the model for Adorno's philosophy of nonidentity – a philosophy that, as negative dialectics, was also considered by him to constitute a social and political critique. Underlying his approach is the conviction that, faced with the fragmentation of the modern world, philosophy can now only proceed through interpretation, rather than through claiming to be scientific or through the construction of totalizing systems. This is, I suggest, a notion of interpretation derived ultimately from his experience of music.

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# SCHELLING AND THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

*Peter Dews*

## The Left Hegelians and the Frankfurt School

During the 1830s the followers of Hegel – who had died unexpectedly in 1831 – began to divide into hostile camps, with opposed political orientations. On the right were philosophers who believed that Hegel's vision of the historical unfolding of reason provided assurance that the inner rationality of the Christian religion and of the modern state could contain the social conflicts of an emerging capitalist society – conflicts of which they were more acutely aware than Hegel himself had been. On the left were thinkers convinced that, although Hegel had achieved the supreme theoretical development of philosophical reason, the emancipatory potential of reason still remained to be realized in practice.

As the polarization intensified during the early 1840s, it became apparent to the most advanced “Left Hegelians” – or “Young Hegelians” – that the central issue was not simply the practical realization of Hegel's conception of reason. Rather, Hegel's philosophy, centred on the inner structure and historical development of “spirit,” still abstracted from the real life-process and experience of finite, embodied human beings, in a manner which perpetuated – rather than overcoming – the deficiencies of the entire metaphysical tradition. It therefore needed to be replaced by a new, anthropologically grounded and interpersonally oriented mode of thinking. Ludwig Feuerbach, much admired by the young Karl Marx, formulated the most sophisticated version of this approach. Since, like other Left Hegelians, Feuerbach remained Hegelian in his conviction that the Master has completed the systematic tasks of Western metaphysics, his “philosophy of the future” essentially involved a new, “post-metaphysical” conception of the relation between thinking and practical life. As Feuerbach wrote, in a tone which anticipates the later Wittgenstein, “Only when thought is cut off from the human being and confined to itself do embarrassing, fruitless, and, from the standpoint of an isolated thought, irresolvable questions arise: How does thought reach being, reach the object?” (Feuerbach 1986: §51).

Arguably, the Left Hegelians set the parameters for many of the central debates which have dominated European philosophy ever since. This is certainly the opinion of Jürgen Habermas, the leading thinker of the second generation of the Frankfurt School, as presented in his 1986 book on *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*:

Today the state of consciousness still remains the one brought about by the Young Hegelians, when they distanced themselves from Hegel and philosophy in general. And the triumphant gestures of reciprocally outdoing one another, by means of which we gladly overlook the fact that we have *remained* contemporaries of the Left

Hegelians, have also been current ever since then. Hegel inaugurated the discourse of modernity; the Young Hegelians permanently established it, that is to say, they freed the theme of a critique of modernity which draws on the spirit of modernity from the burden of the Hegelian concept of reason.

(PDM: 53)

Habermas's phrase "the burden of the Hegelian concept of reason" alludes to his view that Hegel's heroic attempt to validate modernity by unifying the eternal and the transitory, the timeless and the urgently contemporary, ultimately failed. "Modern time consciousness," as Habermas puts it, "exploded the *form* of philosophical thinking" (PDM: 52). In other words, our modern awareness of time is oriented towards an anticipated future which cannot be pre-empted metaphysically by reason. But we must also come to accept, according to Habermas, that our contemporary forms of life cannot be endorsed or criticized simply by drawing on premodern traditions of belief and practice. This is why we have no choice but to follow the Left Hegelian example of a "critique of modernity which draws on the spirit of modernity."

But since, for Habermas, no inherited modes of thought and activity are entitled to pass unscrutinized, the authentic "philosophical discourse of modernity" cannot – despite renouncing metaphysics – give up altogether on the concept of reason as the ultimate critical arbiter. Treating reason neither as "an objective teleology which reveals itself in nature or history" nor as a "merely subjective capacity" (PDM: 69n), it investigates and interprets historically changing social practices from the standpoint of "insight and error," bringing the concept of reason into a domain which – for ancient philosophy, as for the mainstream of modern philosophy centred on the knowing subject – was simply not susceptible to theorization. Habermas clearly regards his own enterprise as exemplifying this approach. And he would no doubt agree that the Frankfurt School tradition as a whole remains especially close to the Left Hegelians in seeking for traces of what he terms "the unifying power of reason" (PDM: 65, 67) amidst the contingencies of the historical process, and in the light of an anticipated, more humane and rational future.

This continuing commitment to what Habermas terms "the relation of history to reason" (the phrase "*Vernunftbezug der Geschichte*" implies an *internal* relation) (PDM: 392) explains the sense in which the project of the Frankfurt School has remained a philosophical – and not simply a sociological and political – endeavour. This philosophical dimension has often been articulated through a return to resources provided by the explosion of philosophical enquiry, experimentation and system-building which occurred between the publication of Kant's three *Critiques*, in the closing decades of the eighteenth century, and the emergence of Marx's theory of history and society in the later 1840s. One might think, for example, of Marcuse's indebtedness to Schiller's conception of a "play drive" (*Spieltrieb*) (Marcuse 1955: 185–194), the links between Adorno's thought and that of the Jena Romantics (see Hörisch 1980), or the Kantianism of Habermas's discourse ethics (see Habermas 1990: 195–215). All these thinkers are also profoundly influenced by Hegel, of course, the dominant figure of German Idealism. However, there is one major philosopher from the post-Kantian period with whom the thinkers of the Frankfurt School have a particularly complex and ambivalent relation, namely Friedrich W. J. Schelling (1775–1854). The reason for this will quickly become apparent if we consider the role of Schelling's late philosophy in the genesis of the Left Hegelianism to which the Frankfurt School outlook is so intimately related.

### Schelling and the Left Hegelians

In 1841 the ageing Schelling – then older than Hegel had been when he died – received a call from the Prussian government to leave his post in Munich for a chair at the University



of Berlin. An advantageous offer to Schelling was prompted by the hope that his philosophy could help to extirpate what the recently crowned, conservative monarch, Friedrich Wilhelm IV, had referred to as the “dragon seed of Hegelian pantheism.” Schelling’s first lecture course in Berlin was a major intellectual event, whose audience included prominent figures and future luminaries such as Mikhail Bakunin, Jacob Burckhardt, Friedrich Engels, Alexander von Humboldt, Søren Kierkegaard and Leopold von Ranke. But many of his auditors soon became disillusioned with the content of his lectures, and Schelling was vigorously attacked by the Left Hegelians for accepting recruitment into a reactionary *Kulturkampf* (for further historical detail, see Frank 1977).

As Manfred Frank has pointed out, however, there is a striking ambivalence about the Left Hegelian assault on Schelling. For one thing, it seemed to involve defending the very idealistic presuppositions of Hegel’s philosophy that the young radicals of the *Vormärz* – the period of ferment prior to the revolution of March 1848 – would themselves seek to dismantle only a few years later (ibid.: 14–41). Engels is a case in point. In his pseudonymous report on Schelling’s lectures for the *Telegraph für Deutschland*, he refers – in an ironic contrast intended to deprecate Schelling – to “the good, naïve Hegel, with his belief in the existence of philosophical results, in the entitlement of reason to step into existence, to dominate being” (Engels [1841] 1977: 459). It would not be long, of course, before Engels and Marx were arguing that ideas only become historically effective when they connect with material forces, express the interests of a rising social class. But, at this stage of his career, the young Engels was even prepared to defend against Schelling the Hegelian claim that “existence definitely falls within thought, that being is immanent to spirit” (ibid.).

At the same time, the Left Hegelians could not help being aware that Schelling’s thought – despite the theological penumbra of his final system – had fostered many of the naturalistic and materialistic impulses which they were soon to mobilize against Hegel. Thus, in a letter to Feuerbach from the end of 1843, Marx characterized Schelling’s philosophy as “Prussian politics *sub specie philosophiae*.” But he then went on to describe the youthful Schelling – the Schelling who had already insisted on the genetic priority of nature over mind – as the “anticipatory distorted image” (*antizipiertes Zerrbild*) of his correspondent. What in Schelling remained a “fantastical youthful dream,” Marx asserts, has in Feuerbach “become truth, reality, manly seriousness” (Marx [1843] 1963: 420–421). The Left Hegelian response to Schelling, therefore, involved sympathy for the inspiration behind the young Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie*, combined with hostility to Schelling’s late thought, as presented in his Berlin lectures. The young radicals were unable to recognize that it was precisely in the final phase of Schelling’s thinking that his abiding sense of the ontological independence and spontaneous dynamism of the natural world, and of the human historical world which arises out of it, had resulted in a powerful critique of Hegel’s logicist version of objective idealism, to which – implicitly, at least – they could not help but be sympathetic. Indeed, many of the problematic features of Hegel’s system pinpointed by Schelling – for example, the notoriously obscure transition from the “absolute Idea” to nature at the end of the *Science of Logic* – were to come under attack in their own later writings (for the cases of Feuerbach and Marx, see Frank 1975, 169–232).

Schelling’s opening lecture to his distinguished audience in Berlin was full of the pathos of a self-consciously assumed historic responsibility. He presented himself as the guardian of the genuine advances in philosophy since Kant (“nothing which has been gained for true science since Kant shall be lost because of me” (PO: 95)). And, without ever mentioning Hegel by name, he made clear his central concern: Hegelian philosophy, because of its incompatibility with “life,” had called forth a reaction which might lead to the rejection of philosophy as such:

Never before has such a powerful reaction from the side of life risen up against philosophy as in this moment. This proves that philosophy has penetrated through to those questions of life in the face of which no one is allowed to be, or indeed can be, indifferent.

(PO: 92)

With the concept “life” Schelling alluded, amongst other things, to our *prima facie*, practical conviction regarding the reality of human freedom, and to the need for a basic orientation in human existence, which – for him – necessarily had a religious dimension. However, it is clear that he had grasped the key problem for post-Hegelian philosophy, which emerged equally in the post-religious perspective of the Left Hegelians: had Hegel’s thought falsely claimed to satisfy the vital – the existential – interests of human beings, when in fact it had overridden them, in its drive to produce a comprehensive rational system? In Schelling’s New Testament metaphor: had Hegel offered his followers not bread, but a stone? (see Schelling 1998: 12).

In his late phase, in other words, Schelling took the view that Hegel’s attempt to unite the metaphysically absolute with the personally individual and historical had failed, and in this sense – as Habermas points out – he paved the way for the emphasis of the Left Hegelians, soon followed by thinkers such as Kierkegaard and Marx, on the “*weight of existence*” (PDM: 68). At the same time, Schelling feared that justified disillusionment with Hegel would lead to the “destruction” of philosophy as such (PO: 96). Consequently, he was far from advocating an abandonment of philosophy’s drive for systematicity. Rather, Schelling proposes a system of a new kind, which acknowledges a fundamental distinction – as well as the intimate relation – between *a priori* philosophical thought and the interpretation of the historical development of human consciousness, by dividing into a “negative philosophy” and a “positive philosophy.” If the problem with Hegel’s project was that it had overreached itself, mistaking what could only be a “fragment of a higher whole” (PO: 95) for a comprehensive understanding of the world, then the answer, for Schelling, was not to turn away from philosophy in disillusionment (a response which was in fact to be enacted many times in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries). Rather, a novel, open-ended hermeneutics of the history of human consciousness – a science which “up until now has been regarded as impossible” (PO: 95) – must complement the *a priori* development of the fundamental categories of being, within a twin-track systematic project.

### Marcuse’s Inculpation of Schelling’s Late Philosophy

As we will later consider in more detail, the role played by Schelling’s philosophy in the disintegration of Hegel’s system, and in particular in the emergence of the Left Hegelians, has preoccupied Habermas ever since his doctoral dissertation of the early 1950s (Habermas 1954). However, in *Reason and Revolution*, first published in 1941, Herbert Marcuse – a leading figure of the Frankfurt School’s first generation – vigorously denied any such catalytic role to Schelling’s late thinking. In a context in which Hegel’s political thought was widely regarded as a precursor of fascism and totalitarianism (Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and its Enemies* – the most influential statement of this view – would appear a few years later, in 1945), Marcuse was eager to emphasize the critical and emancipatory thrust of Hegel’s dialectic. As part of this enterprise, he concluded his monograph by portraying Schelling’s “late philosophy” (*Spätphilosophie*) as the precursor of nineteenth-century sociological positivism – the bourgeois reaction to Marx, the authentic inheritor of Hegel’s revolutionary dialectic. Evidently, there is an irony here, insofar as a total abandonment of philosophical reason was precisely the reaction which Schelling – in his inaugural Berlin lecture – feared

would be triggered by Hegel's exaggerated claims for the scope of pure *a priori* thinking. Furthermore, Marcuse himself concedes that "Schelling stresses that 'experience' is not limited to the facts of inner and outer sense" and that for Schelling "free creative activity is the ultimate matter of fact of experience" (RR: 324). Indeed, his association of Schelling's "positive philosophy" with the positivism of a figure such as Auguste Comte is based on little more than a terminological echo – Kierkegaard might have offered a more appropriate point of comparison. How, then, does Marcuse seek to portray Schelling as annulling the emancipatory power of reason he finds articulated by Hegel?

In the introduction to his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, Hegel declares that history "is one of the particular forms in which reason reveals itself, a reflection of the archetype in a particular element, in the life of nations" (Hegel 1975: 28). It cannot be said that *Reason and Revolution* develops a consistent attitude towards this Hegelian claim to have demonstrated *a priori* the rationality of the historical process. At the start of his chapter on Hegel's philosophy of history, Marcuse writes,

Being, for dialectical logic, is a process through contradictions that determine the content and development of all reality. The *Logic* [i.e. Hegel's *Science of Logic*] had elaborated the timeless structure of this process, but the intrinsic connection, between the *Logic* and the other parts of the system, and, above all, the implications of the dialectical method destroy the very idea of timelessness.

(RR: 224)

This statement strongly suggests a contradiction *internal* to Hegel's system which the system itself cannot process: the very contradiction whose explosive potential eventually led to the disintegration of the Hegelian school. But Marcuse does not seem to be especially conscious of the problem he has highlighted. Rather, throughout the book his interpretation of Hegel passively registers this contradiction, by oscillating between the suggestion that Hegel conceives the world process itself as rationally structured in an objective sense, and an insistence that, for Hegel, it is human thought and agency which imbue the world with reason. Thus, on the one hand, Marcuse writes,

The notion designates the general form of all being, and, at the same time, the true being which adequately represents this form, namely, the free subject. The subject exists, again, in a movement from lower to higher modes of self-realization. Hegel calls the highest form of this self-realization the idea.

(RR: 162)

On this account, the "free subject" is simply the supreme expression of the objective rationality of the "notion" – of conceptuality as the articulated structure of being. On the other hand, Marcuse also contends that, according to Hegel, "all modes of being attain their truth through the free subject that comprehends them in relation to its *own* rationality" (RR: 70 – my emphasis). This inconsistency is encapsulated in Marcuse's juxtaposed claims that the implication of Hegel's philosophy is that "reason cannot govern reality unless reality has become rational in itself" (RR: 7) and that "thought *ought* to govern reality" (RR: 6 – my emphasis). At the same time, a third strand of interpretation in *Reason and Revolution* promotes the view, reminiscent of the Left Hegelians, that "Philosophy reaches its end when it has formulated its view of a world in which reason is realized" (RR: 28). After this point, the task of philosophy is taken over by "social theory and social practice" (*ibid.*).

In fact, Marcuse alternates inconsistently between three basic possibilities identified by Michael Theunissen, in his classic analysis of the debates concerning the relation between

theory and praxis which erupted in the wake of Hegel (see Theunissen 1970: 36). For, in Marcuse's ambiguous account, historical reality: is simply the given, which oppresses the individual until it is made intelligible by rational, but subjective comprehension (Theunissen's first possibility); embodies a progressive realization of reason, as evidenced by the level of reconciliation of individual and universal already achieved within bourgeois society (his second possibility); has to be radically transformed as a result of the determinate negation of philosophy – in its culminating Hegelian form – by Marxian theory (the third possibility). All three of these options appear compressed awkwardly together in Marcuse's statement that

Hegel was the last to interpret the world as reason, subjecting nature and history alike to the standards of thought and freedom. At the same time, he recognized the social and political order men had achieved as the basis on which reason had to be realized. His system brought philosophy to the threshold of its negation.

(RR: 252)

Marcuse's difficulties in proposing a consistent interpretation of Hegel are not irrelevant to his reading of Schelling's *Spätphilosophie*. His main accusation is that Schelling labels Hegel's philosophy as "negative" because it "negated" – namely, it repudiated any irrational and unreasonable reality" (RR: 325). Schelling supposedly objects to negative philosophy because "The matters of fact that make up the given state of affairs, when viewed in the light of reason, become negative, limited, transitory – they become perishing forms within a comprehensive process that leads beyond them" (ibid.). Correlatively, Schelling's positive philosophy is portrayed as inclined towards empiricism, and hence as involving an uncritical "orientation of thought to matters of fact and the elevation of experience to the ultimate in knowledge" (RR: 327).

However, Schelling's concern is far less with protecting the "given state of affairs" from criticism than with the character of the "comprehensive process" – that is to say, the epochal development of human self-consciousness, as expressed in the successive stages of mythology, revealed religion and philosophy. From his point of view, there are two main difficulties with Hegel's conception. The first is that logical connections imply an inflexible necessity. Insofar as Hegel is committed to the view that his *Science of Logic* maps out *a priori* the basic categorial structure of any empirical domain, he cannot – in the last analysis – accommodate the free agency manifested in historical processes. Secondly, Hegel takes pride in the circular character of his system, as the definitive solution to the problem of philosophical foundations:

What is essential for science is not so much that the beginning should be something purely immediate, as that the whole of science should be in itself a circular movement, in which the first also becomes the last and the last the first.

(Hegel 1989: 71)

But this cyclical structure is incompatible with the future-directed, open-ended character of our modern historical consciousness, which we earlier saw emphasized by Habermas. Following Hegel's own practice of using inherited religious language to characterize the ultimate ground of reality, Schelling argues that Hegel's God is one who

only ever does what He has always done, and who therefore cannot create anything new; His life is a cycle of forms in which he perpetually externalizes Himself, in order to return to Himself again, and always returns to Himself, only in order to externalise Himself anew.

(Schelling 1994: 160)

But what about Marcuse's second main criticism – that Schelling's conception of "positive philosophy" involves a "struggle against metaphysical apriorism" (RR: 327) and an empiricist capitulation before the given? As far as the first aspect of this criticism is concerned, Marcuse completely ignores the fact that Schelling late system includes its own "negative philosophy." Schelling fully accepts the need for an *a priori* thinking of being, which dialectically generates the system of categories structuring our efforts to make the world intelligible. But he differs from Hegel in his claim that the *application* of these concepts, in an interpretation of the dynamics of the natural world and the history of human consciousness, follows different epistemological principles from the process of *production* of these concepts. In short, in positive philosophy's employment of the categories generated by negative philosophy, we are confronted with the facticity of a world of which we have to make sense – with "the pure that" (*das reine Daß* – a nominalized conjunction) (SW II/1: 587), which can never be entirely reduced to the sense which we make of it.

Schelling's positive philosophy is based on a wager. Or, put less dramatically, it is driven by a commitment to the reality of freedom, a commitment which opens a perspective in which history appears as the struggle to overcome what he terms "the blindly being" (*das Blindseiende*) or "un-pre-thinkable being" (*das unvordenkliche Sein*) (e.g., PO: 154–165) – the invasive facticity of sheer, pre-modal existence. This account of positive philosophy explains how, for Schelling, there can be an experience of the non-empirical – namely, of freedom. For freedom, while not phenomenologically available "in itself," can be experienced in the *overcoming* of necessity, of the compulsion of blind being. This conception also points towards what Schelling, in his late philosophy, understands by "God." For God is simply the inaugural act – an act which, by definition, must itself be absolutely free – that opens the possibility of something other than ontological compulsion. As Schelling puts it: "God is indeed nothing other than this will; this will not to be blind being..." (Schelling 1998: 117). From this standpoint, any circular, rationally closed system such as that of Hegel cannot transcend blind being towards willed purpose and meaning, but simply reproduces ontological coercion in the automatism of its logical structure. Rather than *equating* freedom and reason, as Hegel does, Schelling asserts that reason can *serve the ends* of freedom – but only when it is deployed in making sense of something other than itself.

Marcuse in effect admits that there is a problem with Hegel's thought in this regard when he concedes that "in Hegel's system all categories terminate in the existing order" (RR: 258). There is no need to underscore the discrepancy between this statement and his incessant attempts, throughout the first part of his book, to persuade his reader of the critical, indeed revolutionary potential of Hegel's dialectical concept of reason. More significant is Marcuse's assertion that "The transition from Hegel to Marx is, in all respects, a transition to an essentially different order of truth, not to be interpreted in terms of philosophy" (ibid.). For, at this point in *Reason and Revolution*, Marcuse re-enacts the response to Hegel which Schelling, in his first lecture in Berlin, feared would be that of his younger contemporaries. If anything deserves to be labelled as "positivist," it is surely this out-and-out rejection of philosophy. Ironically, the damage done to Marxism by the assumption that philosophy could be supplanted entirely by a materialist theory of history is precisely what the Frankfurt School originally set out to repair.

Marcuse's conception of Schelling's historical role could not be more different from that proposed by Habermas. In an essay called "The Unity of Reason in the Diversity of its Voices," Habermas returns to the role which Schelling's thought played in subverting German Idealism from within, as it were, and paving the way for later philosophical developments. From an early stage of Schelling's thinking, Habermas suggests, he was preoccupied with the question:

Should matter, to which innerworldly beings owe their finitude, their concretion in space and time, and their power of resistance, be determined purely negatively as nonbeing? Must not matter, into which the Ideas are impressed and in which they fade into mere phenomena, be conceived as a principle that *runs contrary* to the intelligible – not merely as privation, as a residue that is left over after the removal of all determinate being and all good, but as an active force of negation that first generates the world of appearance and evil?

(Habermas 1992: 123)

Habermas goes on to claim that in Schelling's

remarkable polemic against the bias towards the affirmative, against the apotheosis and harmonization of the unruly, of the negative, there also stirs an impulse to resist the danger of idealist transfiguration.

(ibid.)

This commentary provides an excellent résumé of what Theodor Adorno – the most complex thinker of the first-generation Frankfurt School – found significant in Schelling's thought, on the evidence of his philosophical masterpiece, *Negative Dialectics*.

### Adorno's Response to Schelling

Clearly, as the title of the book suggests, Adorno's principal interlocutor is Hegel. But the notion of "negative dialectics," as Adorno develops it, represents an attempt to push dialectical thinking beyond the limit which, he argues, was imposed by Hegel's insistence on the circular closure of his system. In this enterprise, Schelling becomes a useful ally, because of his view that reality resists complete subordination to what Hegel himself terms "the omnipotence of the concept" (*die Allmacht des Begriffes*) (Hegel 1989: 662). In short, Adorno draws on Schelling's philosophy not as a *substitute* for Hegel, but rather as a valuable corrective, one that foreshadows what he terms the "transition to materialism" (ND: 192–194):

If dialectics were to close completely on itself, then it would already be that totality which leads back to the identity principle. Schelling perceived this interest against Hegel, and thereby exposed himself to ridicule for the abdication of a mode of thought portrayed as taking flight to mysticism. The materialistic moment in Schelling, which attributed something like a driving force to the material in itself, may play a role in that aspect of his philosophy.

(ND: 182)

Of course, the attribution of a "driving force" to the material dimension of things is not compatible with *metaphysical* materialism, with the doctrine that everything that happens in the world is reducible to a "redistribution of microphysical states" – to use an expression of W. V. O. Quine – and that the subjective, experiential dimension of reality is, at most, epiphenomenal. But Adorno would regard such a totalizing view as simply the mirror image of the idealism it purports to oppose. By contrast, what he finds in Schelling is a conception of what we might call the "proto-subjectivity" of the material. Thus, in *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno writes,

Both, body and spirit, are abstractions from the experience of them, their radical difference is something posited. This difference reflects the historically achieved

“self-consciousness” of spirit and its renunciation of what it negates for the sake of its own identity. Everything spiritual is modified corporeal impulse, and such modification is a sudden qualitative reversal into that which not merely is. Urge [*Drang*], according to Schelling’s insight, is the anticipatory form [*Vorform*] of spirit.

(ND: 202)

Hegel too regards nature as *implicitly* spirit. But, in his case, this status is conferred by the fact that nature is an embodiment of the logical idea – the first stage on its dialectical journey towards concrete self-consciousness. Hence, in the “Introduction” to Part Two of the *Encyclopaedia*, which expounds his philosophy of nature, Hegel insists that “What we engaged on here is not a matter of imagination, not a matter of fantasy; it is a matter of the concept and of reason” (Hegel 1970: 2). From Adorno’s perspective, however, this assertion of the primacy of conceptuality and reason simply reaffirms the dominance of human subjectivity over nature, under the guise of aiming for a reconciliation of the two. By contrast, Schelling’s vocabulary of “longing” (*Sehnen*) and “desiring” (*Begehren*) portrays nature as obscurely *driven* to seek a self-consciousness which is finally achieved at the level of human existence. The anthropomorphic language characteristic of Schelling’s middle period, and prominent in the quotations from *The Ages of the World* which Adorno supplies at this point in *Negative Dialectics*, stresses the affinity between the natural and the human, without basing such kinship on nature’s status as an imperfect, externalized version of dialectical structures which will eventually reach their full self-comprehension as absolute spirit.

It is not surprising that Adorno specifically quotes *Die Weltalter* (“*The Ages of the World*”) at this point. For this project, on which Schelling worked intensively between 1811 and 1815 – though it was never published in his lifetime – is often regarded as the high point of his development of proto-materialist insights and his critique of idealism. By contrast, the late philosophy, which begins towards the end of 1820s, when Schelling explicitly draws a distinction between “positive” and “negative” philosophy, is regarded by some commentators as a retreat, involving a revival of theological motifs which his earlier thinking had challenged. We have textual evidence, however, for Adorno’s respect for the “utmost exertion of thought” embodied in Schelling’s late philosophy (Adorno 1978: 69). And this admiration is scarcely surprising, given Adorno’s personal closeness to the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, who was himself profoundly interested in and influenced by Schelling’s late thinking (see Tillich 1974). Tillich supervised Adorno’s *Habilitation* (or second doctorate) on Kierkegaard, and the two thinkers co-taught seminars at Frankfurt University in the early 1930s, before they were driven out of Germany by the Nazis. On Tillich’s death, Adorno paid a moving tribute to him at the start of his 1965/66 lecture course on negative dialectics (see Adorno: 2008: 2–4). But, beyond these suggestive biographical details, can specific echoes of Schelling’s late thought be detected in Adorno’s mature philosophy?

It is a commonplace that *Negative Dialectics* seeks to develop a conception of dialectics which avoids the closure of Hegel’s dialectical thinking. It is not so frequently understood, however, that this project necessarily puts dialectics itself in question – or, at least, makes dialectical thinking unsuitable for Adorno’s unqualified endorsement. The difficulty lies in the fact that, for Hegel, dialectical movement reaches its conclusion when the contradictions which push it forward have been resolved. Contradictions violate the law of identity and it is this which gives them their driving force. Hence, the end of the dialectical movement must be a principle which is fully identical with itself – in which even form and content coincide. Of course, Hegel develops a complex conception of identity, which includes contradiction within itself. But it includes contradiction as a subordinate moment, and it does so precisely in order to avoid becoming self-contradictory in terms of its ultimate principle. This principle is what Hegel calls the “absolute Idea.”

By contrast, Adorno is suspicious of the telos of full self-identity – since he believes that *any* achieved identity involves an element of compulsion. But this does not entail that he is content to dwell in unresolved contradictions – which would be the Hegelian objection to such a position. Rather, for Adorno identity and contradiction are the basic, mutually supporting features of a mode of thinking that reflects and expresses the compulsion inherent in the past and present organization of human social life, based, as it is, on the domination of nature and – by extension – of human beings treated as simply part of nature. This is why he writes, early in *Negative Dialectics*, that “In view of the concrete possibility of utopia, *dialectics is the ontology of the wrong state of things*. A right state of things would be freed from dialectics – no more system than contradiction” (ND: 11 – my emphasis). At the end of the book he repeats the point: “Dialectics is the self-consciousness of the objective nexus of delusion, and has not already escaped it” (ND: 406). Dialectics is such self-consciousness, a “copy of the universal nexus of delusion” as well as “its critique” (ibid.), because it logically mirrors opaque social compulsion at the level of reflective thought.

It should be noted that Adorno does not restrict these claims to Hegelian dialectics. Any mode of dialectical thinking – including negative dialectics – must operate in the force field between contradiction and identity, and, in this respect, it will exemplify compulsion. Hence, Adorno writes,

It belongs to the destiny of negative dialectics that it does not remain tranquilly with itself, as if it were total; that is its configuration of hope.

(ibid.)

Adorno’s reference to “hope” makes clear that the transcendence of negative dialectics *as such* cannot itself be construed as a further dialectical move, for this would be self-contradictory – even though “the force required for the break-out accrues to dialectics from the context of immanence” (ibid.). But this subtle argument inevitably raises the question: what sustains hope that something might lie *beyond even* negative dialectics, and the social compulsion whose impress it inevitably bears? How could we imagine an alternative to – or anticipate breaking out of – the “objective nexus of delusion”? Adorno knows that to assert even the possibility of such a transcending movement would be an utterly feeble, negligible gesture, were there nothing in the here and now which offered a concrete anticipation – however fleeting and elusive – of the vistas it would open up. But where is such an experience to be found, or how could it be characterized? It is to these questions that the final part of *Negative Dialectics*, “Meditations on Metaphysics,” is devoted.

Adorno argues that in moments of what he calls “metaphysical experience” we do glimpse the transcendent – whatever may lie beyond the pervasive nexus of domination and compulsion. Metaphysical experience has affinities with what is evoked in the mystical traditions of religious thought (ND: 372), but also with what is opened up to us in great art – for example, the music of Beethoven (ND: 397). In philosophy, Kant’s postulates of practical reason, and the hope which they are intended to sustain, also point towards this dimension of experience (ND: 390–393). But, according to Adorno, the straightjacket of Kant’s theory of knowledge, or what he calls the “Kantian block,” transforms the term “metaphysical experience” into an oxymoron; the Critical Philosophy makes room for a dimension of hope or “rational faith,” but only at the cost of a strict elimination of any cognitive content. In the central sections of “Meditations on Metaphysics” Adorno argues repeatedly with this Kantian attitude, which he regards as an archetype of bourgeois complacency – the declaration of those matters most existentially urgent for human beings as speculatively off bounds. The character of metaphysical experience could perhaps best be described as an experience of the emancipation of the subject which, at the same time, does no damage to what Adorno



terms the “priority of the object” (ND: 183–186) – the fact that the objective world cannot be exhausted by our modes of apprehension of it. For Adorno, to be fully human we must acknowledge what transcends the human: “Subjectively liberated and metaphysical experience converge in humanity” (ND: 397).

A parallel between Adorno’s interrelating of negative dialectics and metaphysical experience, and Schelling’s interconnection of “negative philosophy” and “positive philosophy,” does not appear far-fetched. Indeed, Adorno specifically refers to dialectics as the “epitome of negative knowledge” (*der Inbegriff negativen Wissens*) (ND: 405). For both thinkers, dialectical thinking is “negative” because in its very form, in its impersonal rigor, it negates the element of spontaneity essential to freedom, and which is implicit – even if not immediately apparent – in genuinely historical processes. Furthermore, for Schelling – as for Adorno – modern reason reverts to the compulsive opacity of mythology (see Hutter 1996: 371–376) because it allows no breathing space between thought and being. Far from this resulting in the full control of the object by the subject, the upshot is the invasion of the subject by objective coercion. By contrast, “positive philosophy” does leave such a space. As Schelling puts it, “To go beyond being, and to come itself into a free relation to it, this is the authentic striving of philosophy” (SW, II/2, 33–34). Positive philosophy, then, does not equate *making sense* of being with achieving conclusive expression of a purported *full rationality* of being. It acknowledges being in its facticity, without submitting to this facticity, since its aim is precisely to reconstruct the historical narrative of the struggle to overcome blind being. In this sense, the transition from negative to positive philosophy achieves a coincidence of form and content by itself *enacting* the emancipation from blind being which is positive philosophy’s central concern. As Schelling explains,

In positive philosophy, negative philosophy triumphs; for it is the science in which thinking posits itself in freedom from all necessary content.

(PO: 153)

### Habermas as Interpreter of Schelling

As we noted earlier, Jürgen Habermas’s 1954 doctoral dissertation already recorded his interest in the role played by Schelling in the disintegration of Hegelianism – in what Marx satirically described as the “decomposition of absolute spirit.” It was while researching the dissertation, devoted to Schelling’s philosophy, that Habermas encountered Karl Löwith’s *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, a book which has shaped his thinking ever since (Löwith 1991). Löwith’s classic deals precisely with the dramatic transformation of European philosophy which occurred in the wake of Hegel. Enthused by his reading, Habermas added a long initial chapter to his dissertation, dealing with thought of Bauer, Feuerbach, Stirner, Marx and Kierkegaard, as responses to the crisis of Hegelianism. However, the centre of gravity of the dissertation is not the late philosophy of Schelling, but rather the drafts of *The Ages of the World*, written between 1811 and 1815. One of its major claims is that the *Weltalter* texts develop a more convincing conception of finite, historically situated freedom than is offered by the other great Idealists, Fichte and Hegel (Habermas 1954: 303–318). This argument was reformulated and further developed in the major essay on Schelling which Habermas published in his 1963 collection, *Theorie und Praxis*: “Dialectical Idealism in Transition to Materialism: Schelling’s Idea of a Contraction of God and Its Consequences for the Philosophy of History.”

Schelling’s central idea, in *The Ages of the World*, is that ontological inconsistency arises within the absolute – or the ultimate source of reality – which can only be resolved by the emergence of a temporal world, structured by the tension between the dimensions of past, present and future. In contrast to Hegel, whose *Logic* begins with the indistinguishability of

thought and being, Schelling argues that the starting point must lie *beyond* the distinction between being and non-being. He therefore characterizes it as “the will which wills nothing,” since an inactive will cannot be said to exist as will, but cannot be denied all existence either: the ultimate origin of things can be envisioned as a divine state of blissful, boundless unselfconsciousness (SW II/3: 16). However, this suspension cannot be maintained, and an ontological tug of war ensues, as the primordial will divides into a particularizing urge and a universalizing urge, each of which strives to embody the whole of being. Even the emergence of a third mode of willing – the residual, and therefore potentially reconciling commonality of the conflicting wills – collapses back into particularity. The result is what the later drafts of the *Weltalter* describe as a frenzied “rotary movement” (*rotatorische Bewegung*) (Schelling 1942: 119) occurring in what can be termed “logical time.”

Schelling’s stroke of genius is to argue that this gyratory madness is resolved by the actualization of a temporal world stretched across the dimensions of past (= the particularizing will), present (= the universalizing will) and future (= the reconciling will). This resolution is possible because temporality distributes the three vectors of being in a sequence where each has its place and its role. The point is that past, present and future cannot be represented as *following* one another along a supposed line of time. Para-temporally, they are both sequential *and* simultaneous. They “collaborate” to produce the happening of time, as the universalizing present strives to break away from the particularizing drag of the past towards a reconciling future. The consequence of this conception, however, is that God effectively ceases to be God – loses all sovereignty, and is entirely plunged into the maelstrom of the temporal process. This is the central meaning of the “contraction of God” – a notion Schelling derived from Jakob Boehme and the Lurianic Kabbalah, and which Habermas highlights in the title of his essay.

Effectively, Schelling’s *Weltalterphilosophie* turns Hegel on his head. For Hegel, finite things are doomed to transience, since they can never adequately instantiate their conceptually defined, normative essence. Particular entities are merely non-self-subsistent abstractions from the overall world process, which is the *only* ultimate reality. As Hegel states in the *Encyclopaedia Logic*, “the truth of the finite is...its *ideality*...This ideality of the finite is the most important proposition of philosophy, and for that reason every genuine philosophy is *Idealism*” (Hegel 1991: §95). In Schelling, by contrast, it is the actual world stretched out across the three dimensions of time that holds in check the contradictions of the rotary movement – contradictions which are not susceptible to any ideal or logical resolution. In Hegel, in other words, circularity represents the ultimate escape from linearity (Hegel’s “bad infinite”), whereas in Schelling we escape from the compulsive nightmare of circularity into the directional movement of time. Not only this: according to Habermas, Schelling foreshadows Marx, because the remainderless contraction of God into the historical process results in the dominance of the past over the present, of the particular over the universal, the material over the ideal. Human history can be seen as a struggle to overcome this dominance of the material principle – driven by the anticipation of a reconciliation of the material and the spiritual, or what the young Marx called “the realized naturalism of the human being and realized humanism of nature” (Marx 1992: 350).

In “Dialectical Idealism in Transition to Materialism,” Habermas also draws on Schelling to launch his own critique of Hegel, arguing that the latter’s conception of his system as a circular structure is vulnerable both to a theoretical and to what might be termed an “existential” objection. The theoretical objection focuses on the problem that one must attain the standpoint of pure thought, beyond the shapes of consciousness in which the subject is confronted with an object other than itself, in order to commence the self-reflexive process of thinking unfolded in the *Logic*. True, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* sets the stage for that standpoint, by culminating in the realization that being is the self-articulation of the

concept – *der Begriff* – or of universal reason. But the shift to that vantage point itself, as Hegel emphasizes, involves a new ascetic act in which “the freedom that abstracts from everything...grasps its own pure abstraction, the simplicity of thinking” (Hegel 1991: §78). However, the reasons for undertaking this act, and indeed even for considering it as feasible, will necessarily be prior and external to the self-confirming system which the *Logic* is supposed to initiate, once the inaugural move has been made. As Habermas puts it, “A beginning of the system is not systematically conceivable” (*Systematisch ist ein Anfang des Systems nicht denkbar*) (DITM: 50).

The existential objection focuses on Hegel’s claim that his philosophy is distinguished by its capacity to confront the “the pain, the difficulty and the labor of the negative” (Hegel 1977: 10). Habermas argues that if the system is indeed circular, then this claim rings hollow, for such suffering becomes inevitable and perpetual, hard-wired into reality, and in this sense its sting is drawn. As Hegel himself writes,

For the sake of the freedom which the concept attains in it, the Idea also has within itself the *hardest opposition*; its tranquility consists in the sureness and certainty with which it eternally generates and eternally overcomes this opposition and in it converges with itself.

(Hegel 1989: 759)

In Habermas’s depiction, this prospect of an endless cycle, in which “salvation” comes only from “the sacrifice of fulfillment itself” (DITM: 50), in which “Eternal life is actual only as redemption from eternity through (immortal) death” (DITM: 50), fills Schelling with horror. Truly to take the pain and negativity of existence seriously means to be driven by the desire for their final overcoming. But such an overcoming is only conceivable if the distress can be traced back to an event, rather than following with inevitable logical from the structure of reality: only if history has a contingent beginning can it have an emancipatory end. For Schelling, this beginning occurred as human beings, in awakening to *self-consciousness*, fell under the sway of selfhood, and hence of the particularity of the natural world in general. The result was the “false unity” – the domination of the material over the spiritual – which has characterized human history, and which must in turn be overthrown. As Habermas points out, Hegel is fully aware that internal contradiction can cause a unity to fall part. But, in this case, there occurs only a diremption into abstract moments, until a new reconciling unity is achieved. What his *Logic* cannot accommodate is the thought of a “positively posited *false unity*” (DITM: 63) of the kind which has defined human history up until now.

This Schellingian critique of Hegel has remained an element of Habermas’s thinking throughout his career. It is noteworthy, because it differs from the far more familiar, indeed clichéd objection that Hegel endows the historical process with *too much* purposiveness and meaning. It also clearly sets up a resonance with Adorno’s statement that “dialectics is the ontology of the wrong state of things.” At the same time, however, Habermas shares something of Marcuse’s hostility towards Schelling’s *Spätphilosophie*. Already in his doctoral dissertation he had argued that the authentic philosophy of finite freedom is to be found in Schelling’s middle-period works, and that late Schelling’s distinction between negative and positive philosophy is unviable, since positive philosophy can only reiterate pointlessly, at an empirical level, the transcendental structures determined by its negative counterpart. In his 1963 essay on Schelling, Habermas repeats this unfavourable contrast between Schelling’s middle-period and late thought in even greater detail. Either negative philosophy must culminate in a dialectical articulation of the meaning of being, as does Hegel’s *Logic*, or it is entirely redundant – simply a barrier to a supposed confrontation with bare existence, whose baleful consequences are finally played out in the philosophy of Heidegger (DITM: 75–76).

There is an irony in this Habermasian response to late Schelling, however. For by the 1970s Habermas was himself beginning to advocate a bipartite conception of “post-metaphysical” philosophical activity, divided between the roles of “placeholder” and “interpreter.” As “placeholder,” philosophy pioneers quasi-transcendental projects of “rational reconstruction” (the elucidation of the conditions of possibility of human capacities such as linguistic communication) which can inspire – and productively collaborate with – research programmes in the human sciences. As “interpreter,” philosophy is oriented towards the “lifeworld,” the web of tacit knowledge and normative assumptions which guides our everyday social interaction and perception (see Habermas 1992: 1–20). It is difficult not to discern in this division of labour an after-echo of Schelling’s distinction between negative and positive philosophy. And the parallels have become ever more pertinent as Habermas has increasingly placed religion at the centre of the lifeworld context which philosophy seeks to interpret.

For example, in his lecture on *Faith and Knowledge*, Habermas repeats the critique of Hegel which has been central to his thought ever since the beginning, in the context of the latter’s claim to provide a conceptual equivalent for the pictorially expressed truths of the Christian tradition:

Hegel makes the death of the Son of God on the Cross central to a mode of thinking that seeks to incorporate Christianity as a positive shape of consciousness... Even the absolute must externalize itself as the other of itself, since it only experiences itself as absolute power when it works its way out of the painful negativity of self-limitation. In this way, religious contents are sublimated into the form of the philosophical concept. But Hegel sacrifices the dimension of the future held open by the history of salvation to a world process revolving in itself. Teleology is ultimately bent back into a circle.

(Habermas 2005: 334)

If this statement is indeed intended as a criticism of Hegel, it implies that there is a truth contained in the notion of a “history of salvation” (*Heilsgeschichte*) which cannot be fully recuperated in conceptual terms. And in fact, Habermas’s account of the relation between religion and philosophy in the late phase of his thought, which depicts philosophy as engaged in a translation effort which may never entirely exhaust the “meaning-generating resources” (Habermas 2017: 105) of religion, repeats very precisely Schelling’s portrayal of the role of positive philosophy in relation to a “revelation” whose epochal hegemony – as opposed to disclosive power – he regards as a thing of the past. As he declared in his first cycle of Berlin lectures: “*Revelation must contain something which goes beyond reason*, but something which we cannot have without reason” (PO: 98).

One of the defining features of the Frankfurt School – across its successive generations – has been a determination to highlight the constraints and reifications of modern reason, without thereby renouncing reason altogether. Marcuse’s evaluation of the relation between Hegel and Schelling comes to grief precisely because he fails to follow through on this complex intention. By contrast, the uptake of Schelling’s philosophy in the work of both Habermas and Adorno suggests that the thinker who dismantled German Idealism from within should be accredited as a significant precursor of the programme of the Frankfurt School.

### Abbreviations

Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* = ND

Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* = PDM

Habermas, “Dialectical Idealism in Transition to Materialism” = DITM

Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* = RR

Schelling, *Philosophie der Offenbarung 1841/42* = PO

Schelling, *Sämmtliche Werke* = SW, followed by part and volume number.

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- NB.: The author has frequently altered the English in citations from works originally in German.
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### Further Reading

Karl Löwith discusses the impact of Schelling's Berlin lectures on the Left Hegelians in *From Hegel to Nietzsche* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 115–121. Schelling's influence on Marx is analysed by Manfred Frank in “Schelling's Critique of Hegel and The Beginnings of Marxian Dialectics”, *Idealistic Studies*, 19 (3), 251–268 (1989). Unfortunately, there is no truly satisfactory, comprehensive account of Schelling's late philosophy in English. The later chapters of Alan White, *Schelling: An Introduction to the System of Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), are admirably clear, though more descriptive than problem-oriented, but they deal only with the positive philosophy. *Interpreting Schelling: Critical Essays*, edited by Lara Ostaric (Cambridge: CUP, 2014), is a useful collection of recent articles on Schelling. However, Fred Rush's piece on “Schelling's Critique of Hegel” (216–237) in this collection should be read with caution, because of its Hegelian *parti pris*, a pervasive feature of Anglophone literature on this topic. An honourable exception is chapter 6 of Andrew Bowie's *Schelling and Modern European Philosophy* (New York: Routledge 1993), 127–177. A more detailed exploration of the relation between Schelling and Adorno can be found in Peter Dews, “Dialectics and the Transcendence of Dialectics: Adorno's Relation to Schelling”, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 22 (6), 1180–1207 (2014).

# CRITICAL THEORY AND SOCIAL PATHOLOGY

*Fabian Freyenhagen*

What is distinctive about Frankfurt School Critical Theory (FSCT)? One prominent answer has been that a particular conception of social pathology is constitutive of and unique to this tradition. This chapter presents an analysis of the idea of social pathology and its role in FSCT. It suggests that this idea can, indeed, set FSCT apart from mainstream liberal approaches, but also notes the challenges involved in doing so and urges proponents of FSCT to return to something more like its original, interdisciplinary program.

The chapter is structured as follows: I begin with a section on the idea of social pathology in general; then I investigate the claim that there is a specific FSCT conception of it; and, finally, I discuss two case studies. Throughout these sections, I gradually build a list of possible general characteristics and FSCT specifications of the idea of social pathology, and conclude by reviewing that list in its entirety.

## The Idea of Social Pathology

Do societies make us ill? Are societies themselves ill? For many centuries philosophers and social theorists answered these questions in the affirmative – for example, Plato spoke of democracies as being “feverish,” Marx claimed that to labor under capitalist conditions “mortifies the flesh and ruins the mind,” and Durkheim suggested that we could see how ill a community was by the kind and number of suicides its members committed. Similarly, in political and everyday discourse, medical metaphors are applied at the social level – be it the nineteenth-century claim of the Ottoman empire as “the sick man of Europe” or the more recent use of the same metaphor for Greece in the context of the sovereign debt crisis. After the 2011 riots, UK’s then prime minister claimed that “pockets of our society are frankly sick.” More recently, influential French economist Piketty described the Brexit referendum result as “a pathological response to a very real sense of abandonment.” The mainstream press is peppered with similar observations. Already ten years ago, England’s *The Guardian* bemoaned “a pervasively pornographic desire to see other people’s raw emotion and hurt” as a “social pathology.” In 2016, Germany’s *Die Zeit* invoked the “social-pathological traits” of recent politics as having disinhibited aggression and resentment. Claims of this form are also found in contemporary social sciences, particularly in medical sociology and public health economics. For example, social epidemiologists Wilkinson and Pickett argued in an influential study that unequal societies make their members more ill than equal ones (2009), and political scientist Mounk recently described contemporary democracies as ill to the *New York Times* (see also Foa and Mounk 2016).

In sum, the idea of social pathology is highly evocative, features ubiquitously in contemporary discourses, and has a long pedigree. However, it also is relatively ill-defined and beset by controversies. It is relatively ill-defined, first, because there is no consistent use as to whether it refers to the claim that society makes individuals ill, to the claim that society itself is ill (possibly irrespective of the illness of individuals), or to both claims at once. Moreover, the notion of illness or pathology is often left vague. Sometimes, those who speak of social pathology simply take medical categories of pathology at face value and use these categories for advancing their claims (say, Stuckler and Baisu's argument in their 2013 study to the effect that IMF-imposed austerity in Thailand led to excess deaths from infectious diseases). Sometimes, the categories of illness and pathology are stretched beyond their medical context, but still understood as broadly to do with individual flourishing or lack of flourishing (for example, when Honneth speaks of social pathology in terms of detriments to self-realization; see below). At other times, talk of illness or pathology is perhaps merely metaphorical (as probably in the case of Mounk above).

There are also several reasons why the idea of social pathology is beset by controversies. Some object that it rests on an illicit analogy between society and an organism. Others point to an ugly history of abuse of the idea. Notoriously, Nazi propaganda portrayed the Jews as a pathogen in European society and used the rhetoric of social pathology to pursue a policy of extermination. This in turn points toward a further objection, which alleges that invoking this idea is more a reflection of antecedent ideological commitment than of good evidence and reasoning. Indeed, one might argue that the notion is so vague that it lends itself to pushing through policies that do not work. Moreover, one might also object to the status claimed for theorists of social pathologies and the status assigned to those (purportedly) affected by them: What legitimates one to be a doctor of society? And is social pathology talk not rendering those affected into passive victims, into "patients"?

These considerations raise a key question: *can the idea of social pathology be fruitfully and legitimately used by FSCT?* This tradition understands itself as an emancipatory project and stands opposed to antisemitism and ideological obfuscation. It is meant to be particularly self-reflective and self-critical, including about the role it assigns to theorists, and to be alert to the lessons learnt from history. Is the idea of social pathology too tainted to be deployed by FSCT?

As a first step in answering this question, it will help to characterize this idea more precisely and to consider what, if anything, speaks for using it. (I will have much less to say about the legitimacy of its use, although later sections will at least delineate some of the challenges that would need to be addressed.) While the notion is relatively ill-defined, one characteristic is generally accepted: the social phenomena described by the idea of social pathology tend to be *dynamic social processes*, which, if not stopped or reversed, will lead to an increased deterioration of the situation – just as with an infection of the body. Indeed, there is a further parallel: as in physical pathologies, the social phenomena in question often involve a downward spiral whereby an initially well-suited response is progressively leading to a worsening of the situation. For an example of this from physical health, consider the effect of high blood pressure on arteries: the body reacts in a way that is, initially, well adapted (the walls of the arteries thicken to withstand the higher blood pressure) but eventually fatal. Similarly, an initial response to high crime levels (such as more police presence) might well be legitimate, but trigger a downward spiral of violence and mutual alienation between local communities and the police. This points to an advantage of using the idea of social pathology: the vicious circles in question might be harder to capture adequately in other normative vocabulary or with other social models.

It also points to a second characteristic. The idea of social pathology is normally conceptualized as ordered by *ethical* criteria, here understood as differentiated from moral criteria.



To clarify, there are various ways to relate ethics and morality, and various ways to understand each. One way of relating the two is to understand them as a contrast, whereby ethics has to do with the good and flourishing (and the bad and lack of flourishing), and morality has to do with justice and the right (and injustice and the wrong). In that way, the idea of social pathology is (part of) *the other of justice*; it presents a different normative vocabulary and register.

We will see below that this second characteristic is not universally adhered to by more recent proponents of FSCT, but for now it is useful to hold onto it. Notably, this second characteristic marks a difference between those who use the idea of social pathology and adherents of the dominant paradigm of contemporary political philosophy. For the past half-century or so, the dominant paradigm in political philosophy has operated within a particular normative register, which for our purposes here we can call the *justice framework*. Two features of that framework have effectively excluded the idea of social pathology from serious consideration:

- *Priority of the right over the good*: Political philosophy, on this approach, aims to articulate principles of justice valid for a pluralistic society in which citizens may have widely divergent conceptions of the good life. Success in this project is understood to require neutrality regarding these divergent conceptions. This starting point and principle of demarcation are then combined with a background assumption, viz. that social pathology presupposes an intrinsically contentious conception of the good. With these pieces in place, the idea of social pathology is excluded from the start.
- *Relation to social sciences*: The dominant contemporary approach in political philosophy understands its role as a form of normative theorizing that is fundamentally different from empirical social science. For many, this reflects a commitment to “ideal theory,” according to which the principal task of political philosophy is the formulation of principles for a just society; empirical social science (on this picture) enters in primarily when it comes to *applying* the principles. Insofar as the idea of social pathology is intertwined with empirical questions and research, it has not found an easy place within this paradigm.

While these two features explain why the idea of social pathology does not feature in the dominant justice framework, they do not suffice to justify this lacuna. Just the opposite: this lacuna is, arguably, a missed opportunity. This is so for three reasons.

First, since the idea of social pathology is widespread in social discourse but absent from mainstream political philosophy, there is a deep disconnect which limits the ability of political philosophers to engage with broader sociopolitical discourse. This is particularly problematic if the idea of social pathology is ineliminable from critical reflection on society. This is not the place to argue systematically for this claim. *Prima facie* support for the ineliminability claim can be found both in the historical longevity and current ubiquity of the idea, together with the fact that it is applied across the political spectrum and around the world, and by lay persons and (social) scientists alike. Moreover, the model of organic unity is such a fundamental schema for understanding complexity that its application to social reality may well be inevitable.

At the same time, the justice framework is not well suited to bring the full range of social phenomena properly into view – for example, because individuals affected by the social ills do not even think of themselves as free and equal citizens making justice claims on each other (while this self-conception of citizens is a central presupposition of most variants of the dominant justice framework). Even where the dysfunctionality of current societies is admitted – say when it comes to climate change – this is shoehorned into the justice

framework and the real phenomena are pushed in the background while theoretical problems take center stage. To stick with the example, instead of direct critical scrutiny of how climate change is intertwined with a particular economic system, the focus of those working in the dominant framework tends to be on theoretical conundrums, such as whether we can have obligations to future generations in the face of the “nonidentity problem” (that is, the problem that each of the policy choices would lead to the existence of different populations of future individuals, meaning that there is no stable comparison class of people who would be affected). Arguably, the dominant justice framework, at best, diverts attention from social problems and, at worst, obfuscates them (see Geuss 2008; Finlayson 2015).

Moreover, the sharp division between normative political theorizing and empirical research has the unfortunate consequence that the resulting theories are not informed by important evidence being amassed by social scientists, such as in support of the thesis that “austerity kills” (Stuckler and Basu 2013). At the same time, this evidence and the way it has been collected are left unscrutinized by (political) philosophers, despite the fact that political dimensions are, often, clearly at play. To give just one other example: the way conditions and behavior are classified as mental disorder is not a normatively or politically neutral matter, and liberal theorists who simply appeal to such classifications overlook the normative substance they are importing into their theories and, as a result, do not submit this substance to the critical scrutiny it deserves (Freyenhagen and O’Shea 2013).

FSCT seems well equipped to avoid these pitfalls, and thus harness the fruitfulness of the idea of social pathology. FSCT does not rule out ethical concerns from the start, but (traditionally) operates with a broader normative framework than the justice framework. It takes up the normative vocabulary of social struggles – not uncritically, to be sure, but in a way that need not imply a deep disconnect with broader sociopolitical discourse(s). And it does not conceive of itself as sharply divided from the social sciences, but as interwoven with them, both by drawing on them and by critically scrutinizing them.

It now is clearer why the idea of social pathology might be attractive to FSCT. More needs to be said about how this idea can be legitimate, but at least we have begun to see its fruitfulness in the face of certain social problems and vis-à-vis one other approach, the justice framework dominant in much of liberal political philosophy.

### **A Distinctive Conception?**

In an influential paper, Honneth ascribes a particular conception of social pathology to (early) FSCT and claims that it is constitutive of its approach. He makes the general point that the idea of social pathology operates in an ethical register, in contrast to the dominant liberal concern with moral categories like justice (the second characteristic noted above). He then presents three fundamental specifications as constitutive and distinctive of (early) FSCT’s use of this idea (none of which relate directly to the first general characteristics noted above, to which I return again in the second case study.)

First, FSCT is unique in combining the idea of social pathology with “the concept of socially efficacious reason” (Honneth 2008: 784). Following Hegel, the idea is that a social pathology is given whenever a society falls short of the “objectively’ already possible rationality” (Honneth 2008: 786). In contrast, “a successful form of society is only possible by maintaining at the highest level the appropriate standard of rationality” (Honneth 2008: 786). Thus, both the notion of social pathology and its contrast (what we might call “social health”) are tied here to a particular conception of rationality. To say that society is ill or makes its members ill is to ascribe a deficit in rationality to society.

The idea of socially efficacious reason deserves explication. The basic thought is that human practices and institutions are tied up with rationality in various ways. In particular,

they rely on norms to operate. In other words, they are not merely causal mechanisms, but operate on the basis of rules and values (however implicit or uncoded these may be). These encapsulate or provide the point of the practices and institutions. For example, the point of the health care system is to diagnose and treat disease and injuries; the point of primary schooling is to educate young children in a way that allows them to acquire basic skills (like literacy), which are crucial for them to function as free and equal citizens and pursue their own conception of the good. A practice and institution can fail to realize its in-built norms, either to some extent or perhaps even completely. For example, if a health care system became too dominated by the pursuit of profit at the expense of diagnosing and treating disease and injuries, it would thereby be a pathological case of a health care system: it would be irrational in the sense of failing to realize the norms to which it aspires. It might be helpful to note that what a practice and an institution aspire to (and their norms more generally) can change over time or differ between societies (perhaps if the marketization of health care advances sufficiently, its norms simply will become commercial ones). This makes it difficult to distinguish between cases where a practice is not living up to its norm and cases where the underlying norm has changed. Socially efficacious reason will normally not be timeless and universal, but tied to a particular sociohistorical context. However, some theorists within this Hegelian tradition are also committed to a historical progress story. The development of human practices and institutions over time is then understood not as a mere succession (like in a morphing sequence), but as representing improvements along one or several dimensions (like becoming more inclusive or increasingly governed by democratic will-formation).

There is clear evidence that FSCT from its inception has subscribed to a broadly Hegelian conception of reason and criticized society for rationality deficits. Consider Horkheimer's seminal paper "Traditional and Critical Theory" (1937). In it, Horkheimer clearly confirms a conception of reason as socially efficacious. Notably, he writes, "The collaboration between human beings in society is the mode of existence of their reason, the way in which they apply their powers and confirm their essence" (1972: 204; translation amended). He continues by noting that the potential of reason to be fully and truly socially efficacious remains unrealized. Contemporary society, as reason's current manifestation, is – both in process and result – alienating for its members: "all its waste of labour power and human life, and [...] its wars and all its senseless wretchedness" testify to its rationality deficit and this "misery of the present" grounds FSCT's aim of a truly rational society (1972: 204 and 216–217; translation amended).

Second, according to Honneth, society's rationality deficit has one specific (ultimate) cause in the (early) FSCT tradition: capitalism. Put in medical language, *capitalism is modern society's pathogen*. Here Honneth emphasizes the influence of Lukács, according to whom "[m]echanized practical work and commodity exchange demand a form of perception in which all other humans appear as thing-like beings lacking sensation, so that social interaction is robbed of any attention to properties valuable in themselves" (2008: 799). Such a narrowing of perception implies a narrowing of rationality – to instrumental rationality in the service of self-interest – and leads to a variety of social ills (not least alienation and exploitation in the Marxian sense). Lukács's model – though perhaps not the specifics of the content – is then adopted by FSCT and applied to a variety of contexts. While Honneth does not explicitly say so, the social pathologies that capitalism causes reveal it to have structural deficits such that – at least for the early FSCT – the only cure is to rid us of capitalism.

Third, Honneth argues that the idea of social pathology in FSCT is always conjoined with an account of the emancipatory interest in overcoming it. He credits Freud with a formative influence. In particular, two insights are taken from Freud: (a) deficits in rationality always find expression, however indirectly, in experiences of suffering and (b) this suffering

motivates, and can be alleviated only by, the search for the very aspects of rationality whose suppression led to the suffering in the first place.

Honneth suggests that there are obstacles to upholding each of these three FSCT specifications of the idea of social pathology. He claims that if one wants to defend FSCT's idea of social pathology (as he does), then one needs to reconfigure each of them (2008: 808). In his own work, he has particularly reconfigured the second, generalizing the account of the causes to one about the structural organization of societies. Capitalism can be one aspect or example of such structures, but is not the only one. For example, Honneth (2014) describes "juridification" (such as excessive appeal to rights and the legal system in personal affairs, exemplified in films like *Kramer vs Kramer*) as a social pathology, but claims that it is a consequence of the normative structure of legal freedom, its own tendency to become one sided. In other words, something deficient in the idea of legal freedom is the cause of this particular pathology, not something in the capitalist structure of society. The decoupling from capitalism as (ultimate) cause of social pathology takes place already in Habermas's work (1987). There, juridification is a social pathology that can arise from the structural organization of societies, but it is not necessarily caused by capitalism (at least not directly, insofar as juridification can result from attempts to contain capitalism).

One question one might ask about Honneth's portrayal of the particular conception of social pathology in the FSCT tradition is whether the three specifications are really setting FSCT apart from all other approaches. One might think that many left-Hegelian or Marxist views could subscribe to a conception of social pathology in terms of rationality deficits of society that are caused by capitalism and lead to suffering of a kind that can only be overcome when these rationality deficits are overcome. Perhaps even right-Hegelian approaches to political matters could subscribe to this.

Another question would be whether Honneth (and others) made FSCT conceptions of social pathology less distinctive when modifying the original specifications. Earlier we saw that one key characteristic of the idea of social pathology is that it is understood as an ethical idea in contrast to justice as a moral idea. This characteristic at least set the FSCT conception apart from the dominant justice framework. Yet, both Habermas and (the later) Honneth have reduced that difference. Habermas's claims about social pathology boil down to claims about rationality deficits, but these can be specified further to include deficits in moral rationality and hence justice (I provide an example below). Similarly Honneth, particularly in *Freedom's Right*, conceptualizes social pathologies now as part of an account of justice – substantive justice, purportedly different from procedural justice accounts Honneth ascribes to Habermas and Rawls, but a justice account nonetheless.

In addition, starting with Habermas and continuing with Honneth, an integral part of the conception of social pathology has become the notion of the functional differentiation of society. In Habermas's work, this functional differentiation is conceptualized as one between system and lifeworld (1987). Honneth, on the other hand, takes up Hegel's tripartite division of the social world (family, civil society, and state) in a slightly modified form (for example, the first sphere comprises more than just the family) (see notably 2014). A healthy society is then conceptualized as one in which the different spheres each play their functional role, like different organs do in a body (the liver or family have a different function from the brain or state, and so on) and interact in the proper way (the liver or market economy does not poison the rest of the physical or social body). Social pathology as rationality deficit is here understood as either a malfunction of a sphere or one sphere taking over another ("colonialization" in Habermas's terms). At least, this is the basic model. There can be more complicated versions. For example, one part of one sphere (capitalism as part of the system for Habermas) negatively affects the functional role of one part of the other sphere (say democratic will-formation in the lifeworld) – consider how, for example, wealth can come to play

a problematic role in democratic will-formation through campaign donations and lobbying (this would be an example of a social pathology that is an injustice for Habermas).

Leaving aside the details here, one important question is: “Does understanding society in terms of functional differentiation problematically constrain the conceptualization of social pathology?” Here is one reason why one might think that the answer is positive. In understanding society in these terms, one, at least implicitly, tends to accept that the social world is well constituted in principle. What needs to happen is to (re)instate how the social body functions if all of its “organs” (the different spheres) are allowed to make their contributions uninhibited by the other “organs.” This approach seems apt to capture certain social problems, like the ones alluded to in the examples above, and should be part of the repertoire of FSCT. However, validating the claims about functional differentiation is a difficult business, especially if the specific claims are meant to be not just descriptive of a particular historical constellation, but have normative weight, such that were society to be differentiated into different spheres or none at all, we could meaningfully speak of a loss. It is not clear that one needs such a complex model in order to oppose, say, a right-libertarian approach to campaign finance and lobbying, given that liberal theories can also oppose such an approach. More importantly for the FSCT tradition, this way of conceptualizing and modeling the issues *inherently tends to reformism* (although it need not necessarily lead there). To see this, consider, first, a general point: models and metaphors are not innocent, neutral devices; they frame our thinking, our choice of examples, our priorities. The model of functional differentiation, basically, thinks of FSCT as an instrument for repairing and correcting something that is in principle healthy. That is to foreclose from the start the possibility that not the interaction of the “organs” of the social body is problematic, but the social body itself; that it needs replacement or radical transformation, rather than repair. Not just is capitalism downgraded by Honneth and Habermas to one among other possible causes of social pathologies, but the very idea of social pathology is understood, for the most part, in a way that removes its more radical potential. The idea that the current society is itself a pathological case of a society, not just one that is basically healthy but befallen by an illness, is being dropped (or at least made harder to think and imagine). This blunts the critical power and potential of the idea of social pathology for FSCT.

To return to an example somewhat neglected by this tradition, climate change, it is important to keep open the possibility that our capitalist societies are dysfunctional, not just in the sense of neoliberal interests’s being too dominant in political decision-making, but also in the sense that those societies as a whole are endangering human survival (and that of other species and the earth’s ecosystem). This makes them deficient in rationality and pathological qua social formation. Perhaps this is part of what Adorno meant when he wrote,

The preservation of humanity is inexorably inscribed within the meaning of rationality: it has its end in a reasonable organization of society, otherwise it would bring its own movement to an authoritarian standstill. Humanity is organized rationally solely to the extent that it preserves its societalized subjects according to their unfettered potentialities.

(Adorno 1998: 272–273)

In this section, I presented three specifications Honneth identifies as distinctive of (early) FSCT. I also sketched subsequent developments in Habermas and Honneth, and warned that they erode the distinctiveness and radical potential of the FSCT approach. This raises the following question: What would it take to preserve both the distinctiveness of the FSCT conception of social pathology (vis-à-vis the dominant justice framework) and its radical potential? In this section, I began to answer this question by suggesting that we should not

make the functional differentiation of society an integral part of the conception of social pathology. In the remainder of this chapter, I continue to answer this question with the help of two case studies and, in the process, unpack the idea of social pathology further (and what defending it would entail).

### Sick Normality

A search of Adorno's *Collected Works* does not yield one explicit mention of "social pathology," but the idea is present nonetheless. Perhaps the most vivid way it is present is in one of the mini-essays of *Minima Moralia*: No. 36, called "The Health unto Death," dated 1944. Here Adorno states,

If such a thing as a psycho-analysis of today's prototypical culture were possible; [...] such an investigation would have to show that the sickness proper to the time consists precisely in normality. The libidinal achievements demanded of an individual behaving as healthy in body and mind, are such as can be performed only at the cost of the profoundest mutilation [...] No science has yet explored the inferno in which were forged the deformations that later emerge to daylight as cheerfulness, openness, sociability, successful adaptation to the inevitable, an equable, practical frame of mind. [...] The very people who burst with proofs of exuberant vitality could easily be taken for prepared corpses, from whom the news of their non-quite-successful decease has been withheld for reasons of population policy. [...] And how comfortless is the thought that the sickness of the normal does not necessarily imply as its opposite the health of the sick, but that the latter usually only present, in a different way, the same disastrous pattern.

(Adorno 2005: 58–59)

The claim here is that what society considers normal and healthy comes at such high costs to individuals ("profoundest mutilation," "deformations") that it is, actually, pathological and sick. Implicit in this is a claim about society as a whole: a society that demands a sick normality of its members is itself dysfunctional, "damaged." Here we have then a clear example of a radical critique of the social body: the "disease" is not conceptualized as a misaligned relation between otherwise healthy organs, but as pertaining to the social body as a whole.

This (purported) social pathology is, however, difficult to detect. Adorno suggests that there is a double layer of repression at work:

The regular guy, the popular girl have to repress not only their desires and insights, but even the symptoms that in bourgeois times resulted from repression.

(Adorno 2005: 58)

While the sickness of normality is concealed, this does not mean it does not exist; nor does it alter the fact that damaged society is its cause. What it does mean is that to detect it, one needs to take a perspective on society as a whole. Thus, although what Adorno presents here is a double claim about how society makes individuals ill and thereby is ill itself, he goes on to say that the social pathology cannot be detected by looking at individuals as atomistic entities:

For socially ordained sacrifice is indeed so universal as to be manifest only in society as a whole, not in the individual. Society has, as it were, assumed the sickness of all individuals.

(Adorno 2005: 59)

In one sense, this claim, for all its rhetorical starkness typical of Adorno's writings, is unsurprising. Only if a phenomenon reaches a certain threshold does it fall into the purview of sociology and social theory. For example, an isolated suicide does not demand an explanation at the (macro-)social level, but if such cases start to accumulate, then what is called for is an explanation that does not look merely at the individuals and their immediate surroundings. Even if each suicide seems unconnected to the others, at a certain level of prevalence, it makes sense to look at the broader social context. It might be difficult to know and agree what level of prevalence triggers the need for a sociological explanation, but the point holds nonetheless. In that sense, any social pathology is manifest "only in society as a whole." Adorno's thesis might be more radical than other claims about social pathology – saying not only that society produces higher levels of sickness (say depression) than there need be, but that the socially induced sickness is "universal" – but the claim that social pathologies are only visible if we look at society as a whole is not out of the ordinary.

This brings out another general point about the social pathology framework, and allows me to highlight an important challenge for using it legitimately. Thatcher, the neoliberal UK Prime Minister from 1979 to 1990, famously claimed that there is no such thing as society. Theorists availing themselves of the idea of social pathology must disagree. They are inescapably committed to macro-social entities. (I understand "entities" here in a broad sense to include structures, institutions, and processes. Consumer culture is an example of "entity" in my sense.) The commitment to macro-social entities is most clearly present in claims about how society itself is ill, but also holds in the case of claims about how society makes individuals ill. To see this, consider that a claim about the social causes of illness becomes really only a claim about social pathology when macro-social entities are invoked. For example, hardly anyone would deny that social factors are part of the causal nexus of depression. Psychiatrists often speak of "life events" as causally relevant factors. Yet, this does not make them social pathology theorists. For one thing, the psychiatrists need not, and typically do not, make claims about social patterns of such life events. At the point when a theorist claims that it is, say, the capitalist organization of society that produces recognizable patterns of stressful life events that lead to depression, we face a social pathology claim. Yet, invoking these macro-social entities is not just opposed by neoliberal politicians like Thatcher, but also controversial among social scientists and philosophers. Indeed, what is even more controversial is the idea that we can treat such entities as if they were physical bodies that can be diseased (i.e., treat them as if they were organisms).

What then could vindicate invoking macro-social entities as causal factors and/or sites of illness? While this is not always explicit, the main answer is that invoking them yields *explanatory surplus* and *success* in relation to social phenomena (be it prevalence levels of depression or the rise of right-wing populism). This is not the place to establish whether, for example, Adorno's claim about sick normality is vindicated in this way. Instead, I merely want to highlight two points. The first is again about the distinctiveness of the social pathology framework vis-à-vis the justice framework. Insofar as the main vindication is by way of explanatory success of social phenomena, the social pathology framework cannot operate with the division of labor typical of the justice framework, whereby normative theorizing and empirical social studies are largely separated from each other. While Rawls leaves the truth of the trickle-down theory of wealth to the economists and aims to devise principles of justice that hold either way (notably, in this context, his famous "difference principle"), Adorno could never do so. For better or for worse, the social pathology framework is intimately intertwined with social theorizing and empirical research. The interdisciplinary approach of the early Frankfurt School is, thus, not accidental to the theoretical enterprise, but crucial to it.

Second, it is worth noting that postulating macro-social entities as causal factors or even as organism-like bodies might be vindicated in a structurally or even methodologically similar way to how the natural sciences vindicate their entities. It is also worth recalling that the latter entities, from quarks to giant black holes, seem no little strange themselves. This is not to say that philosophy or social science should become like natural science – to say that they should become so would run counter to what theorists in the FSCT tradition believe. Rather, it is to point out that philosophical or social theories should not be held to higher standards when it comes to ontology than the natural sciences. Proving causal claims, not just correlations, is a genuinely difficult endeavor. Even the supposed gold standard of such proofs, randomized control trials (RCTs), has limitations, both in whether they meet the exacting standards they require to be valid and how their results transfer across contexts (see, for example, Cartwright and Hardie 2012). Moreover, some social scientists have embarked on showing that sociological studies can meet the benchmark set by RCTs by way of what is called “natural” or “quasi-natural experiments” (Dunning 2012). (These involve an as-if-randomized distribution of individuals across groups, whereby the distribution does not arise because of an experimental setup, but, for example, as an unintended side effect of a policy commencing on a certain date, such that some individuals are affected by the change and others are not.) Similarly, the ontological claims made by nuclear physicists result from certain models and their explanatory success. For example, quarks with their peculiar nature are postulated as among the fundamental elements making up reality because this makes sense of certain phenomena (whether in the artificial context of experiments or outside of it). Is it any more problematic to speak of quarks as “colored” and “flavored” than of society as “sick”? Both claims might be strange or perhaps metaphorical, but if they are part of successful explanatory models, then they are as vindicated as they can and need to be. In other words, the focus should not be on the ontological strangeness of certain invoked entities within a social theory, but on its overall explanatory success or lack thereof compared to other theories.

### Organized Self-Realization

Earlier I criticized Honneth’s reconceptualization of the idea of social pathology, especially in his later writings. However, I think there is much to learn from his discussion of specific social pathologies, especially from the middle period of his writings, where the possibility of radical critique was still left open. Here I focus on one case because I think it is particularly fruitful – both in itself and in what it tells us about social pathologies and their role in FSCT.

In “Organized Self-Realization: Paradoxes of Individualization,” Honneth discusses as social pathology a process by which a genuinely worthy ideal (self-realization) becomes co-opted into the reproduction of capitalist society in such a way that, paradoxically, its realization is at the same time its betrayal. In a nutshell, a combination of various social factors since the 1970s has led to self-realization’s being co-opted into the capitalist production process, such that people have to feign self-realization activities to become employed, to stay employed, or get promoted. As a result, people end up experiencing feelings of inner emptiness and meaninglessness (as indicated by (purportedly) rising levels of depression). Parts of the day and of the self not previously subject to direct capitalist control have been opened up to such control. Nonworking time was never free under capitalism because such time was always part of a context of domination, but now this domination has seeped ever more directly into this domain. For example, it is not enough to study for a degree to secure a livelihood, but one also has to orientate one’s “extra-curricular” activities around the imperative of employability. Even where working times and hierarchies have become more fluid than before, this has not led simply to a progressive result, as employees are now expected to be on call and responsive



24/7. It is not enough to do a job, but one must do it enthusiastically and act as if the job is part of one's self-realization. Instead of genuine self-realization what we have is a travesty. The rhetoric of self-realization becomes part of a renewal of the capitalist production process and social world. But it is not just the rhetoric that is co-opted. Self-realization, indeed, finds expression in practices and actions, but merely as outwardly performance, from which the individual is alienated, such that it does not make sense to speak of genuine self-realization. What was a battle cry for emancipation and criterion for social critique has become an instrument of domination, inverting its normative valence.

Here too we see the entwinement with the social sciences (notably the work by Chiapello and Boltanski on "the new spirit of capitalism" and by Ehrenberg on the "age of depression"). We also see the process character of social pathologies: it is not that Honneth (or the theorists on whom he draws) would claim that there was a conspiracy of powerful men (and women) who decided to co-opt self-realization to renew capitalism and expand it into even further spheres of life. Rather, what he offers is an account of how a reasonable response to capitalism, social critique fueled by the value of self-realization, gets progressively taken up in social practices and thereby becomes, inadvertently and without anyone controlling this, subverted and co-opted. (One need only think of Don Draper in *Mad Men*, and how he is inspired and fascinated by a series of countercultural developments and then uses them to create a new allure for mass consumer goods. It is not that Draper is in cahoots with an all-powerful elite that consciously steers US society. The mechanisms are much subtler and unfold behind the backs of all of the actors. At most, one could say that Draper wants to be good at his job insofar as he wants to find the most convincing ad for the product in question, even if this means going against the clients' initial opposition; and, more often than not, it is just accidental that the counterculture he encounters spills over into successful ads as a result of the dysfunctionality of his own life, rather than being planned as part of a conspiracy by the elites.) It is also clear from this that whatever goes wrong here is primarily ethical in nature. Insofar as a distinction of morality and ethics is drawn, self-realization is counted on the side of ethics. It is not clear what rights – legal or moral – are violated. And even structural injustice does not seem well equipped to capture what is at issue. In addition, the way Honneth describes the phenomenon in question does not rely on his model of functional differentiation of society or curtail radical critique.

Moreover, while this (purported) social pathology exemplifies well some of the characteristics and specifications of social pathology highlighted already, it resists fitting into an influential schema suggested to capture the idea of social pathology in the FSCT tradition. According to Zurn, social pathologies (or at least those analyzed by Honneth) are *second-order disorders*, where this means that they operate "by means of constitutive disconnects between first-order contents and second-order reflexive comprehension of those contents, where those disconnects are pervasive and socially caused" (2011: 345–346). Zurn's schema fits best (his characterization of) Marx's articulation of a theory of ideology: those subject to false consciousness are not "cognisant of how those beliefs come about," and this disconnect is pervasive and socially caused, involving "hiding or repressing the needed reflexivity of the social participants about the structures of belief formation and the connection of those cultural-cognitive structures to the material ordering of the social world" (2011: 347). Yet, when it comes to the real target for this schema, including crucially capturing organized self-realization as social pathology, it is a poor fit. As one's own mode of self-realization requires reflective endorsement to be authentic, one could imagine a case where such second-order reflexivity is undermined by social processes. However, the way the actual phenomenon is described (including by Zurn) is such that the pathology becomes worse by a cognitive *connect*: it is "often itself vitiated by the individual's own recognition that the demand for individualised self-realisation is itself a productive force, a

functionally useful innovation of post-Fordist capitalism, one playing an ideological role in furthering neoliberal deinstitutionalisation and deregulation” (2011: 360). If cognitive disconnect is essential to social pathology, the recognition noted in the quotation could not vitiate the social pathology, but would end it – whatever would be bad about it could not be characterized in terms of Zurn’s schema of social pathology. Put differently, Honneth does not argue that organized self-reflection is (or indicates) a social pathology because individual reflection on the ideals of self-realization pursued is blocked. Just the opposite, Honneth’s argument relies on people’s awareness of the false (or at least not authentically accepted) first-order content (the modes of self-realization). In fact, for him, this awareness is not just a “vitiating” factor, but part and parcel of the pathology in question – leaving us either to feign authenticity or flee into depression (2012: 167). In this way, his interesting suggestion is that social pathology can consist in the process by which the pursuit of an ideal (here self-realization) becomes co-opted and subverted, sabotaging its genuine realization.

One lesson from this is that it might not be possible (or advisable) to systematize the idea of social pathology completely. It might be better to think of it as a kind of cluster concept, with partially overlapping features, than to press it into a rigid schema. One can then take certain social phenomena (such as organized self-realization or the rise of antisemitism and xenophobia) as core examples of the idea. These examples constitute the idea in its diversity. The task of FSCT would then be to assemble and work through a range of such examples.

In this context, it is helpful to return to Honneth’s reconceptualization of the idea of social pathology. As seen, he proposed to move away from capitalism as the ultimate cause of all social pathologies. Indeed, he seems to oppose any mono-causal picture. For example, regarding organized self-realization, he speaks of “a series of socio-structural processes of development”; how they “operated in conjunction” and were “accompanied” by “cultural transformations and attitude changes” (Honneth 2012: 158f). What we get here is a complex causal nexus, in which capitalism plays a role, but is not the one and only cause. Moving away from a mono-causal picture has the advantage of increased plausibility. Still, the challenge of how to vindicate social pathology claims remains in different form. If the causal nexus is so complex and multifaceted, how can we validate the claims in question? To take one example, Honneth links self-realization becoming “an ideology and a productive force in a deregulated economic system” to “a rapid rise in depression” (2012: 165). He refers to Ehrenberg’s work, but he does not note the numerous controversies at stake, both about Ehrenberg’s work and about the general issue. Controversies extend to (a) how depression is classified and diagnosed, (b) the claims that it is on the rise, and (c) the causes of any rise in prevalence and incidents that may have occurred. To validate Honneth’s claim, one would have to resolve all of these controversies about the so-called “age of depression” and link the results to the multifaceted developments in the socio-structural processes, cultural transformations, and attitudinal changes that Honneth thinks are the causal nexus of “organized self-realization.” That is a tough ask. Honneth is largely silent on how it might be completed. This is not just an issue for him. Zurn is probably correct to observe that of the four tasks involved in a social pathology diagnosis (symptomatology, epidemiology, etiology, and prognosis and therapy), the third, etiology (the study of the causes), is particularly neglected (2011: section 2). There is a lack of substantive sociological details in Honneth and Adorno alike when it comes to convincing identification of causes.

What this also brings out is that those working in the FSCT tradition will have to turn their attention more to the second-order question of how one can validate social pathology claims. Renewed attention to philosophy of social science and a reintegration with the social sciences are called for.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the idea of social pathology and its role(s) in FSCT. Noting the contested nature of this idea, I proposed two key general characteristics of it: social pathologies tend to concern (a) social processes of increasing deterioration, whereby (b) deterioration is understood in ethical terms (such as self-realization and flourishing or the lack thereof) and contrasted to moral terms (notably justice). Following Honneth 2008, I then explicated (early) FSCT's specification of this idea as involving three elements: (c) social pathologies are understood as rationality deficits of society on a broadly Hegelian notion of reason; (d) their ultimate cause is capitalism; and (e) they include or give rise to human suffering, which fuels an emancipatory interest to overcome them. While these specifications may not suffice to distinguish FSCT from all other approaches to social and political philosophy, they, together with the general characteristics (a) and (b), differentiate it from the justice framework dominating liberal political philosophy in the last half century. This differentiation is, however, in danger (although not automatically lost) whenever theorists in the FSCT tradition reconceptualize the idea of social pathology in terms of justice. I also noted that Honneth and other theorists in the FSCT tradition have modified the later three specifications, especially (d), moving away from a mono-causal account of the genesis of social pathologies. In Habermas and Honneth, one additional, also broadly Hegelian element is introduced: (f) functional differentiation of society into spheres, whereby social pathology becomes understood as malfunctioning spheres (malfunctioning either internally or in their interactions, notably by one colonizing the other). I warned that this specification tends to restrict prematurely social critique to reforming the social body. For the social body is here understood as well constituted in principle, and merely deviating from its healthy state. With the help of two case studies, I then suggested how the idea of social pathology could be used in ways that leave open a more radical path of social critique. And I explicated some additional general characteristics of social pathology claims and of the challenges involved in vindicating them. Specifically, social pathology claims involve (g) a commitment to macro-social entities (like society, capitalism, or consumer culture) as explanatory categories. Vindication of these commitments and the explanations to which they belong remain elusive, particularly when it comes to the claims about the causal nexus of social pathologies. There are additional challenges on which I have only touched briefly, notably the historical abuse of the idea of social pathology, and how using the idea seems to view theorists as social doctors and others as mere patients.

In sum, the idea of social pathology promises to be a distinctive resource for FSCT, but making good on this promise will require further work. Some of its general characteristics (such as (b) its being captured in an ethical normative register) and FSCT specifications (such as (d) the causal link to capitalism or (f) tying it to functional differentiation of society) may have to be given up or modified. And wielding it successfully will require making good also on the interdisciplinary program of the early FSCT and on a worked-out philosophy of (social) science as well as a self-critical examination of its historical and possible uses.

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## Further Reading

- Freyenhagen, F. (2015) "Honneth on Social Pathologies: A Critique," *Critical Horizons* 16(2): 131–152. (A critical discussion of Honneth's influential view and how it has developed from his earlier to his latest works.)
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- Honneth, A. (2014) "The Diseases of Society: Approaching a Nearly Impossible Subject," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 81(3): 683–703. (Honneth's most recent and most direct engagement with the idea of social pathology.)
- Jaeggi, R. (2014) *Kritik von Lebensformen*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag. Forthcoming English translation: *Critique of Forms of Life*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. (Detailed account of how society and human practices embody reason and how social critique is possible within this account, including radical critique.)
- Stuckler, D. and S. Basu (2013) *The Body Economic*, London: Penguin. (Not in the FSCT tradition, but a good example of how contemporary social scientists argue that society makes us ill and is ill itself.)

# THE SELF AND INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY IN THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

*Kenneth Baynes*

There is a long tradition according to which to be a self (or person) entails a particular form of self-reflection or self-awareness as well as a level of care or concern for the self (Horkheimer 1947: 128; Adorno 1966: 218; Tugendhat 1986; Frankfurt 1988). So conceived, the self also includes what has been called “bourgeois interiority” (Gordon 2016: 4)—the vast domain of “private” thoughts, desires, hopes, and fears to which the self relates in a privileged way and over which it exercises a special authority. Further, it is also widely held that to be free or autonomous the individual must in an appropriate way “identify with” or “take responsibility for” this psychic life and the conduct issuing from it. Without this identification or appropriation, the individual can be described as alienated or not at home with himself or possibly even as a case of “disturbed” self-appropriation (Jaeggi 2014: 151). Finally, something like this conception of the self and its autonomy developed together with the rise of capitalism and plays an important role in its legitimation (Horkheimer 1947: 138; Siedentop 2014). The bourgeois individual is closely connected to the idea that each person exercises a special authority over himself—or even owns himself—and the idea that each person in virtue of this authority possesses special dignity and rights.

There is of course an equally long tradition of criticism of this understanding of the self and its powers and capacities. These criticisms range from claims that the capacity for self-knowledge is widely overestimated or that there is no such privileged authority to doubts that the domain of bourgeois interiority is a fiction or that the self (so conceived) does not exist (Metzinger 2011). Many have similarly criticized the ideal of individual autonomy and emphasized its ideological character. Subjectivity (or “interiorization”) has a deeply social and historical dimension and, as Adorno observed, “if you define interiorization as an absolute in contrast to that social dimension, and use it as the basis of an idea of pure human beings as such, you will have embarked on an irretrievable decline into ideology” (Adorno 2006: 186; see also 1966: 218). Significantly members of the Frankfurt school can frequently be found on both sides of this debate: they have relentlessly criticized the “absolutization” of the self and the more exorbitant claims made on its behalf while at the same time insisting upon the indispensable importance of a notion of the self (or “ego identity”) and the autonomous individual. As Adorno expressed it in *Negative Dialectics*: “To use the strength of the subject to break through the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity—this is what the author felt to be his task ever since he came to trust his own mental impulses” (Adorno 1966: xx). Nor is this position unique to him. All of the prominent members of the institute criticize the

excesses and ideological uses of the (bourgeois) individual and autonomy and yet continue to insist upon the value of these ideas and their importance for social criticism (Habermas 1979: 71–72; see also Honneth 2009; Jay 2016).

In view of this mixed or dual attitude among Frankfurt School theorists, it is significant that in recent years there has been resurgence of interest in the topic of individual autonomy that reflects this same ambivalence (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000; Christman and Anderson 2005; Taylor 2005). At one level the more recent discussions operate with a more refined and nuanced terminology than that found in the earlier authors. But many of the same questions and concerns emerge there as well: Is the self or person a historical achievement or a deeper metaphysical reality? Does personal autonomy presuppose a “deep self” or is it better construed in relational or recognitional terms? Is autonomy to be understood procedurally or in connection with substantive values? What role might reference to individual autonomy play in social critique—for example, in explaining the phenomena of adaptive preference formation?

This chapter explores the views of three theorists who, despite some shared affinities, propose distinct accounts of the self and autonomy: Max Horkheimer, especially in *Eclipse of Reason*, traces the emergence of a procedural account of autonomy in the modern era that finally undermines the very idea of a self. Theodor Adorno, through a sustained reflection on Kant’s notion of freedom, proposes a substantive account, but one tied to a controversial metaphysics. Finally, Jürgen Habermas, in connection with his pragmatic turn, offers an account of the self and personal autonomy that is socially constituted and relational (or recognitional) in character. The implication of his recognitional account is then examined in connection with one form of ideology critique, namely an explanation of adaptive preference formation.

### Horkheimer: “Self-Preservation without a Self”

Horkheimer’s writings reveal an interest in the individual self and autonomy throughout his entire career. His earlier writings trace the emergence of the “bourgeois individual” against the backdrop of changing social conditions largely within a Marxist framework—that is, in terms of the dynamic between developing human capacities and social structures (Horkheimer 1993: 118). Even the human interest in self-preservation (or what he also calls “egoism”) is not natural or fixed but is expressed in very different ways throughout history (Horkheimer 1993: 123–125). The philosophy of German idealism, which marks a high point with its emphasis on the autonomous individual, “arose above all from the contradictory circumstance that while the modern age proclaimed the spiritual and personal independence of man, the preconditions had not yet been realized for autonomy and rationally structured communal work within society” (154). Still, in his earlier essays, Horkheimer is relatively sanguine about the prospects for a rational social order in which the freedom and equality of each individual could be achieved (Horkheimer 1993: 40). However, beginning in the early 1940s and due in part to his increased collaboration with Adorno, Horkheimer advances a less optimistic picture that ties the interest in self-preservation to a specific conception of reason. As he expressed it in “The End of Reason,”

The destruction of rationalistic dogmatism through the self-critique of reason, carried out by the ever renewed nominalistic tendencies in philosophy, has now been ratified by historical reality. The substance of individuality itself, to which the idea of autonomy was bound, did not survive the process of industrialization. Reason has degenerated because it was the ideological projection of a false universality which now shows the autonomy of the subject to have been an illusion. The collapse of reason and the collapse of individuality are one and the same.

(Horkheimer 1978: 36)

Horkheimer's *Eclipse of Reason* offers his most sustained analysis of the paradoxical condition of the "supposedly autonomous individual" (Horkheimer 1947: 96). In this analysis—which roughly parallels that found in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—the individual (as a self-conscious, purposive agent) gradually emerges over the course of natural history along with his capacity for reason. Reason itself develops in connection with attempts of human species to gain control over the forces of nature and is thus broadly in the service of the self-preservation of the species. Over a long historical period, competing interpretations of this capacity for reason and its relation to the individual vie with one another and shape our "modern" understanding. According to Horkheimer's story in the modern period, a notion of subjective (or instrumental) reason has gained an upper hand over the classical notion of objective reason (which claims to discern basic values inherent in the structure of reality). For subjective reason nothing has value or worth except that which is endowed with it by individual desire and so the idea of self-preservation is emptied of any content other than that of the desiring subject itself. Initially, according to Horkheimer, this understanding of reason and the individual, freed from the constraints of any traditional values, contributed to the growth of capitalism. (One is reminded of Marx's remark that "all that is solid melts into air.") Over the long run, however, this understanding erodes any value or dignity that might have been attached to the self and the idea of reason in the service of self-preservation instead serves only a larger economic system. Horkheimer describes this as a crisis of reason manifested in the crisis of the individual:

the individual once conceived of reason exclusively as an instrument of the self. Now he experiences the reverse of this self-deification. The machine has dropped the driver; it is racing blindly into space. At the moment of consummation, reason has become irrational and stultified. The theme of this time is self-preservation, while there is no self to preserve.

(Horkheimer 1947: 128; Horkheimer and Adorno 1973: 48)

Despite its at times totalizing tone, Horkheimer's analysis anticipates many other criticisms of an "atomistic" individual that has lost all contact with objective values—one is reminded, for example, of Michael Sandel's much later critique of the Rawlsian "essentially unencumbered subject of possession." The greater challenge confronting Horkheimer's position lies rather in his proposed solution. In the final chapter, Horkheimer suggests that the cure for this "disease of reason" is not to choose between objective and subjective reason, "but to foster a mutual critique and thus, if possible to prepare in the intellectual realm the reconciliation of the two in reality" (Horkheimer 1947: 174). He further suggests that the "untruth" does not lie in either concept of reason but rather in their "hypostatization" from one another.

On the one hand, the social need of controlling nature has always conditioned the structure and form of man's thinking and thus given primacy to subjective reason. On the other hand, society could not completely repress the idea of something transcending the subjectivity of self-interest, to which the self could not help aspiring... The idea of self-preservation, the principle that is driving subjective reason to madness, is the very idea that can save objective reason from the same fate.

(175)

More concretely, Horkheimer concludes that an interpretation of self-preservation that includes respect for individual life must be part of this understanding of objective reason. But it is difficult to see how such a reconciliation might be accomplished (see also Lohmann 1993).

Objective reason with its Platonic and/or religious ancestry suggests an independent order of values, whereas subjective reason suggests that something has value only to the extent that it is actually desired by a subject. At any rate, it is a project Horkheimer did not pursue further than these brief remarks.

Interestingly, there are some deep parallels to this juxtaposition of objective and subjective reason within contemporary discussions of individual autonomy. On the one hand, procedural accounts maintain that an individual is free or autonomous if she is acting from what she most desires or in accordance with her “decisive commitments” (Frankfurt 1988). On the other hand, others argue that a person cannot be autonomous if the desires that inform her motivational set conflict with certain objective values or fail to track objective reality (Wolf 1990; Taylor 2005). Although attempts have been made to buttress procedural accounts against some of its strongest criticisms—can a person autonomously will her own subordination?—it is far from clear that the attempt to “reconcile” procedural and substantive accounts offers a coherent goal.

### Adorno: Reading Kant on Freedom

Adorno shares Horkheimer’s broad thesis that subjective or instrumental reason, in the service of self-preservation, is at the same time the source of human domination—this was, after all, the theme of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* which they jointly authored. He also shares with Horkheimer—in a less guarded moment—the claim that the logic of instrumental rationality cannot be the whole story about reason: in a claim juxtaposing objective and subjective reason that could have been drawn from *Eclipse of Reason*, Adorno writes,

*Ratio* should not be anything less than self-preservation, namely that of the species, upon which the survival of each individual literally depends. Through self-preservation the species indeed gains the potential for self-reflection that could finally transcends the self-preservation to which it was reduced by being restricted simply to a means.

(Adorno 1988: 273)

In a critique of Weber’s decisionism and commitment to value neutrality, Adorno claims that subjective reason, on pain of incoherence, must yield a rational end:

The preservation of humanity is inexorably inscribed with the meaning of rationality: it has its end in a reasonable organization of society, otherwise it would bring its own movement to an authoritarian standstill. Humanity is organized rationally solely to the extent that it preserves its societalized subjects according to their unfettered potentialities.

(Adorno 1988: 272–273)

However, Adorno attempts to overcome the impasse into which Horkheimer was led by developing a more nuanced account of the individual self and autonomy. He does this in large part through a close reading of the German idealist tradition, especially Kant, and by incorporating psychoanalytic insights into the Kantian account. The result is a more complex reading that does not dismiss autonomy and subjectivity, but attempts to retrieve these notions “dialectically” from a dogmatic and ideological interpretation (Gordon 2016: 190). However, whether Adorno’s own proposal is ultimately convincing is still a matter of debate (see Habermas 2008; Jütten 2010; Freyenhagen 2013).



Adorno's reading of Kant concentrates on the latter's resolution to the "third antinomy" in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. This might seem surprising since much of Kant's discussion of autonomy arguably does not importantly depend on any such resolution. As is well known, Kant proposes to settle the dispute between free will and causal determinism by introducing a distinction between two worlds—the phenomenal (or empirical) and the noumenal (or intelligible). Insofar as individuals are part of the empirical world, our conduct is subject to the principle of causality but as rational or intelligible beings individuals belong to the noumenal world and our actions are free. Kant maintained that this distinction between two worlds secured our autonomous and moral agency from the intrusion of the empirical sciences. However, along with many other critics, Adorno thinks that this resolution is purchased at too high a price. It implies, on the one hand, that all our action is caused and at least in principle subject to causal explanation while, on the other hand, the notion of intelligible agency introduces a unique notion of causality—what has more recently been called "agent causality"—that is difficult to combine with the empirical study of human behavior. "Man's pure noumenality, devoid of any empirical substance and sought in nothing but his own rationality, does not permit us to make any rational judgment about why it worked in one case and failed in the next" (Adorno 1966: 295, 240).

Thus far, Adorno's reading of Kant is not especially novel. But Adorno continues to press Kant on the inconsistencies created by his two-world metaphysics. For example, despite his solution to the third antinomy, Adorno points out that Kant continued to search for a crucial thought experiment (*experimenta crucis*) that would prove the worldly existence of our freedom after having argued that no such proof is possible (Adorno 1966: 223, 2006: 222). In one of Kant's more notorious examples, he asks us to consider whether, when confronted with the choice between providing false testimony or the gallows, a person doesn't know that it is at least possible for him to overcome all self-interested motives and act from pure practical reason alone (Kant 1956: 30). For Adorno, this appeal to a unique "fact of reason"—or our consciousness of the moral law—also reveals a deeper insight: the bourgeois affirmation of our freedom is always coupled with an insistence upon our responsibility and caution to use freedom "in accordance with the law." It thus turns the Kantian notion of freedom into a form of rational compulsion. For Kant, acting freely and acting from the moral law ultimately coincide—this is what Allison calls the "reciprocity thesis" (Allison 2006: 136)—and for Adorno this means that freedom requires acting from laws that are universal in form and so precisely contrary to anything that is unique or specific to individuals as natural and historical beings. This juxtaposition of (rational) freedom and nature leads to the (aporetic) conclusion that

subjects are free in so far as they are aware of and identical with themselves; and then again, they are unfree in such [rational] identity in so far as they are subjected to, and will perpetuate, its compulsion. They are unfree as diffuse, nonidentical nature; and yet, as that nature they are free because their overpowering impulse will also rid them of [rational] identity's coercive character.

(Adorno 1966: 299)

One of the more intriguing aspects of Adorno's Kant interpretation is his attempt to integrate his critique of rational psychology (and so notion of a free will) with psychoanalytic theory: "Freud was the first to register the full implications of the Kantian critique of an ontology of the soul, or 'rational psychology'" (Adorno 1967: 81). The interpretation of moral conscience in connection with the work of a superego is one obvious example. But more important is Adorno's critique of Kant's sharp opposition between reason and nature. For Adorno, the human capacity for reason—rational control over natural processes—is not

the opposite of nature but the product of human nature (or psyche) in its efforts to make nature (and itself) more accommodating (Adorno 1966: 289). The ego—that is, rationality or the reality principle—thus contains a bit of nature within it. But Adorno’s point is more far reaching than this claim might suggest. Ego lies, so to speak, on the border or frontier between inner nature (human psyche) and the external world and so contains elements of both: “The concept of ego is dialectical, both psychic and extrapsychic, a quantum of libido and the representative of outside reality” (Adorno 1967: 86). The ego gains its autonomy by internalizing a bit of the world and by developing its own relation to the wider psyche. This is a central insight for Adorno’s understanding of psychic life: the rational self is constituted through the interaction of (an ever changing) inner nature and the outer world. There is no rational ego—or pure rationality—that does not betray signs of the life of unconscious desires and marks of an external reality. Further, in an apparent departure from Freud, the rational ego can operate unconsciously such that the repression of instinctual life can itself be irrational (or out of proportion to what is required for individuals to live successfully in the world). Adorno illustrates these claims via a critique of contemporary discussions of rationalization and the shift in psychoanalytic literature from an individual free of repression to a “well-integrated” individual. Rationalizations may be a form of self-deception (so irrational) but still disclose truths about the current conditions of social life (and so rational). Similarly, in contrast to the “revisionists,” the “well-integrated individual” may not be identical with the autonomous individual but rather one whose psychic life has been tailored to meet the requirements of an irrational society (Adorno 1967: 85–86). Adjustment or integration (*Anpassung*) would then signal the extinction of spontaneity and autonomy (Adorno 1988: 240). At any rate, the insights of psychoanalysis betray any simple contrast between a free and rational subjectivity (or interiority) and an external (and unfree) natural and social world.

Three departures from Kant’s conception of freedom are especially significant for Adorno’s own account. First, individual freedom is a social achievement in two senses.

But whether the subject is autonomous in reality, whether it is able to decide one way or the other... depends on the opposite of this subjectivity that has inflated itself into an absolute in this fashion. That is to say, it depends on objective reality. For it is this, the organization of the world, the nature of the world, that actuality determines the extent to which the subject achieves autonomy, and the extent to which it is vouchsafed or denied.

(Adorno 2006: 222)

Autonomy is not a wholly private and individual affair; rather it depends on a society that overcomes conditions of want and coercion and that provides appropriate background institutions. In a further sense, subjectivity or “interiority” (*Innerlichkeit*) is conceptually or “constitutively” social and can’t be characterized apart from this social dimension (Adorno 2006: 186). Individual autonomy (as a status) requires the recognition of others (see below).

Second, autonomy is not in opposition to or at the expense of instinctual life (or “inner nature”). To be sure, as an orthodox Freudian, Adorno doubts that a free society could do away with all repression. But the “unconscious ego” promotes an irrational repression of inner nature in the service of irrational social ends. In a free society, by contrast, there would be no need for “surplus repression” and the relation between ego (reality principle) and id (instinctual desires) could develop in a more reciprocal manner, freed from the irrational demands of an (unconscious) ego and the heightened “revenge” of instinctual life (Adorno 1967: 85; O’Connor 2013: 126f.). To be sure, however, there is continued debate on precisely how far Adorno’s interpretation of Freud would let him proceed along these lines (Benjamin 1977; Whitebook 2006).

Finally, Adorno claims that practical reason is impotent and cannot alone provide motivation for an agent to act (Adorno 1966: 229). This implies in turn that freedom cannot be identified exclusively with practical reason and it leads Adorno to reject Kant's basic understanding of spontaneity. For Kant rational action requires a moment of radical spontaneity—the agent “incorporates” a desire into his maxim or makes it a reason for action—in order to move from the realm of “mere” passivity to genuine (rational agency) (Allison 1996: 118). Adorno by contrast explicitly identifies spontaneity with a moment of irrationality or unintelligibility: it is what he calls the “jolt” or “surge” of an archaic impulse that lies outside the rational ego or at least exists prior to its consolidation (Adorno 1966: 221–222, 2006: 228). He refers to this notion of spontaneity as the “addendum” or “additional factor” and it marks his most radical break with Kant (Adorno 1966: 226; Freyenhagen 2015: 255f.). Like Kant, this notion of spontaneity is necessary for free action but, unlike Kant, it is associated not with the noumenal realm but with the realm of archaic impulses and nature.

Despite this sharp departure from aspects of Kant's account, Adorno's treatment of Kant is not entirely critical. Indeed, in some of his public lectures he seems to embrace Kant's idea of autonomy without reservation: “The single genuine power standing against the principle of Auschwitz is autonomy, if I might use the Kantian expression: the power of reflection, of self-determination, of not cooperating” (Adorno 1983, 1988: 195). These comments are not limited to his public lectures, but can be found in the same texts in which he criticizes Kant's philosophy (Adorno 2006: 178). Thus, the central concern for Adorno seems to be not a complete dismissal of the Kantian view of autonomy but rather that the challenges confronting its realization will be too quickly dismissed. This is not the entire story as it ignores his problems with Kant's dualisms but it is still a point worth emphasizing since it distances Adorno's position from more radical calls for the “end of the subject.”

What is the alternative understanding of freedom (autonomy) and agency that Adorno wants to oppose to Kant's solution to the third antinomy? Interestingly, Adorno does not pursue a strategy that has appealed to many neo-Kantians. This involves a rejection of the “two world” interpretation of Kant in favor of the idea of “two standpoints” on one world (which however can only be accessed from one or another standpoint) (Allais 2015: 8). A strong textual basis for this reading is found in Kant's remark that insofar as we regard ourselves as agents we must think of ourselves as free (Kant 1996: 114; Allison 2012). Adorno dismisses this passage with the brief remark that it turns freedom into a mere “fiction.” He associates it with Vaihinger's interpretation of Kant as a “philosophy of the ‘as if’” and suggests that this reduces the problem of freedom to a mere pragmatic interest (Adorno 2006: 244–245). Further, Adorno repeats his claims that this account of freedom (which again connects the notion of freedom to the idea of acting under universal law) renders it a form of coercion: Kant's claim that we have no choice but to act under the idea of freedom (as universal law) reveals the “cloven hoof” that finally subordinates Kant's notion of human freedom to the idea of a universal causality (Adorno 2006: 246).

In contrast to Kant's two-world metaphysics, Adorno appeals to a competing Romantic conception of nature (see Jütten 2010). Rather than the idea of *natura naturata* (constituted nature, as a closed causal realm), he invokes the Romantic notion of *natura naturans* (constituting nature) in which human spontaneity and (human) nature are not in deep conflict but work in tandem (Adorno 2006: 245). The problem of freedom and causality (Kant's third antinomy) is dismissed as a “pseudo-problem” that in fact arises from the real experience of freedom and coercion in a social world that has taken on a “quasi-natural” form. This “second nature” however is the result of an instrumental reason (or “identity thinking”) that has obscured a deeper remembrance of nature in the self and turns the world (including other agents and ourselves) into objects. Only through a reversal of this “derailed natural history” can a proper understanding of human freedom (and its harmony with nature) be achieved

(Habermas 2008: 183). The “addendum” (or archaic impulse) is thus a reminder of this lost harmony: “It is a flash of light between the poles of something long past, something grown all but unrecognizable, and that which some day might come to be” (Adorno 1966: 229). This, however, links the (enlightenment) project of human autonomy to a controversial interpretation of nature—and ultimately to a metaphysical (or ontological) project (even if one that is construed negatively).

### **Habermas: Kantian Pragmatism, Recognitional Autonomy, and Adaptive Preferences**

Habermas’s writings reflect the same ambivalence regarding the self and individual autonomy that can be found in Horkheimer and Adorno. He is critical of the ideological role these ideas have played in capitalist society but he also recognizes that a notion of the autonomous individual is indispensable for the normative foundations of critical theory (Habermas 1979: 72–73). Deeply influenced by the thought of Durkheim (as well as Hegel), Habermas acknowledges that the self is a “social construction”—that is, the product of a long and contingent historical process—but nonetheless insists that it is more than a “mere fiction”—it is an idea central to (modern) social practices that cannot simply be set aside (Habermas 1992: ch. 7). Like Adorno, he resists embracing a “false positivity” or premature acceptance of “bourgeois interiority”—a pure subjectivity untainted by society and granted excessive powers and capacities—but insists that an intersubjective or recognitional account of autonomy must still be preserved.

Both Adorno and Habermas attempt to move beyond Kant’s transcendental idealism with its reliance upon a “constitutive subjectivity” but they do so in very different ways. Adorno’s negative dialectics exposes the limits of Kantian dualism—and so at least implicitly points to a unity of nature and freedom that is prior to the rise of instrumental reason (Freyenhagen 2015: 259). Habermas, by contrast, offers a pragmatist reading of Kant that aligns more closely with the epistemic or “standpoint” interpretations of Kant. With respect to the concept of freedom (or autonomy), Habermas also recasts the third antinomy in terms of two standpoints or perspectives. As agents, we experience nature as a limiting or constraining condition on our actions (Habermas 2007: 19, 2008: 189) but this encounter with nature (accessible from the participant’s perspective) is not the same as the “theoretical” or “observer’s perspective” that assumes a domain of closed causal laws. This latter conception of nature cannot simply replace the former nor can the former be reduced to it. Thus, the “resolution” of the third antinomy does not involve an ontological claim about two worlds but an epistemic claim about the mutual irreducibility of two perspectives.

In what he labels “perspectival dualism” (Habermas 2008: 165) or “linguistic dualism” (208), Habermas locates these two perspectives in the “grammatical structure” of language or, more specifically, in the practice of linguistic communication. In a further step, Habermas associates the participant’s perspective with the mundane or everyday experience of social actors (or what Sellar’s called the “manifest image” of the world). On Habermas’s view, although scientific insights can modify aspects of this manifest image they cannot ultimately threaten or undermine the participant’s perspective—at least not without radically altering the deep-structural “grammar” of our linguistic practices. Finally, Habermas attempts to show that the observer’s perspective presupposes the participant’s perspective since science cannot eliminate the need for argumentative practices rooted in everyday language use (Habermas 2008: ch. 1; Baynes 2016: 36–37). So formulated, this amounts to a version of Kant’s claim that we can act—that is, understand ourselves as rational and accountable agents—only under the idea of freedom combined with Kant’s thesis concerning the primacy of practical over theoretical reason (Gardner 2006; Allison 2012: 98). For

Habermas, accountable agency is an idealization built into our communicative practices that can't be abandoned while still regarding ourselves as capable of engaging in reasoned arguments (Habermas 2007: 23f.).

At the core of this understanding of the participant's perspective is a basic notion of autonomy or communicative freedom. Communicative freedom refers to the capacity of agents to accept or reject the various claims raised in basic types of speech acts (or illocutionary acts). This notion of freedom is prior to other notions of autonomy and is contained in the idea that, as language users, individuals occupy a normative standing or status. Competent speakers can make assertions, promises, requests, and the like because they attribute to one another (and themselves) the normative power to challenge or accept the various sorts of claims raised in those speech acts. Communicative freedom refers to this normative power and successful or "felicitous" communication depends on its mutual ascription. This notion of communicative freedom is neither a wholly "subjective" capacity nor an indication of our membership in a noumenal realm. It is rather intersubjective (or recognitional) from the outset and it presupposes a network of social practices and institutions that Habermas (with a nod to Husserl) refers to as the "lifeworld." In their interpretive activity, actors draw upon the norms and practices of this lifeworld and appeal to them in their exchange of reasons. In a rather vivid metaphor, Habermas describes the complementary relation between the communicative action of accountable agents and the sociocultural lifeworld as a "circular process":

While the segment of the lifeworld relevant to the situation encounters the actor as a problem which he has to solve as something standing as it were in front of him, he is supported in the rear by the background of his lifeworld. Coping with situations is a circular process in which the actor is two things at the same time: the initiator of actions that can be attributed to him and the product of traditions in which he stands as well as of group solidarities to which he belongs and processes of socialization and learning to which he is subjected.

(Habermas 1987: 135)

However, he also emphasizes that this description of a "circular process" should be accepted with caution: actors are not products of the lifeworld in a way that renders them passive nor should the lifeworld be regarded as a self-perpetuating process—a macro-subject—that has a life of its own. Rather, it is individuals (and groups) who reproduce the lifeworld through their communicative action and the lifeworld is "saddled upon" the interpretive accomplishments of its members (Habermas 1979: 121, 1987: 145). Or, to express the same point in somewhat different terminology, reference to the situatedness of the agent (and her reasons)—a "product" of the lifeworld—must not be at the expense of her status as a rational and accountable agent, but should rather be seen as a central condition of that agency. Habermas's model of social agency seeks to avoid the extremes of treating agents as "cultural dopes" who passively reproduce their lifeworld, on the one hand, and rational agents who always act (insofar as they are rational) to maximize their own self-interest, on the other hand. Neither of these extremes captures adequately the idea that actors are deeply embedded in their lifeworld *and* accountable agents who reproduce it through their communicative action (Habermas 1992: 43).

Habermas recognizes that there is a diversity of forms of autonomy, including moral, political, legal, personal (or individual) (Anderson 2011: 92). Importantly, however, these other conceptions are derived from or built upon the basic notion of agential autonomy; nor is there a more fundamental notion of individual self-relation or freedom on which the notion of agential autonomy depends, in a way that might suggest a person must first be a self or

possess individual authority before he or she can possess the normative power associated with speech acts (see, for example, Habermas's important exchange with Dieter Henrich in Dews 1999). In *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas describes the "co-originality" of public and private autonomy (which correspond roughly to the notions of political freedom and civil liberty), but in his account, these two notions of autonomy themselves presuppose the notion of agential autonomy outlined above (Habermas 1996: 4). Similarly, the idea of moral autonomy—or the capacity to act from moral norms—presupposes both the more minimal notion of agential autonomy and the idea of membership in a moral community (compare Darwall). Finally, even individual (or personal) autonomy—or what Habermas calls "ethical self-understanding"—presupposes a relevant public to whom one can in principle give an account or justification for one's decisions and commitments. Habermas describes the rise of this form of individual autonomy in connection with nineteenth-century confessional literature (such as Rousseau's *Letters*) in which claims to an authentic life are still dependent on the recognition of others:

No one can dispose over his identity as property. The guarantee under discussion must not be conceived according to the model of a promise through which an autonomous speaker binds his will.... The self of ethical self-understanding is dependent upon recognition by addressees because it generates itself as a response to the demands of another in the first place. Because others attribute accountability to me, I gradually make myself into the one who I have become in living together with others.

(Habermas 1992, 170)

In sum, these further notions of autonomy are also deeply recognitional in character and dependent upon the basic idea of communicative freedom and agential autonomy.

One of the primary reasons for the Frankfurt School's interest in autonomy was to better understand its ideological function and its role in the critique of that ideology: viewed negatively, appeals to individual autonomy appear to be "false" and in the service of wider social imperatives; on the other hand, it also seems that some positive notion of individual freedom or autonomy must be presupposed by those who engage in social criticism (Horkheimer and Adorno 1973: 198f.; Habermas 1979). An analogous tension can be found in the recent literature on individual autonomy and its use for social critique (see Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000; Veltman and Piper 2014; Oshana 2015). For example, some feminists have appealed to a notion of autonomy to help explain how the oppressed might be complicit in their own oppression. Under the label of "adaptive preferences" the claim is that some individuals acquire preferences that undermine their own autonomy and work against their own interests (Stoljar 2014). Others respond that such appeals to an "autonomy deficit" display a form of disrespect toward the oppressed (Khader 2011). Habermas's recognitional account of autonomy might offer a way to navigate some of this challenging terrain.

Jon Elster initiated the recent discussion concerning adaptive preferences with the suggestion that such preferences circumvent or curtail an agent's autonomy. According to Elster, an adaptive preference is a preference that has been unconsciously formed or altered as a result of an (unchosen) reduction in the set of feasible options available to the agent (Elster 1983: 117). It is something that happens to the agent, rather than something the agent does. The fox is frustrated by his inability to reach the grapes and his preference is modified in order to reduce his level of frustration. However, it is not modified on the basis of a choice or through an exercise of his deliberative capacities. Others have suggested that Elster's account is too thin and that a more substantive account of individual autonomy is required in order to identify the objectionable feature of adaptive preferences. Natalie Stoljar, for example, has

argued that even if a woman consciously and reflectively embraces certain oppressive social norms, there may still be a failure or deficit in her autonomy. A person living in a society with oppressive social norms might have so deeply internalized these norms that she would continue to endorse them even if she were critically to reflect upon them in accordance with a procedural account of autonomy. On her view, we need a more substantive account of autonomy—one that incorporates objective values—in order to address the worry about adaptive preferences. Finally, in a further response, some proceduralists have claimed that substantive accounts like Stoljar's mischaracterize the conditions for autonomy and/or set the bar too high (Christman 2009).

In the context of this recent discussion, Habermas's account of individual autonomy is best viewed as an example of a normative competence approach. What characterizes such an approach is not whether a particular preference conforms to a set of substantive values or even whether it would be endorsed in critical reflection, but whether or not it is the outcome of an exercise of a normative competence (Benson 2000). In Habermas's case, the basic idea is that for a preference to be (properly) attributable to an agent it must arise from an exercise of her communicative competence—where this competence refers at the most basic level to the agent's capacity to respond with reasons to claims raised in speech acts. More generally, it refers to an agent's capacity to offer justifications for her conduct and preferences to a relevant audience. Such a normative competence supposes that the agent has a basic (normative) status and authority to give reasons and to respond to reasons offered by another (normatively competent) agent. What the possession (and appropriate ascription) of this competence requires in a given situation is a complex question and depends on a wide variety of factors. It will include as well an answer to questions concerning the relevant audience to whom the person is accountable and the appropriate domains or aspects of her life for which she owes an account. The notion of communicative competence should also not be construed in an overly "intellectualist" manner, as it will include many affective and emotional skills and dispositions as well (see Anderson and Honneth 2005). To anticipate and as a first approximation, preferences held by the agent that did not arise through the exercise of her communicative competence (with an important qualification below) are not properly attributable to her as an agent—they are not genuinely her own—and so are adaptive in Elster's initial sense.

Quite independent of Habermas's work, Andrea Westlund has proposed a strikingly similar account that she describes as a competence (or disposition) for answerability. Individual (or personal) autonomy requires (an exercise of) a disposition or readiness to give reasons (be answerable) to others. A person is autonomous with respect to a given preference then if the preference is formed through an exercise of her normative competence for answerability rather than in a manner that thwarts or circumvents that competence. Three features of her normative competence approach are especially worth noting for the similarities with Habermas: first, the competence for answerability is still conceived quite formally or procedurally in the sense that there will be a wide range of reasons that could be offered that are compatible with the exercise of this competence and preferences that cannot be judged to be non-autonomous directly on the basis of their content. Nonetheless, as others have pointed out, it remains at least a "weakly substantive" account in the sense that it relies upon some substantive normative assumptions and (more controversially) not all preferences could be compatible with an exercise of this competence (Benson 2011: 4).

Second, as Paul Benson and others have emphasized, a competence for answerability requires an adequate sense of self-worth (Benson 2000; Anderson and Honneth 2009). If a person does not view herself as worthy or entitled to have a voice or to have an opinion—to be, in other words, an authoritative source of valid claims—she would fail to have the relevant normative competence for answerability. Similarly, to see oneself as answerable to

others also supposes that one has a sufficient or adequate sense of one's own self-worth. Autonomy thus requires not only possessing the authority to give and respond to reasons but an adequate appreciation or recognition of this authority with respect to oneself. One must, in other words, have some recognition of oneself as a "self-authenticating source of valid claims" (Rawls): one must have, and to some extent recognize oneself as having, a voice that can command an (equal) authority just as much as it is (equally) answerable to another. Finally, as Westlund points out, individual autonomy does not only depend causally on others for its development, but is also "constitutively" social: it is a normative power that by definition requires the recognition or "uptake" of another (Westlund 2009: 44). A person can only be answerable or have the authority to make a demand if that capacity and authority is recognized by another who also has that status and capacity. Her relational account thus again closely parallels Habermas's.

How does this normative competence account bear on the discussion of adaptive preferences? Roughly, a preference is adaptive if it does not arise from an exercise of a person's communicative competence or normative competence for answerability. Obviously, this initial formulation needs further clarification and some important qualifications. As Westlund also notes, not every (autonomous) preference actually held by an agent arises from a deliberate or conscious exercise of this competence. A great deal of "deliberation" about one's preferences can occur at a fairly unreflective and perhaps even unconscious level. Second, and more importantly, since realistically (and quite generally) not all preferences are the direct result of any exercise of such a normative competence, this proposal must be amended to include a modified version of Christman's authenticity condition (Christman 2009: 155): if the agent *were* to reflect on the preference in question, she would endorse it—that is, she would regard it as a preference that could have arisen through an exercise of her normative competence (in a world sufficiently similar to her own). However, as Westlund again points out, there is a real danger here: it makes little sense to speak of a person possessing a normative competence—and even less to speak of her as autonomous—if she never exercises the competence (Westlund 2009: 35). It also would be problematic to describe preferences ascribed to a person as "autonomous" if the ascription relied solely on a counterfactual claim about what a person would endorse absent any significant exercise of the competence. So, while for any given preference it may be plausible to consider it autonomous if it satisfies this counterfactual condition, it would not be plausible to consider an agent autonomous if she did not actually exercise her competence with respect to some range of her preferences that she valued and cared about. That is, there must be a real limit with respect to when this counterfactual condition is invoked in the absence of the actual exercise of the person's normative competence. Third, and finally, the exercise of a competence can be quite local and domain specific: the fact that someone does not regard himself as entitled to a voice in one context, or is not so regarded by others, does not necessarily mean that he lacks a normative competence for answerability (Mackenzie 2008: 523). This of course implies that empirical ascriptions (even self-ascriptions) of a competence are extremely difficult and should be down with great caution and "epistemic humility." It does not mean, however, that a social theorist is never warranted in proposing such hypotheses to explain some social phenomenon or that she is always displaying disrespect toward an individual in making such a judgment.

At this point Habermas's account of communicative competence offers some additional resources. He locates both the interpretation and value of autonomy in history—and specifically within processes of modernization—and he does not oppose autonomy and socialization (in, say, the fiction of a "deep self") but treats certain forms of socialization as necessary conditions for individual autonomy. Both of these aspects of his account are captured in his contrast between "normatively ascribed agreements" and "communicatively achieved



understanding" (Habermas 1985: 340). The more specific details of this view can't be pursued here, but what matters for this conception is that with modernization comes a broadening scope or range in which it is expected that the individual will assume responsibility for himself and his commitments—in religious faith and values, in love and intimate relations, in work and career choices, and in solidarities and allegiances (Habermas 1990: 199).

Of course, this historical dimension of Habermas's account brings complications with it as well. On the one hand, it both allows for and requires much greater historical perspective and cross-cultural variation when speaking of autonomy and its value. On the other hand, it calls for much more nuanced ascriptions of autonomy as is evident in his own distinction between a thin and thick notion of communicative freedom (Baynes 2016: 117). It allows, for example, for both a more minimal notion of agency (that presumably must be presupposed even in "normatively ascribed agreements" if we are to be speaking of agency at all) and the much more demanding ideal of personal autonomy if we are talking about communicatively achieved understanding across a broad range of an individual's practical identity and in more than highly episodic and circumscribed manner.

How does the normative competence account fare with respect to the worry about deeply entrenched preferences and tightly scripted social norms mentioned above? Isn't it possible that a person might be "in the grip of a norm," even in exercising her normative competence for answerability, such that a preference she has might still be "adaptive" (where that means, not properly attributable to her, or not truly her own)? I confess that I find such a scenario difficult to imagine. It would mean, for example, that the deferential wife would not be able to regard her preferences as ones she could have acquired through an exercise of her normative competence—where this means she could not see those preferences as ones she would be able to give good reasons for in an exchange with her relevant peers or interlocutors. But others may have different intuitions at this point. Of course, much will depend once again on how thinly or thickly we understand the competence for answerability or the ability to exchange reasons—and this, I have suggested, can and should vary with context. To possess the normative competence for answerability does not mean being able to give a (good or reasonable) answer to just anyone who happens to ask for one (Westlund 2009). Habermas's view also allows for the fact that ascriptions of responsibility should be considered in connection with a wider assessment of social policy and goals—greater expectations for accountability must be matched with resources for its realistic exercise (Anderson 2008). These observations underscore, once again, that actual judgments about a person's failure with respect to the exercise of a normative competence—and so about whether his preference is adaptive—are judgments that must be made with extreme caution. At the same time, it suggests that a recognitional account of autonomy can perform a valuable role in the type of social criticism that is a distinctive feature of the Frankfurt School tradition.

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### Further Reading

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- Baynes, K. (2016) *Habermas*. New York: Routledge. (Develops the reading of Habermas as "Kantian pragmatist" presented in this chapter.)
- Christman, J. and J. Anderson (eds.). (2005) *Autonomy and the Challenges of Liberalism*. New York: Cambridge University Press. (Valuable collection on autonomy, several with reference to Frankfurt School.)
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- Mackenzie, C. and N. Stoljar (eds.). (2000) *Relational Autonomy*. New York: Oxford University Press. (Valuable collection on relational autonomy and feminist theory.)
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# THE HABERMAS–RAWLS DEBATE

*James Gordon Finlayson*

## Some Background

It is not often in the history of philosophy that two great contemporary living philosophers engage one another in dispute. Sidney Morgenbesser, Special Projects editor of the *Journal of Philosophy*, would have known that. When he found out about the conference on Rawls taking place in Bad Homburg in the Summer of 1992, at which Habermas was to participate, he wrote to Rawls proposing a special issue of the journal. The idea was that Rawls and Habermas would “publish articles on each other’s work as it relates to questions of justice” (Letter to Rawls, 31 July 1991). Rawls generally avoided getting involved in such disputes, finding them unfruitful, but embraced this opportunity and replied that he would talk to Habermas personally about the format. He did. The dispute envisaged by Morgenbesser did not eventuate. Habermas was too busy completing his own book, *Faktizität und Geltung*, and chose to limit his contribution to the conference to the posing of some critical questions to Rawls. The eventual format of the exchange, which finally appeared in the *Journal of Philosophy* in 1995, was far more modest: Habermas offered some critical comments on Rawls’s new book, *Political Liberalism*, and Rawls replied.

That the 1995 exchange took the form of a critical review and a reply is obvious from the titles of their respective contributions: Habermas’s “Reconciliation through the Public Use of Reason: Remarks on John Rawls’s *Political Liberalism*” and Rawls’s “*Political Liberalism*: Reply to Habermas.” Yet it is surprising how many people don’t notice this, and don’t take into account that the eventual exchange was nothing like the dispute that Morgenbesser originally envisaged, the dispute over issues of common concern between Habermas’s and Rawls’s mature political theories. I think this has something to do with the general sense of disappointment expressed by political theorists in the aftermath of the exchange. The “Habermas–Rawls accord” was, claimed Andrew Kuper, “largely a failure.” Onora O’Neill concurred, noting that this was because there are “too many premises heading in different directions.” Jonathan Wolff spoke of “the failure of the two greatest minds to meet” (Wolff 2008). Joseph Heath, a sympathetic scholar of Habermas, talks of a “relatively low level of philosophical engagement” (HRDP 117). Such commentators evaluated Habermas’s review and Rawls’s reply as if it was the full on dispute that was billed, but never transpired. As Habermas himself later notes, explaining the disappointment, “I saw my role at the time rather as that of a reviewer who could expect a response from the author” (HR 283). It is unlikely that the mere prospect of a review of Rawls’s new book by Habermas would have provoked such high expectations and subsequent disappointment.

Is there, however, something to this widespread judgment? Yes and no. On the one hand, each had recently spent time and effort finishing lengthy and long overdue books setting out their mature political theory. They did not have much time to immerse themselves in each other's work. Habermas read an early version of *Political Liberalism*, but was still thinking of it in terms of *Theory*. If anything, as he later acknowledged, the fact that the ideas of *Faktizität und Geltung* were still resonating in his head as he wrote his review may have stopped him gaining a proper understanding of the contours of *Political Liberalism* (HR 284). That said, Habermas is surely to be forgiven for that. For he only had the first version of *Political Liberalism* to go on. And, as Burton Dreben points out, Rawls's ideas in the first version of *Political Liberalism* were not settled. For example he fails to distinguish consistently between a "political conception" of justice and a "comprehensive doctrine" until the second, paperback version, in 1996, after his exchange with Habermas (Dreben 2002, 320). On the other hand, the exchange was productive in that each forced the other to clarify their respective views. Habermas prompted Rawls to give a more detailed account of political justification, while Rawls forced Habermas to develop a more positive view of the role of religious discourse for social integration. To that extent, it seems both hasty and uncharitable to condemn the dispute as a failure.

In addition, according to Thomas McCarthy the eventual format of the exchange gave rise to several misconceptions. "[S]ince that time, the repeatedly discussed differences between Rawls and Habermas have been framed largely as differences within normative theory, more particularly, within what Rawlsians call 'ideal theory.'" It is debatable to what extent *Political Liberalism* really is an exercise in ideal theory. Certainly, in design and conception it is less so than *Theory*. Nonetheless, McCarthy's point is a good one: not noticing that the *Habermas-Rawls* exchange is in truth just a critical review of *Political Liberalism* and a reply, commentators inferred a similarity in object and approach between Habermas's and Rawls's political theories that did not begin to do justice to the differences in substance and approach of *Between Facts and Norms* and *Political Liberalism*. Perhaps they took this to be confirmed by Habermas's observation that his critical comments in the 1995 exchange remained "within the bounds of a familial dispute" (RPUR 110/25) upon which so many critics have remarked. But the same point holds. It is clear when Habermas makes that remark in RPUR, and previously in correspondence with Rawls, that it refers specifically to their "exchange." He is not saying that their respective works of political theory belong to the same family.

### The 1995 Exchange

In Habermas's opening salvo to the 1995 exchange, "Reconciliation through the Public Use of Reason," after observing that he "shares" the intentions of Rawls's project and "regards its essential results as correct" he offers three sets of criticisms:

- I. on the design of the original position
- II. on the idea of the overlapping consensus; and
- III. on the relation between private and public autonomy and Rawls's general approach.

I. Habermas argues that Rawls gets into trouble by constructing the original position as he does, building morally substantive considerations (of equality and impartiality) into the choice situation through the device of the veil of ignorance, which obliges the choosers to make impartial choices, while freeing them up from any moral pressure and allowing them free rein as merely rational self-interested parties, disinterested in others, who want the best outcome for themselves. He maintains this has three deleterious consequences.

- A. The highly stylized parties in the original position, contrary to Rawls's explicit assumption, are unable to grasp the "highest order interests" of the actual citizens whom they model, and on whose behalf they choose (RPUR 111/27). Consequently, it is not the case that the principles chosen in the original position would be the ones that the actual citizens they stand in for would choose.
- B. It misleadingly treats basic rights as primary goods, by imposing the prudential perspective of the economically rational chooser. It is thus unable to account for what he calls the "deontological meaning" of basic rights or principles of justice.
- C. It does not guarantee impartiality of choice.

These claims are not new and have been much discussed in the literature, so I will not analyze them further here. Of interest is why Habermas kicks off what is supposed to be a critical review of *Political Liberalism* with these criticisms of the original position. It is puzzling since the original position, though it was the key argument of *Theory*, plays a much less prominent role in *Political Liberalism*. The idea in the later work is offered as a "conjecture" that the two principles of justice would be the most reasonable, if chosen from a list, by choosers in the original position from behind veil of ignorance. This conjecture is one of several possible "pro-tanto" or "freestanding" justifications of a political conception of justice, provided it can be shorn of its controversial philosophical assumptions and cleansed of all vestiges of Rawls's comprehensive liberalism.

The question arises: Why begin a review of *Political Liberalism* thus? In my view, the best explanation is that this criticism is carried over from Habermas's close critical discussion of the original position, which occurred in the late 1980s in the context of his dispute with the moral psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg over the construal of the moral point of view at Stage 6 of moral consciousness (MCCA; JS 220). We must forgo a detailed discussion of Stage 6 here. Suffice it to say that Kohlberg's notion of "moral musical chairs" which provided his model for Stage 6 was directly inspired by Rawls's device of the original position. Of chief interest to us is that Kohlberg both generalizes and moralizes Rawls's thought experiment, pressing it into the service of his own rather different agenda. As he writes,

Rawls's theory is justificatory; it undertakes to show that certain principles of justice...are the ones that would be chosen...in the original position. In that case, Rawls claims, they are the right or true principles of justice. My psychological claim...is that something like his principles of justice are chosen by those at Stage 6, and they are chosen because they are reversible, or in better equilibrium than justice principles used at previous stages.

(Kohlberg 1981, 201)

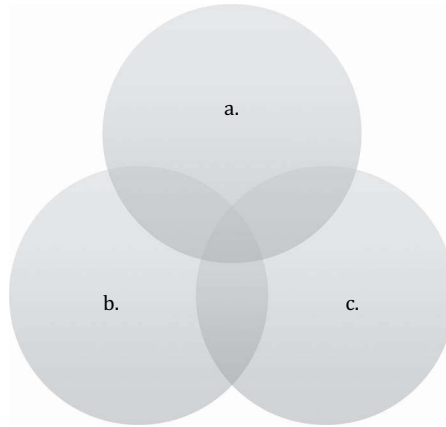
Habermas made several telling criticisms of Kohlberg's Stage 6, which eventually convinced the moral psychologist to change his view. For one thing, Habermas denied that Stages 5 and 6 are "hard" or "natural" stages, and contended that at this level the superiority of one stage over another consists solely in its degree of reflexivity and cognitive complexity and can therefore only be established by philosophical argument. For another, he contended that Stage 6 moral consciousness consists in the disposition to participate in a *dialogical* procedure with others, rather than to apply reason *monologically*, and that in this respect principle (U) offers a more adequate reconstruction of the moral point of view at Stage 6 (MCCA 170–175). It is these arguments that underpin Habermas's claim in RPUR that "the meaning of the moral point of view cannot be operationalized in this way" (RPUR 112), i.e. in Rawls's "monological" way (cf. McMahon 2002).

The upshot is that Habermas by this time has a heavy theoretical investment in these criticisms of Rawls. In addition, he tends to read *Political Liberalism* as a supplement, rather than as a revision to *Theory*. This is the best explanation for why he begins as he does. Nevertheless, by beginning with objections that had been formulated in the context of Discourse Ethics and aimed at the original position, Habermas derailed much of the subsequent literature, which gives undue prominence to the comparison between principle (U) and the original position, and to Habermas's argument about the superiority of the former (see, for example, McMahon 2000, 2002). That comparison involves some philosophically interesting issues, for the question of how best to conceive of the moral point of view for the choice of impartial principles of justice is an important one in moral theory and in moral psychology. However, that question has little to do with Rawls's *Political Liberalism* and throws little light on either the 1995 exchange or the broader dispute between them. In the introduction to *Political Liberalism*, Rawls criticizes his own approach in *Theory* and implicitly distances the new position from it: "In *Theory* a moral doctrine of justice general in scope is not distinguished from a strictly political conception of justice" (PL xvii). Rawls's political conception of justice in *Political Liberalism* is thus not even "a conception of justice general in scope." And it is certainly not a general principle of moral rightness, a procedure for establishing the validity of universal moral norms, which is broadly how it is construed by Kohlberg and how Habermas thinks of principle (U). No doubt, if the debate between Habermas and Rawls had been about how to "operationalize the moral point of view" in a general moral theory, a discussion of the relative merits of principle (U) and the original position as reinterpreted by Kohlberg would be central to it. But that is not what the 1995 exchange is about. Even if one considers the broader dispute between Habermas's *Between Facts and Norms* and *Political Liberalism*, it is difficult to maintain that the salient points of comparison are principle (U) and the original position, since the former plays an ancillary role in *Between Facts and Norms*, although Habermas, as we will see below, is somewhat equivocal on that point. Nonetheless, the principle of democracy and the system of rights are the keystones to the theory of *Between Facts and Norms*.

II. Habermas's second group of criticisms concerns the idea of the overlapping consensus. That said, at this point Habermas does not have a very clear grasp of that idea, and consequently tends to misinterpret it. Habermas objects that it is "unclear how the validity-claim of the theory is to be understood" (RPUR 119). And he suggests that *either* the idea of the overlapping consensus plays a "cognitive" role, like the notion of consensus and the associated idea of validity do in his own Discourse Ethics; *or* it plays a merely instrumental role in securing social stability, neither of which are strictly true. He then wants to press another dilemma. If the former is the case then this violates the method of avoidance; if the latter is the case Rawls fails to account for the epistemic and cognitive claims (or meaning) of democratic discourse.

There are actually several misconceptions here, which it is worth bringing to attention. To begin with Habermas claims that, as Rainer Forst puts it, Rawls "relegates the validity of the theory to the contingent fact of its being consonant with various comprehensive doctrines" (HRDP 157). I'm assuming that Forst here is not only reporting what Habermas's view is, but also endorsing this view, for Habermas himself claims that Forst helped him to come to grips with Rawls's theory: "I relied on his advice on first reading the unpublished manuscript of PL" (HRDP 295). Nevertheless, what the overlapping consensus of reasonable doctrines lacks, according to Forst and Habermas, and what it needs if it is to account adequately for the cognitive or epistemic meaning of democratic discourse, is "a common perspective on justice among citizens and a genuine moral consensus" (HRDP 157). In other words, it seems

that Forst and Habermas are thinking of the contents of the overlapping consensus of reasonable doctrines as something like the intersection set of a Venn diagram.



So the intersection set of reasonable Comprehensive Doctrines a. b. & c. might contain within it the political values  $\langle v, w, x, y \text{ \& } z \rangle$ . Habermas suggests that they are all equally valuable, just because their value is due to their all occurring within the overlap of all the reasonable comprehensive doctrines, and because, consequently, all citizens will be minded to accept a political conception which is justified by some or all of them. To my mind, that is not how Rawls thinks of the overlapping consensus. For one thing, not every value in the intersection set will be a political one. There may be values or ideas that are shared by all citizens but that are not germane to the justification of a liberal constitutional democratic order (PL 139). So let's assume that only  $\langle x, y \text{ \& } z \rangle$  meet this second criterion of germaneness. For another, Rawls denies that the value of  $\langle x \text{ and } y \text{ and } z \rangle$  *only* consists in their being shared by all reasonable doctrines (their falling within the overlap), and hence accepted by all reasonable citizens. By contrast, he contends that they are shared by all reasonable doctrines *because* they are “very great values and not easily overridden” (PL 169, 218). That is, they have intrinsic and not just instrumental value: indeed, they only have instrumental value because of their intrinsic value.

At the second stage of justification, Rawls claims, one asks whether Justice as Fairness is “sufficiently stable” (PL 141, 144). This means asking whether people have a “normally sufficient sense of justice” such that they comply with just institutions and laws, and also whether the political conception can be the “focus” of an overlapping consensus. On a common interpretation (to which I think both Habermas and Forst subscribe), consensus only comes into play the second stage, as a final test of the validity of the theory, after the freestanding justification has been worked up. The overlapping consensus, Habermas maintains, would in that case be merely an “index of the utility of the theory,” namely its “functional contribution... to the peaceful institutionalization of social cooperation” (RPUR 121–122) and it is no indication of what he calls the “validity” or the “epistemic meaning” of the political conception.

Now, as Quong points out, consensus is already in play at the first stage (Quong 2010, 3). After all, the political values and ideas, on which the freestanding justification of the political conception rests, are – as falling in the overlap of all reasonable doctrines – already held in common by all reasonable citizens. Qua freestanding, the justification avoids recourse to any comprehensive values that are not held in common and is thus indemnified from being reasonably rejected by any citizen on comprehensive grounds. The effect of the consensus operative at the first stage is that the freestanding justification is indemnified against reasonable rejection.



True the justification is pro-tanto, but that does not mean it cannot account for the epistemic meaning, or cognitive content of the political conception of justice; it means that it rests on a selection or subset of the full set of reasons on which the political conception can be supported. So, contra Habermas, consensus is operative at the first stage, and is apt to account for the epistemic meaning of the political conception.

Now let's switch attention to the implied contrast, for Habermas contrasts what he takes to be the role of the overlapping consensus in Rawls to the role of consensus in his discourse theory. Habermas contends that the amenability to consensus of the political conception (or in his case – of a candidate norm) is internally related to its validity and thus a test of its rightness. Moreover, he takes rightness of norms to be analogous to the truth of propositions. That is because the notion of validity in discourse theory implies that if *p* is true, then it is amenable to rationally motivated consensus, and likewise if a norm is *right*, it is amenable to rationally motivated consensus, and that the validity claim to truth and rightness are analogous in this respect (Finlayson 2005). Note, however, that Habermas is implicitly drawing a comparison between *Political Liberalism* and Discourse Ethics, not *Between Facts and Norms*. The analog of truth, on his view, is the rightness (or justice) of moral norms. Thus, it turns out that it is the moral principle (U) and the norms it validates, that accounts for the “epistemic meaning” or cognitive meaning, which he claims that Rawls’s “freestanding” political conception of justice lacks.

It is true that Rawls does not make clear that consensus is operative at both stages of justification. And there seems to be an important ambiguity in Rawls’s use of the idea of consensus: an ambiguity between the notion of an overlap of reasonable doctrines, and a stock of political values held in common, on the one hand, and the agreement among reasonable citizens on a political conception of justice on the other. These are interrelated but ultimately different ideas.

Habermas’s third misconception is that an overlapping consensus for Rawls is test of the “neutrality” of the political conception, because what it means to call a justification “political not metaphysical” is that it is neutral with respect to conflicting worldviews. This does not capture the point acutely enough. Rawls denies that a political conception of justice is neutral in its effect. This cannot be because, as Rawls says, the political conception has the capacity “to shape those doctrines towards itself” (RH 145/58). It is only neutral in its aim, which is not to privilege any reasonable comprehensive doctrine, and in its grounds, since it may not appeal to any particular one, or group, of them.

III. In the final section of RPUR, Habermas levies three further criticisms. The first is that in spite of his claim of having balanced the liberties of the ancients and those of the moderns, in fact Rawls’s theory “generates a priority of liberal rights” and “demotes the democratic process to an inferior status”. As a consequence once the veil of ignorance is lifted, real citizens find themselves subject to “institutions and norms” that have been “anticipated in theory and have been institutionalized beyond their control.” Unlike in discourse theory, he argues, the citizens cannot understand the process of constitutionalization and the realization of basic rights as an “open,” “incomplete,” and “ongoing” process in the civic life of their society. (RUPR 128/42)

The second criticism is that Rawls conceives “political” as a technical term, with three different meanings. It describes a conception that is (a) neutral with respect to worldviews, (b) scope-restricted in its application to the basic structure of society, and (c) based on a small fund of values held in common. By contrast, discourse theory conceives of the political as those social domains that are regulated “by the legitimate means of positive and coercive law” (RUPR 130/43). This conception is both broader and more in tune with the actuality of political life in modern societies.

Finally, Habermas claims that his theory is modest in different ways (and by implication in a superior manner) to that of Rawls. His theory is modest in the sense that it can “leave more questions open because it entrusts more to the process of rational opinion and will formation” (RUPR 131/44), whereas Rawls’s theory is modest in the sense that it deploys a “strategy of avoidance” which Habermas thinks is futile, and also a failure. Furthermore, he claims that where Rawls’s theory is freighted by “substantive connotations” his own is developed in a “strictly procedural” manner (RUPR 116/32).

Rawls’s “Reply to Habermas” is over twice the length of Habermas’s initial review. Much of it takes the form of a patient elaboration and commentary on Habermas’s interpretation and criticisms of *Political Liberalism*, and a reiteration of his position on those points to which Habermas objects. Rawls gives very little quarter. He denies for example that his strategy of avoidance is unnecessary and that it fails (RH 150/63). He denies that his idea of stability (for the right reasons) is a merely functional or instrumental consideration that is not also part of public justification (RH 146/59). He denies that *Political Liberalism* leaves too much work to the political theorist and not enough work to citizens themselves (RH 153/65, 174/81). He denies that in *Political Liberalism* private and political autonomy are in unresolved competition, in contrast to discourse theory, which shows them to be co-original and internally related (RH 161–163/73–75). And he responds to the charge that his account is not “strictly procedural” by accepting that it is not and denying that it should be purely procedural, and stating that it combines substantive and procedural elements, just as does Habermas’s theory, albeit in a different way (RH 170/82).

However, there is one point on which Rawls offers not just a defense, but a significant development of his view, which is in his account of public justification. Here he outlines three different levels of justification and two different kinds of consensus, as supporting the idea of stability for the right reasons and legitimacy.

- i. Pro-tanto justification is the justification for the political conception of justice offered on the basis of political values alone (RH 142/56).
- ii. Full justification is carried out by individual citizens when they embed the political conception like a “module” in their respective comprehensive doctrines, such that their nonpolitical values and ideals support the conception worked up from the political values common to all reasonable doctrines (RH 143/56).
- iii. Finally there is “public justification” whereby each citizen checks that every other reasonable citizen has successfully embedded the political conception of justice in their respective comprehensive doctrine. Rawls states that “the contents of these doctrines have no normative role in public justification” (RH 144/57). In other words, whether each individual can support the political conception from the perspective of their own comprehensive doctrine is a kind of social fact that each citizen is to ascertain for themselves. (So the third level of “public justification” does not require the kind of exchange of perspective, or ideal role taking, that, according to Habermas, moral discourse requires of its participants.)

Rawls also distinguishes two kinds of consensus. The first is a contingent convergence of values and interests, on which basis a skillful politician can forge a coalition to support a particular policy (RH 145/58). The second – which he calls a “reasonable overlapping consensus” – is essentially the consensus that consists in and results from the three-stage process of justification set out above, whereby, if successful, a political conception can be “supported...by reasonable citizens” even on the basis of their several comprehensive doctrines. (As I argued above, I believe there are two distinct ideas of consensus in play here: the overlap of reasonable doctrines on a shared fund of ideas and values, and the consensus of reasonable citizens on a political conception of justice.)

In addition to this elaboration of his conception of public justification, Rawls levels a significant criticism at Habermas's discourse theory. "Of the two main differences between Habermas's position and mine, the first is that his is comprehensive and mine is an account of the political and it is limited to that" (RH 132/47). And the first, Rawls argues, frames and stages the second difference, which is that between their respective devices of representation.

Rawls is right I believe to claim that the second difference, that between their respective devices of representation, is ancillary. After all, the dispute, insofar as there is one, is between their respective political theories, their conceptions of public justification, and their resultant ideas about democratic legitimacy and its relation to justice. As argued above, principle (U) does not stand at the center of *Between Facts and Norms*, and the argument from the original position is not central to *Political Liberalism*.

Rawls's main objection is that Habermas's theory is comprehensive and takes the form of a "logic in the broad Hegelian sense" (RH 139/53). The trouble with this objection is that Rawls's conception of a comprehensive doctrine is polysemous, and includes religious, moral, and philosophical doctrines. Accordingly, there are at least three different ways in which Rawls's chief objection can be construed. The objection can be that Habermas's theory presupposes: (a) a worldview, religious or secular; (b) an actually existing morality or conception of the good; and (c) controversial philosophical theories of one kind or another, including moral theories such as utilitarianism or Kantianism. All of these three kinds of comprehensive doctrine have one feature in common, which is that they are all subject to reasonable disagreement, because there are mutually excluding alternatives that reasonable people might endorse. Perhaps that is why Rawls conflates them. He assumes that whatever specific sense of comprehensive doctrine is in play, the overall objection will be similar. Nevertheless, to assess the correctness of the objection, we will need to specify the sense in which the term is deployed.

The objection Rawls actually goes on to develop shows that what he has in mind is that discourse theory takes too many theoretical hostages to fortune – i.e. it is "comprehensive" in sense (c) – while Rawls's theory "leaves philosophy as it is" (RH 49–51; cf. 48). That said, he could as well have developed the objection in either of the other two senses: that Habermas's conception of legitimacy rests on substantive moral grounds or that it rests on a controversial secular worldview.

## Evaluation of the Dispute

### *Habermas's Criticisms*

I. As regards Habermas's first criticism, namely that Habermas's device of representation is superior because dialogical, I believe it is misplaced as a criticism of *Political Liberalism* and is based on the comparison of Lawrence Kohlberg's use of the original position, as a way of construing the moral point of view at Stage 6 of moral consciousness. In the debate about Stage 6 that comparison made sense, but it is not germane either to *Political Liberalism* and Habermas's critique of it in the 1995 Exchange, or to the broader dispute between Habermas's discourse theory of law and Rawls's late political theory. Whether there is a meaningful difference between the two devices construed as alternative ways of choosing impartial principles in abstraction from differences in context, whether indeed the dialogical-monological distinction is even tenable, is questionable. For example, McMahon has argued in one article that the dialogical-monological distinction as Habermas conceives it is untenable, and in another that each theorist can

make use of the other's device of representation (McMahon 2000, 2002). If one only considers their respective *political* theories, it is not clear whether Habermas's discourse theory allows a greater role for public discussion in the generation of public reasons, nor, if it does, what advantage this is supposed to yield. Anyway the salient points of comparison with Rawls's theory is not principle (U), but the principle of democracy and the resultant differences in their respective conceptions of legitimacy. And as we will see below, it is very unclear what the precise relation is between the principle of democracy as the reconstructed legitimacy-conferring procedure of democratic discourse, and the moral principle (U) as the reconstructed rightness-conferring procedure of moral discourse.

II. This problem bleeds into the second set of objections Habermas makes, and muddies the waters there also. Recall that he tries to pin Rawls on either side of a dilemma. Either Rawls offers a merely instrumental justification for legitimacy in which case he fails to account for the "cognitive meaning" of democratically legitimate political norms or he accounts for their cognitive meaning but violates his own strategy of avoidance. Rawls counters that neither horn of the apparent dilemma is correct; since the justification of the political conception of justice is not merely instrumental, it has an essential moral dimension. And it is not external either, since the morality in question is a political morality and a core domain of the political.

The problem here lies not just with Habermas's grasp of the Rawlsian position, but with his own position which forms the salient point of contrast. According to Habermas, moral agreement according to (U) must satisfy what I call "the validity requirement," namely that every participant in a discourse agrees on a norm *for the same reasons*: "anything valid should also be capable of a public justification. Valid statements deserve the acceptance of everyone for the same reasons" (IO 86; Baynes, 2016; Finlayson, 2017). That is a very strong condition. It is not clear whether any moral norm can meet it in an actual discourse. Even as the counterfactual aim of an idealized discourse, it is very demanding. Habermas realizes this and acknowledges that under modern conditions the moral domain shrinks to a very small number of highly general norms (JA 91). Anyway, the point is that on his account the validity requirement of moral discourse forms the basis of the analogy between rightness and truth which Habermas argues is the basis of the epistemic meaning (or cognitive content) or moral discourse. Now whether democratic discourse must meet the same stringent condition, whether the validity requirement is also a necessary condition of any legitimate law is, on Habermas's account, very unclear. The principle of democracy states that "only those statutes may claim legitimacy that can meet with the assent of all citizens in a discursive process of legislation that in turn has been legally constituted" (BFN 110). It contains several conditions but importantly does not state that an agreement on a law must meet the validity requirement.

In addition to these conditions, Habermas adds two more. In *Between Facts and Norms* he writes that legitimate laws "must also harmonize with... ethical principles" (BFN 99). On his view, ethical principles are not universally shared among citizens – Habermas is a pluralist about ethics and values – so what this condition means, it seems, is that the reasons that each citizen has to accept the laws do not contradict their various ethical value conceptions. There must be some congruence with the ethical values of the citizenry and the laws of the state. Habermas does not state how this condition is to be met in practice. (This looks *prima facie* rather like Rawls's "full justification" whereby each citizen, for themselves, embeds the political conception of justice in their respective reasonable comprehensive doctrine.) The final condition, and the most important one for our purposes, is that legitimate laws must "harmonize with the universal principles of justice and solidarity" and that "a legal order can be legitimate only if it does not contradict basic moral principles" (BFN 99, 155).

I call this the *moral permissibility constraint* (MPC). Unfortunately in Habermas's theory the important detail is lacking. MPC could mean that a law, if it is to be legitimate, may not be inconsistent with any extant valid moral norm. Some of Habermas's statements lean in this direction (e.g. BFN 99). But it could also mean something much stronger, namely that there must be a positive relation of fit between all extant valid moral norms and any legitimate law. Kenneth Baynes, for example, takes Habermas to have the stronger position. "Citizens must simultaneously both presuppose and strive to articulate a basic political consensus...focused on the idea of a core morality that all citizens can endorse as valid for the same (publicly available) reasons" (Baynes 2016, 179).

If the latter stronger interpretation is correct, it looks like the validity requirement – that citizens reach agreement for the same reasons – may be a requirement of legitimate law too, on Habermas's account. The necessary condition that every law subject to a "discursive process of legitimation" must satisfy is that it is amenable to universal assent *for the same reasons*, i.e. on the valid moral norms with which, Habermas maintains, all legitimate laws must cohere. Let's assume this reading of Habermas is correct. *Prima facie* this is good news for Habermas. It bears out his assumption that his theory accounts for the epistemic or cognitive meaning of democratic discourse. But this victory comes at a high cost, for it implies that rationally motivated consensus in democratic discourse is just as hard to reach as it is in moral discourse. Consequently, the validity of political norms (their "legitimacy") will be as hard to secure as the validity of moral norms (their "rightness" or "justice"). But for that very reason legitimate law cannot lift the burden of social integration from morality, which is what according to Habermas's modernization theory it is supposed to do, once the moral domain shrinks to a narrow core of highly general norms. If, when faced with that unwelcome conclusion, Habermas opts for the weaker reading, while legitimacy becomes easier to come by on his account, he can no longer fairly claim that the principle of democracy and his account of legitimacy account for the 'epistemic meaning' or 'cognitive content' of democratic discourse.

Setting aside this difficulty for a moment and assuming (with Baynes) the stronger interpretation of MPC, what is the difference between Habermas's view and Rawls's? *Prima facie*, they are not so different. Public justification contains a moral core – for Rawls the political values that all citizens hold in common, and for Habermas the valid moral norms, or core morality. Public reasons are, both philosophers contend, moral reasons, which are indeed the same for all citizens. In addition, citizens must find reasons for endorsing the political conception (in Rawls) and legitimate laws (in Habermas) from within their several (and possibly discrepant) reasonable comprehensive doctrines (in Rawls) and worldviews or ethical self-conceptions (in Habermas).

So what is the difference? Well, for Habermas what is to be justified, or agreed to, in public justification, is not "justice as a political conception," but rather all coercive laws or political norms in general. Moreover, for Habermas MPC is a side constraint on legitimacy exerted by general morality, whereas for Rawls the pro-tanto or freestanding justification of the political conception is worked up from values and ideas that comprise a subdomain of general morality, political morality – the politically germane contents of the overlap of reasonable doctrines.

So there are significant differences. But in fact, they do not bear out Habermas's argument that his discourse theory accounts for, and preserves, the epistemic or cognitive meaning of democratic discourse (and the laws, policies norms, etc., that such discourse "validates") while Rawls's theory does not. That claim rests on a very strong reading of MPC, which is at worst thoroughly misleading, and at best subject to difficulties further down the line, as well as on a mistaken reading of public justification in Rawls.

III. There is more substance to Habermas's third set of criticisms, in particular the view that Rawls makes the term 'political' into a technical term, far more restricted in scope than the everyday adjective is. Habermas is not alone in leveling these objections. On the one hand, perfectionist liberals like Joseph Raz have accused Rawls of confusing political philosophy, which aims at making true statements about politics and the political realm, with democratic politics, which aims at producing "stability for the right reasons" in a well-ordered society or something like that. And some defenders of Rawls have bitten that bullet by retorting that, unlike Platonic philosopher kings, in the real world philosophy has no independent contribution to make to political theory, where, just as in politics proper, philosophy must deploy the canons of political justification (Raz 1990, 10; Laden 2010). (I'm with Raz and Habermas on that point. What makes a law legitimate is rather different from what makes political theory justified, and justification in politics is rather different to justification in political theory.) On the other hand, others like David Enoch think that the public justification theorists' preoccupation with the agreement or consensus that is supposed to result from justification, rather than with the substance of the justification, puts too much distance between the first-order matters of actual politics and the second-order contributions of political theorists. This criticism applies to Habermas just as much as it does to Rawls – because on his version the theorist's job is too confined to the rational reconstruction of the practice of democratic argumentation.

Both criticisms apply to Rawls. There is a sense in which *Political Liberalism* is both too remote from actual politics and too political. On the one hand, most of the book is given over to a meta-theoretical discussion of the kinds of reasons or justifications that reasonable citizens must offer one another, and that the state or relevant government officials are to offer their reasonable citizens, for a political conception of justice that is used to gauge and shape the legitimacy of the basic structure of society. The account remains completely internal to the constituency of the reasonable, that is, even if unreasonable citizens benefit from citizenship through the rights and liberties they are granted, their unreasonable views are not taken into account in the justification of the laws and policies that define the political domain, namely the basic structure of society (Quong 2004, 320). To the extent that the unreasonable do not freely agree to be bound by the laws, they have to be "managed" or forced to comply with the laws that the reasonable agree to be bound by, although only so far as constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice are concerned. This means that *Political Liberalism* is too remote from real politics in two further respects. First, reasonable citizens are exempted from having to engage their unreasonable fellow citizens in argument. Second, their commitment to adduce only certain kinds of reasons (namely public ones) with which to articulate their political views, and advocate for legislation, devolves entirely on to a moral duty of civility.

On the other hand, Rawls's theory is too political in that Rawls binds himself, and the justification of *Political Liberalism* to the same process, such that he, in advancing his theory, must act as if he were offering public reasons for legitimate laws or policies. But that demand seems both too much to ask of a political theory, and the wrong kind of demand to place on it.

### ***Rawls's Criticisms***

Turning now to Rawls, what are we to make of his chief criticism that Habermas's theory is comprehensive, while his remains political? In some recent important works, commentators sympathetic to Habermas, such as Hedrick, Heath, and Baynes, have sought to defend Habermas

from this charge (Hedrick 2010; Heath 2010; Baynes 2016). I think there is no straightforward defense of Habermas. Rawls's objection involves a complex of different claims because of the triple ambiguity of the term "comprehensive doctrine," on the one hand, and because of the implied contrast with a theory that is "political" in Rawls's controversial sense, on the other. Before evaluating, we must disentangle them.

The first claim is that Habermas's theory is comprehensive – in sense (c) above – in that it takes many theoretical hostages to fortune which reasonable people can reject. Note though, that Rawls's criticism is contrastive. Habermas's theory is criticized for being comprehensive and for not being "political." So we should appraise the objection with and without the contrast. Ignoring the contrast for the moment, it is clearly better not to embroil a theory in needless theoretical controversies, which Habermas certainly does, by presupposing Discourse Ethics and the pragmatic theory of meaning and so forth. That said, in his reply to Rawls's reply Habermas has a good retort to this criticism, namely that although a theory should strive to be "post-metaphysical" and "neutral" with respect to worldviews, "it does not follow that political theory can itself move entirely within the domain of the political and steer clear of stubborn philosophical controversies" (MW 93/IO 77). Any political theory will make some controversial theoretical assumptions that reasonable people can reject. Take, for example, the very idea that political theory should itself conform to the canons of political justification (rather than philosophical justification). Habermas denies this too. That is, he denies Rawls's contrasting claim that Habermas's theory is not "political" on the grounds that that this is not an appropriate requirement for political theory. Habermas is right on both counts, and so has strong grounds on which to defend himself from both parts of this criticism.

Let's look at Rawls's criticism that Habermas's theory is a "comprehensive doctrine in sense (a) above, i.e. as a religion or worldview. Of course, Habermas denies that his theory is a religion or worldview, or that it presupposes one. As a matter of interest, Charles Larmore has argued that Habermas's conception of post-metaphysical as the appropriate way of doing philosophy under conditions of modernity amounts to a secular worldview (Larmore 1995, 63). But to my way of thinking, in the end this is just another way of saying that, because of its reliance on modernization theory, there are cultural and historical, and meta-theoretical, assumptions to Habermas's theory here that can be reasonably rejected. The argument here is not so much about whether Habermas's theory can prescind from making controversial assumptions, which he is right to deny, but whether the assumptions he in fact makes are justified.

Finally, Rawls could, though in fact does not, develop his objection in the following way: namely that Habermas's discourse theory of law and the notion of legitimacy it puts forward rest on substantive moral grounds. I believe this is correct as a comment on Habermas's conception of democratic legitimacy, even though Habermas takes pains to insist that the principle of democracy is derived from principle (D) and the form of law, and not from principle (U), and to insist that his conception of the political is thus fully autonomous, unlike natural law theory, which derives the authority of law in part from the normativity of an antecedent moral order (BFN 103–105, 104–105; BNR 78; cf. Finlayson 2016). This version of the objection holds because of the role of MPC as a necessary condition of legitimacy. The relevant difference between Rawls and Habermas on this point is that Rawls's political conception of justice has moral grounds, but these consist in the 'political' values which form part of a subdomain of the moral, whereas Habermas insists that the moral norms that flow into the political system are general moral norms. It is the moral as such, not a subdomain thereof, that imposes side constraints on legitimate laws (BFN 109). Whether the MPC is a point against Habermas's theory, or for it, is itself debatable. Many commentators take the view that Habermas's discourse theory of rights and his conception of democratic legitimacy need more justificatory support from substantive moral norms (Larmore 1995; Forst 2011;

Flynn 2003, 2010). But the fact is that Habermas's rejection of natural law theory, his insistence that his own theory of legitimacy is by contrast "morally freestanding" (BNR 80), and his construal of the autonomy of the political, all conflict with the actual role that valid moral norms play in discourse theory as side constraints on political legitimacy. It appears that Habermas himself has yet to decide which way to go on this issue.

## Conclusions

In hindsight, it is clear that the early widespread judgment that the Habermas–Rawls debate was a "failure" was itself precipitate and mistaken. It rested in part on a conflation of the early debate and the 1995 exchange, or on confusion about the eventual format of that exchange, and, in either case, on a failure to see where the salient differences and points of dispute between their respective political theories lay. And while it is true to say that Habermas took a while to appreciate the novelty of Rawls's project of Political Liberalism and that he misunderstood several of its important features, he was among its earliest critics and showed an unerring eye for its weak points.

Habermas was certainly right to criticize Rawls for narrowing the domain of political discourse and placing seemingly arbitrary restrictions on what can count as bona fide political justification, by restricting the constituency of reason-givers to reasonable citizens and choking back the fund of eligible public reasons to the political ideas and values already held in common by reasonable citizens. While this still allowed Rawls an elegant (if over intricate) public reason solution to the problem of finding a basis for legitimacy in the political domain, under persisting conditions of reasonable disagreement, to its critics it begged too many questions in favor of liberal democracy.

Habermas, though he had a broader and more empirically sensitive conception of the political, nonetheless put a lot of historical, empirical, and normative faith in modernization theory, and in associated processes of socialization; for example, in their ability to socialize individuals into moral agents at Kohlberg's Stage 6, who as citizens have achieved a correlative political outlook that includes a commitment to democratic procedures and willingness to abide by their results.

As for the critical potential of Habermas's political theory, he insists that it is still there. He contends that the moral point of view forms an immanent perspective "from which modern societies are criticized by their own social movements" (MW 110). However, such a contention is moot. A detailed account of how this is possible is lacking, and the relation between morality and legitimacy in Habermas's political theory is unclear. Habermas still holds, contra Rawls, that substantive criticism of society on the basis of a conception of the good or the right is not appropriate for social theory. Principle (U) is supposed to be merely a reconstruction of a procedure of moral discourse, and it remains very unclear how a principle that serves "the descriptive purposes of rational reconstruction" of moral consciousness can simultaneously provide the basis of social criticism of a political society, albeit in the hands of citizens and social movements rather than the theorist. The suspicion remains, then, that Habermas's political theory, much like Rawls's, is more of a rich explanatory theory, than a normative and critical one. Or more charitably put, even if Habermas's political theory is still a critical one, Rawls's gives a much clearer account of its own normative foundations.

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### Further Reading

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- McMahon, C. (2002). "Why There Is No Issue between Habermas and Rawls." *Journal of Philosophy* XCIX(3): 111–129. (A very influential article, making a persuasive case for a widespread thesis.)



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Part V

# PROSPECTS



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# IDEALISM, REALISM, AND CRITICAL THEORY

*Fred Rush*

*Die Menschen kennen sich einander nicht;  
Nur die Galeerensklaven kennen sich,  
Die eng an eine Bank geschmiedet keuchen;  
[...]  
Doch wir verkennen nur die andern höflich,  
Damit sie wieder uns verkennen sollen.*

—Goethe, *Torquato Tasso* V. v

## Between Idealism and Materialism

In its early years, Critical Theory was especially concerned to assess its credentials relative to rival philosophical, economical, and sociological approaches. Adorno, Benjamin, and Horkheimer had been trained in philosophy at a time dominated by mannerist neo-Kantianism. Marcuse had studied with Heidegger, who challenged this “school philosophy,” but he issued that challenge from within and, in any event, one might argue that the Magus of Meßkirch could conjure so convincingly only against the background of that run-of-the-mill. Neo-Kantianism was hardly alone in its commitment to idealism of one sort or the other. The other contending philosophical forces, e.g. phenomenology, logical empiricism, and Marxism, also had idealist strands of which they were intensely self-aware. Moreover, such self-awareness was historical and concerned to settle accounts when it came to the relative precedence of the two main representatives of systematic idealism, i.e. Kant and Hegel. If one were more taken with questions of mathematics and physics, Kant seemed unavoidable. If one held that philosophy had graduated from its self-assigned role of guarantor of the natural sciences to be more properly concerned with ethical, social, and political questions, Hegel was of signal importance. This is not to say that Kantian ethics has not been a primary point of orientation for philosophers since that time. But it is important not to miss the fact that the most philosophically penetrating and historically refined accounts of Hegelian ethics—here I have in mind those of Robert Pippin and Allen Wood—find resources in Kant, perhaps conceptually underdeveloped or difficult to discern because of his idiom, that are more replete in Hegel.

Early critical theorists were just as intent, however, to distinguish themselves from “vulgar materialism.” Pressure to do this came from the empirical side of the critical enterprise. The important figures spearheading the social scientific dimension of the Institute of Social Research, e.g. Otto Kirchheimer, Franz Neumann, and Friedrich Pollock, were

not involved in providing a justifying apparatus for their research, firmly grounded though it was in Marxist ideology critique. That task fell primarily to Horkheimer, who attempted to articulate, among other things, a proper role for materialism in Critical Theory. His inaugural lecture at the Institute set the mark: Critical Theory is to be a new form of social thought that combines philosophy, history, sociology, anthropology, economics, jurisprudence, and political science. One might say that Horkheimer's injunction was in its way supremely Hegelian—i.e. a call to revivify an understanding of these disciplines as deeply and inherently conjoint. And, indeed, the form of materialism pertinent to early Critical Theory is, as is well known, indebted to neo-Hegelian understandings of what is essential in Marx. The problematic materialism treated in Horkheimer's and Marcuse's seminal early essays takes explanation to be the conceptually basic mode of understanding and causation to be the fundamental form of relation among social phenomena. But even vulgar forms of Marxism or materialism have their upside. Namely, they inhibit the tendency of idealism to "transfigure" (*verklären*) suffering, i.e. to propound otherworldly measures of ultimate value that substitute for and suppress social self-understanding, freedom, and this-worldly change. On the downside, however, unalloyed materialism reduces overall value to instrumental value and, thus, undermines criticism. "Instrumental reason," as Horkheimer calls it, treats its objects as inert. That is, in order to engage with such objects in terms of one's projects or ends, one need not take into account any like needs or desires on the part of the object. Such objects, that is, do not of themselves impose limitations outside those of physical possibility on how they are conceived and used. No one treats social structures quite so explicitly in this fashion—i.e. as if they were completely divorced from having been made by humans—but to see such structures as a matter of degree in this way is to divest them of intrinsic agency to that degree. This, in turn, undermines criticism because taking social structures to be fixed enough to analyze exhaustively in a causal manner is to take them as data only, as instrumentally defined theoretical entities for which criticism is irrelevant. Of course, this is not only an issue for the social scientist; any social agent can form beliefs about the nature of their society, or perhaps of any society, that cast mass social structures or society itself as being fixed in this manner. One often adverts here to large-scale economic structures, i.e. that their ambit and pervasiveness *means* that they are not candidates for change that might result from criticism. This is nonsense of course. Economies are not galaxies; they are artifacts through and through. What can be done can be undone.

Idealism and materialism are, then, locked in an uncertain embrace in early Critical Theory. Many of the resources upon which early Critical Theory was able to draw in order to check materialism in its instrumental forms were leavings from German idealism—an idiosyncratic brew of Kant and Hegel. But idealism's tendency toward abstraction could also be a form of instrumental rationality, as evidenced by Marburg neo-Kantianism's affection for the thought that philosophy's main function was still to secure modern science. The infiltration of conceptions of strict laws into Kant's ethics is also not to be missed in this regard. Perhaps even more problematic, however, is the operation of the kind of ideals that idealism posits as criterial for answering a wide range of social and political questions. These are ideals *precisely* not sensitive to real human possibilities as they are encountered in runs of historical experience. What is ideal about such ideals is that they hover above experience in "pure" realms of reason or insight. Their purported power comes from being isolated from specific instances of application.

### Political Abstraction, Abstracted Politics

There is at present a lively debate concerning the foundations of political theory between those who take politics to be a part of the domain of morality and those who take politics

to be a discipline that should be autonomous from morality. To proponents of the first position, moral philosophy fixes the terms of what is right and good as such, providing an overall framework for considering questions concerning regard toward others and self; political philosophy concerns itself with those moral principles that pertain to social existence. Such principles—say, those of justice—are in their fundamental specifications ethical, and such specifications constrain their political application. Application is essentially a two-step procedure. First, the moral principle receives a political interpretation that establishes an ideal for political practice. For the concept of justice, for example, the interpretation yields a primary structure of how individuals and groups must stand to one another in relations of permission, right, and duty. Only once this ideal is in place does political theory turn to the task of surveying the actual political landscape, taking into account existing desires, hopes, beliefs, needs, and practices. There typically is reciprocal responsiveness between ideal and object, between the moral rule instantiated politically and the actual practices and beliefs it confronts. On the one hand, the reason for introducing the morally ideal into the political domain is so that it can act as a criterion for correctness that governs political actions; accordingly, actions are to conform to the dictates of the rule. On the other hand, one must rank-order such actions in terms of their social impacts in order to discern which will be subject to *law*, that is, which will be candidates for coercive enforcement and which not. Even in the most rigorist cases of the political *cum* moral, ideals must bend in order not to break. The key point here is that it is in the nature of political ideals, in this way of thinking, that they tend to downplay the exigencies of practice. Put another way, a good part of the force of conceiving of political ideals as having their genesis in moral theory is to reign in exigency as much as is consistent with a balance of ideal and practice. It is worth mentioning that aversion to over-idealization, i.e. to idealism, in political theory has a home within liberal democratic theory, a form of morals-based politics if ever there was one. What counts as “over-idealizing,” as well as what counts as “moral” is a matter of both degree and dispute of course.

The second position on the relation of moral theory to political philosophy sees them as conceptually separate enterprises. The proper and basic orientation of political theory is toward those aspects of ongoing political life that are of first significance. There may be many such, but particularly evident is *contestation*, i.e. the various disagreements people have. Such disagreements are not limited to specific political courses of action; they also involve ideas of the basis for right and good. This second approach to the relation of morality to politics credits disagreement about matters such as, e.g., the nature of rights or whether there should be rights at all. Fundamental disagreement of this sort is not due to a failure to conform to the moral terms purportedly governing the debate—conflict *itself* is basic. Once one allows this, the problem of social life presents itself in a new way. The challenge is not getting the right moral-political principles in place and executing social arrangements according to an antecedent form; rather, the problem is how to have a social structure of lasting effect given that moral terms cannot provide at the fundamental level the shared consensus that the structure is viable and correct. What counts as structural stability, i.e. what kind of structures are involved and how much and what sort of stability is necessary are matters of dispute. In any event, for theories of this second type social structure has its source in the exercise of existing authority backed by threat of force. The question of permissible social structure is the question of permissible rule by force, where “permissible” is a strictly political concept.

Proponents of this second view on the relation of politics to ethics have a variety of ways to refer to the first view. Bernard Williams terms such approaches “moralism” or “applied ethics” (Williams 2005: 77; cf. Williams 2003: 112–14); Raymond Geuss labels them “ethics-first” views (Geuss 2008: 9). Williams and Geuss both call the competitor view that they



support “realism” (Williams 2005: 92; Geuss 2008: 9–11). They are hardly alone; there is an argumentatively lively and conceptually diverse literature in political realism (see Unger 1975; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Hampshire 1989, 2001; Honig 1993; Sluga 2014). Nothing in political realism requires one not to expect, hope, or aim at a coincidence of political and moral principles, nor does realism forbid moral discussions in the political sphere. Realism is, rather, the view that political principles may *not be justified in terms of* moral principles. One might think the term “realism” is somewhat inapt on account of its most prevalent use in political theory: in the modern theory of international relations, where realism enjoins one to treat states as the only politically relevant actors and power and pursuit of state interest as the sole substantial aims of such actors (see Morgenthau 1948). But “realism” in the sense Williams, Geuss, and others favor does not pledge allegiance to *Realpolitik* nor does it entail that might means right. Where the power to enforce laws through coercion is not distributed over the population but is reserved (“monopolized”) by and for a social institution, Weber, who would be counted with Hobbes as one of the main precursor theorists in the realist tradition, holds that we may speak of a political state (Weber 1994; Weber 1976: 26–30). This monopolization of force in the state must stand the test of its legitimacy—legitimacy in fact, not merely as perceived. But, again, what makes a political structure legitimate is a matter internal to the political sphere, not a moral question.

The philosophical tradition in the West that views moral and political principles as continuous is a good deal older than its rival. It is unsurprising that the view is most stable both conceptually and as a practical matter in historical periods in which there is not a clean division between the respective domains at all: in accounts like Aristotle’s where realization of ethical well-being requires political life or in periods when there is a stable religious-political structure that dictates the relevant relation, e.g. the Roman Catholic Church in medieval Europe. With the onset of modern forms of ethical and political thought that increasingly emphasize neutral rationality as a tribunal for ethical and political thought and action, the question of the possible autonomy of ethics and politics from one another comes to be squarely posed. Even if one is a proponent of the view that political rationality is grounded in its ethical counterpart, that is something that needs to be shown over and against claims to the contrary. The main moral theories dominant in the modern period upon which politics could draw also reflect in their structures potential gaps between morality and politics: rule-consequentialism and deontology. Both deploy the concept of a rule the force and substance of which is antecedent to what the rule orders; that is, they exhibit a confluence of moralism and abstraction. Of course, formally speaking *any* rule must be antecedent to its applications, but that is not the point. Realists certainly deploy positive conceptions of political rules. The point is that moral rules are not distilled from the “best practices” of experience; rather, they confer from above upon such practices their moral authority. In deontological theories, this is easy to see. Take Kant’s account of the intrinsic good of the moral will as an example. It is no doubt a caricature of Kant’s ethics to portray moral agents as always engaging in universalization or Kingdom of Ends tests. Kant holds that moral agency “on the ground” is for the most part automatic, even in cases that might be thought challenging in abstraction. Notwithstanding this, what makes an action moral is that it stands under a “pure,” impersonal, yet self-authorized moral law. The rule-consequentialist is similarly situated. What makes an act moral is that it accords with an ideal increase in overall ethical well-being. Whether that in fact has taken place can only be established empirically, but the ideal that provides the end for action is anything but non-moral.

When turning to contemporary political theories that realists typically class as moralizing, it is very important to differentiate what is and what is not at issue. It was noted previously that one might be anti-idealist and be a political moralist. Likewise, one might be a political realist and an idealist, i.e. one for whom moral authority did not determine political

rationality and, yet, who finds abstract principles politically binding come what may. But while political realism is not synonymous with anti-idealism, the moral theories most likely to transgress politically do feature strong idealization. Indeed, that they do so makes their transgression all the simpler. Realists might reject those idealizations but argue for others of course. That said, most contemporary political realists are contextualists and, therefore, will always be suspicious of idealism. This is perhaps due to the intellectual proximity of political realism to the so-called “Cambridge School” of intellectual history (see Skinner 1969; Skinner et al. 2002.) It cannot be merely that it is wrong to think of politics as “applied moral philosophy” (Williams 2005: 77), for several thinkers who would count as moralizers also make the denial. Rawls, for one, attempts to be clear as possible that he holds that politics cannot admit into its base principles or allow political discourse to depend on what he terms “comprehensive” moral or religious doctrines (Rawls 2001: 5, 14). The sense in which Rawls’ theory of justice qualifies as applied ethics cannot consist in his lodging of elements of the second *Critique* into what he argues is the basic framework of political justice, for Rawls does no such thing. The theory is an example of an idealizing ethics-first approach because Rawls’ view that the principles of justice are political *ab initio* rests on a series of methodological abstractions based in moral concerns that have their intended force prior to political reality. One may capture the suspect idealization in a catchphrase: justice trumps all always. The idealization, while not depending on importing comprehensive moral doctrines into politics, is nonetheless moral, as Rawls intends. Realists’ criticisms snap into place just here. Realists will allow that justice may outweigh other political values in some cases, but in some cases it will not. Rawls’ insistence on the unalterable primacy of justice reveals that the political basis he cites for the provision of the value, while it may not depend on comprehensive moral doctrines, does depend on a provision of first principles, principles that apply as trumps and, thereby, structure antecedently how other political considerations must be subaltern relative to them. Political forms of life unsecured by such a priori constraints are mere *modi vivendi*. Realists pounce on the “mere” in the formulation, revealing as it does Rawls’ disdain for forms of thought and action that would see justice as not having intrinsic absolute value for purposes of achieving political coordination and stability, but rather as one more thing (important to be sure) to place on the scales. Rawls presents his theory of justice in essence as a set of purported transcendental constraints on liberal democracy. This is the heart of what one might as well call his idealism, expressed methodologically. But this is not mere methodology. Transcendental arguments may take a variety of subtly different sorts, but a coarse approximation of general form suffices here. A transcendental argument grounds a state of affairs by regressing to the purported necessary conditions on the very possibility of that state of affairs. The state of affairs in question is not put in question by the argument; its actuality and rightness is assumed as a premise. The methodology’s whole purpose is to identify a principle that is immune to revision by experience. This violates *per se* the contextual realist injunction to look to matters at hand and be guided by the multivalent demands of the situation.

Theories like Rawls’ token disquiet on the part of some political theorists that if hard and fast laws are not provided from outside the political sphere (or, in the case of Rawls, inside it, where “inside” is reformulated in terms of morals), mere exigency will win the day. Again, the word “mere” is far from incidental. One concern that hounds moralistic idealism is political legitimacy. One strand of political realism answers the question against the backdrop of the centrality of the demand for stability in politics. When Weber, for instance, defines the modern state as that which enjoys a monopoly on legitimate coercion under law, the value of legitimacy is not to be understood for all time as answering to democratic requirements of being able to rationally assess and embrace the rightness of the coercion over and against individual liberty and the like. Weber is very clear that legitimacy has and does come

in many forms: what the King decrees, what the oracles say to do, etc. Nowadays, stability may require legitimization through rational self-authorization, but matters were not always so, and that they were not always so is not a matter of rational impoverishment. It is a matter of different conceptions of what count as good reasons, or even reasons as such. Williams addresses this concern about the proper place of the concept of political legitimacy in realism, arguing for what he calls a “basic legitimization demand” (Williams 2005: 4–9, 135) and raises for himself the objection that his principle is just the sort of moral demand that he counts as inappropriate to the sphere of politics (Williams 2005: 5). As I understand it, Williams’ response, stripped to the essentials, is that it is analytic to the very concept of government—of the political as such—that the power to be exercised is (correctly) accepted by one who is subject to the power as binding upon one. Power deployed, even systematically and unerringly meted out, does not amount to politics. In fact, the exercise of power unhinged from any form of consent is what politics is meant to blunt. If the principle is moral in nature it is so in a peculiarly political way, resulting as it does from reflection on what constitutes the political as such. Although Williams did not live to develop the conception of a basic legitimization demand, it appears that this formulation does not commit him to a pre-moralized form of politics.

Let’s take stock. The realist’s basic problem is to understand and appreciate the myriad ways that humans organize into groups that structure and control power relations. Realists are interested in the balancing act of, on the one hand, limiting the arbitrary exercise of power of the many and, on the other, of making certain that reposing power in the one does not result in abuse. This means that realists will be attracted to investigating such things as “microhistories” (Ginzburg 1976) of social coordination, i.e. coordination in its incipience, as it is most natively responsive to concrete situations. There is also a premium placed on political judgment, i.e. on the negotiated sensitivity to the requirements of establishing political order. The literature here is vast, including most early modern European republicanism—Machiavelli, Montesquieu—and contemporary neo-republicans like Philip Pettit. The take-away is that sensitivity to the demands of context may require deployment of power that is much more extensive than what would be tolerated by an ideal model. This means, in turn, that contextualizing realists will treat social institutions as autonomous sources of political meaning and not merely as ways to promote deeper principles, as would idealists. Because institutions considered as actors in their own right are not rooted in an invariant moral substructure, attention to the historical specificity of institutions also will be of the essence.

### **Realism, Idealism, and Recent Critical Theory**

The focus given in political realism to institutions, historical specificity, and genealogy of central concepts and practices would seem *prima facie* to be attractive to Critical Theory. Moreover, it would appear that Critical Theory would not hesitate to reject political moralism on what are essentially realist grounds. Given the strongly contextualist leanings of most critical theorists, this dovetails with a rejection of idealism. In the first place, idealism violates the prescription that the content and structure of political theory result from interactive exchange between philosophy and the empirical social sciences. Horkheimer, for whom idealist theories counted as “traditional” not “critical,” had an eye cocked toward just this corrective power of social science. It is worth remembering that expatriated Critical Theory—what was to become known as the Frankfurt School, in exile in the USA during the period of the late 1930s to the late 1940s—continued the mix of empirical research and social theory typical of the Critical Theory’s first decade. Adorno’s ill-fated partnership with the Rockefeller Foundation-funded, Paul Lazarsfeld-led Princeton Radio Project produced basic materials for his philosophy of music. Pollock’s work on state capitalism, Neumann’s

*Behemoth*, Kirchheimer's *Punishment and Social Structure*, the cooperative social-psychological study *The Authoritarian Personality*, and the Horkheimer-edited monograph series *Studies in Prejudice* were all products of this period, not to mention the research Kirchheimer, Marcuse, and Neumann conducted for the wartime OSS. The leading front of American sociology—e.g. C. Wright Mills, Talcott Parsons, and David Riesman—took this work very seriously. Only one uninformed about the importance of such studies would opine that Critical Theory in its “American era” was a marginal intellectual presence. In point of fact, Critical Theory already had made its mark on the European intellectual scene in the 1930s, as its impact on Laski and Mannheim in England shows. In 1949 Neumann edited a new English translation of Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des lois*. Montesquieu observes that the imposition of law in advance of coalescing consensus is a singularly poor way to bring about social change (Montesquieu 1949: 304–305). This cannot have failed to impress Neumann positively. Laws are human inventions that express in especially concentrated form antecedent recognition of value. In voicing skepticism concerning the prospects of a “legislation-first” agenda for social change, Montesquieu put his finger precisely on the dangers of idealization as a critical theorist might see them.

The second main point of contention between Critical Theory and idealism parallels this *aperçu*, for views like Rawls' take such a top-down moralizing approach to instilling proper conduct. Ethics-first views treat political consensus in advance of principle as unprincipled and, thus, very circumspectly. For the idealist will take it that such consensus may token a lack of the right kind of reflection, i.e. may appear accidental viewed from the aerie of theory. Consensus, viewed in this way, has near cousins in conformity and complacency. Of course, consensus is insufficient for political good. There was consensus aplenty in the Third Reich. The point is that legislation in advance of a predicate laid by existing social convention that could see in law a reflection of its self-understanding does not enhance change, but impedes it. This, again, is quite the opposite of the view of critical theorists prior to the 1970s, who view the imposition of law on this basis—on the basis of abstract and moralizing principles detached from the vagaries of the real world of politics—as dangerous.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, the stance of the Frankfurt School in its more recent history for or against idealism and moralism is a complex matter, and that means that its posture with regard to realism will be likewise complex. Large-scale political theory has dominated much of Critical Theory from the 1980s to the present. Critical Theory had always been “political” in the sense that its research often took political objects as its subject matter—“vulgar” forms of Marxism, authoritarian social psychology, the economics of state capitalism, etc. Nevertheless, after the student revolts in the former West Germany of the late 1960s, philosophers like Habermas could look back at early Critical Theory and judge it as not having engaged sufficiently in politics (cf. Hammer 2006). Over a span of three decades beginning in the 1970s, Habermas has laid out an intricate and far-reaching theory of political freedom and justice that straddles the divide between political idealism and realism. Habermas' work at the intersection of sociology and the philosophy of language provided a platform in social and political philosophy in the form of the “ideal speech situation” (see Habermas 1981, 1983), a platform broadened in the 1990s in a deontological—indeed Kantian—direction in his “discourse ethics” (see Habermas 1991, 1992). Habermas acolytes abound, and there are at present several subtly different yet converging strands of this approach to ethically-informed politics in the literature. When viewed in terms of the relation of ethics to politics and the coordinate concern about idealism in political theory, Habermas' political philosophy operates on a parallel track with Rawls'. It is moralist and idealist, if not as robustly anti-realist (see Anderson 2005: 127–128).

Dissatisfaction with Habermas' retrenchment in idealism has caused some critical theorists to turn to other basic materials. A case in point is the work of Axel Honneth. Drawing

largely upon Critical Theory's Hegelian provenance, over the last twenty years Honneth has crafted an ambitious account of social and political freedom in terms of the concept of mutual recognition (*gegenseitige Anerkennung*). Honneth's most comprehensive statement to date is *Das Recht der Freiheit*, an expansion and partial reconsideration of his previous main work, *Kampf um Anerkennung*.

Honneth's account of mutual recognition is multilayered. Earlier work drew upon Hegel's 1805–1806 Jena lecture manuscripts on the “philosophy of Spirit” (Hegel 1987: 193–204; Honneth 1992: 54–105) and joined his interpretation of the “young Hegel” (cf. Dilthey 1959; Lukács 1973) with Donald Winnicott's psychoanalytic account of object-relations in childhood (Honneth 1992: 148–173; Winnicott 2005) in order both to establish the basic forms of mutual recognition: self-trust, self-respect, and esteem and to identify and track the “social pathologies” corresponding to deficiencies in each (see Honneth 1992: 168, 174–191, 197–210). This earlier work is discernably Kantian in its treatment of self-respect in the political realm (Honneth 1992: 174–191) and more sanguine about taking legal status to be paradigmatic of political status. Critics of liberalism's atomic conception of political freedom can question the adequacy of the very concept of a right, or of right to property in particular (see Marx 1958: I, 364; MacIntyre 1984: 66). The idea of a private right still plays a central role for Honneth, but the account of social freedom is in many ways extra-judicial. Additionally, Honneth has argued along Fichtean lines for recognition as a basic structure underlying all cognition (see Honneth et al. 2008). So, for instance, failures of what Honneth terms “antecedent recognition” result in reification. Unlike Fichte, however, Honneth does not construe basal recognition ethically, holding instead that reification results from a “forgetting” of antecedent recognition (Honneth et al. 2008: 17), an idea he culls from a somewhat gnomic sentence from Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “alle Verdinglichung ist ein Vergessen” (all reification is a forgetting) (Horkheimer and Adorno 1969: 244; see also Adorno and Benjamin 1995: 417).

Neither antecedent recognition nor reification features by name in *Das Recht der Freiheit*. Perhaps Honneth has withdrawn the concept of antecedent recognition in the face of some recent criticism of the idea alleging that such recognition is crypto-moral (see, separately, Geuss and Lear in Honneth et al. 2008: 126–127, 134–135). In any case, I leave these concepts aside in what follows. *Das Recht der Freiheit* is also a thoroughgoing reimagining of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, deploying a frame device adapted from Hegel's doubly nested tripartite structure of (A) Abstract Right, (B) Morality (*Moralität*), and (C) Ethical Life (*Sittlichkeit*) and within (C), structures of (1) Family, (2) Civil Society, and (3) State (cf. Taylor 1995). Hegel arranges the parts of this structure in an interlocking and dialectically progressive hierarchy, secured by a teleological metaphysics governing what he takes to be the necessary developmental structure of human communal intelligence. Honneth rejects this metaphysics; nevertheless, his own account is progressive. Honneth calls the argumentative approach he takes to social and political theory “normative reconstruction,” a form of immanent critique in terms of which he nests the various forms of recognition, which forms are fine-tuned to the requirements of modern social, economic, and political reality as he sees them. In particular, his approach is calibrated in terms of the requirements of a modern conception of freedom.

Honneth finds that neo-Kantianism in political theory errs when it insists that principles of freedom can be (must be) developed from sources external to the social reality to which they will apply (Honneth 2011: 21–22). Instead of surveying social reality and then regressing to an idealization, the critical theorist ought to look around hard in the first place. Honneth is particularly keen to demote political theories that obscure the social-communal nature of human being, whether they are of classically liberal lineage or theories of “reflexive freedom” in either their “pure reason” (e.g. Kant) or “authenticity” (e.g. Fichte) veins. He holds

that a Hegelian conception of social freedom can encompass and give proper place to both of the individuality-centered accounts of freedom by surmounting them. Although inherently social in nature, individual freedom for Honneth remains the core personal, social, and political value, the organizing principle around which the “transcendental” presupposition of the drive to normative integration” operates (Honneth 2011: 19). (It is worth marking that Honneth places the word “transcendental” in scare quotes; a realist might balk at even this, wondering how seriously he takes the demand for integrative force issuing from mutually recognized freedom.) Honneth’s view is that being free means being able to satisfy one’s demand that others recognize one as free. In turn, this means that one must see others as free in order for such recognition to matter in the right way (i.e. to be freedom enhancing). The minimal free “unit” is this coordinating, reciprocating “we.” Social structures that protect, enable, and preserve freedom as self-determination via mutual recognition by definition are just (Honneth 2011: 38–39).

The principal question of political theory that Honneth confronts is Hegel’s as well: what is the proper theoretical relationship of morality (*Moralität*) to ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*)? Hegel takes morality to be “abstract,” in a sense not too far afield from the one we have developed in prior discussion of political realism. Morality requires one to do one’s duty but the content of that duty—what duty it is—is left indeterminate without resources external to morality. While moral principles may provide *ex post* tests for the validity of candidate moral judgments and actions, they do not determine the judgment or action at hand *as it is at hand*. The basis for the charge is an entirely general feature of Hegel’s metaphysics, which targets a purportedly inadequate, modern account of how a universal (i.e. a law) and a particular (i.e. an action) are conjoint in thought (i.e. judgment). Kant limns his conception of a moral law from that of a physical law; what he calls strict laws, in which universal and particular are isolated from one another antecedent to thought. Laws determine their instances by imparting form to them; what is to-be-formed does not contribute lawlike structure of its own. That an instant judgment falls under moral law shows at best, according to Hegel, that the law is a necessary but not a sufficient condition on the judgment. The Kantian may intervene at this point to remind one that Kant does not think that instances are wholly formed by the laws under which they fall; they are determined as the instances they are by material components exogenous to law. That may be, but it is beside the point. Hegel does not deny that Kantian moral laws do not determine with exactness the specifics of judgment; it is, rather, that the specifics cannot enter into the law in the first place. For Hegel only empirical social specifics can provide what is contentful about moral precepts—a source of authority that could only count as heterogeneous in Kant’s reckoning. Ethical life takes on board the provision of content from existing social activity, thereby satisfying the sufficiency condition. This does no violence to the necessity of moral law because, as Hegel has it, the social content is itself rationally constructed to abide within the form of law. That is, such content is structured developmentally by an inhering, rational, teleological historical process. On this basis, Hegel holds that ethical life encompasses morality in an enriched form. Not reversing this “direction of fit” between morality and ethical life is as crucial for Honneth as it was for Hegel. Only by presenting an account in which morality is dependent on ethical life, and not the other way around, can one avoid idealism, viz. an abstracting, ethics-first view of politics.

The two sectors of mutual recognition Honneth discusses that most touch upon what a realist would consider the political involve market economics and institutional politics. As to the first, Honneth rejects, as did Hegel, the notion that market rationality is autonomous. Markets are at least in part ethical; political questions of their legitimacy are always pertinent. In their present state, however, markets are so devoid of *Sittlichkeit* that Honneth admits that the proposition that they are constrained ethically cannot emerge from normative

reconstruction. This raises the difficulty that any requirement to engage economic markets as potential bearers of recognized ethical value issues from an idealization not different in kind from one a neo-Kantian might propose. In other words, economies currently bottom out in *Moralität* with no intrinsic way forward. This admission may amount to less a willing embrace of idealism than a testament to what can happen to the Hegelian who abjures metaphysics. Perhaps Honneth is offering what a Kant would regard as a regulative posit. How welcoming that admission and procedure will be to the realist will depend on whether Honneth thinks the regulative debt might be at some point discharged. To the extent that it is a transcendently necessary posit (i.e. a posit that *cannot* be discharged on pains of a failure of rationality), the realist will reject it.

As for the political arena, Honneth stresses, as does Habermas, the intertwined historical development of media and democratic discourse; however, Honneth now departs from Habermas by not focusing predominately on legal institutions as guarantors of or impediments to freedom. Exclusive or near-exclusive focus on legality threatens to tip the scale, again, in the direction of abstraction. Legal status is of course important, but the idea of legislating esteem—holding that one has a *right* to be treated with dignity with respect to, say, one's ethnic origin, i.e. an obligation imposed on another backed, if necessary, by force—is, to say the least, contestable. Honneth places emphasis on less structurally concerted forms of recognition present in art and less mainstream forms of life to cover the bases. This is a reincorporation of Adorno's avant-gardism; such products are important due to their expression of forms of experience that are not yet fully "recognized" in the culture. They work, in essence, in the reverse direction of law—not from top down, but from bottom up.

To be sure, Honneth is mindful of many of the concerns that contextual political realists take to be central: the avoidance of moral idealization antecedent to and independent of political reality, the role played by political judgment, the deployment within political philosophy of social scientific resources, and rejecting the introduction of prior substantive commitment to particular moral theories within politics. As we saw, Hegel criticizes Kant's abstracting moralism by incorporating it in the more comprehensive category of ethical life. Honneth's conception of social freedom is modeled on Hegel's conception of the same and—the case of markets aside—likewise identifies forms of social justice that are "ethical" in the expanded Hegelian sense, but nonmoral because nonabstract. Is Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*, deployed as a political ground, a concept that the realist is bound to reject, notwithstanding the Hegelian's own objection to Kantianism? Does the move away from Kantian forms of idealism inoculate Honneth from contextual realist scrutiny?

Consideration of the question is helped by recalling the general thrust of Marx's critique of Hegelianism. There used to be an abundant (some might say: overabundant) literature on the question of whether Marx is an ethical thinker and, if he is, in what sense. Regardless of how one settles that question, there are two things Marx is not: (1) a moralizing Kantian and (2) an endorser of Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*. According to Marx, Hegel was correct to reject Kantian *Moralität* as abstract. But Marx rejects Hegel's incorporation of morality into ethical life. There are two grounds for the rejection. First, according to Marx it is manifest that, in fact, morality governs the modern political state, not ethical life. The modern state as it exists is steeped in liberal political ideals, determined to be a state governed by private right and individual self-interest. Second, that one might be oblivious to this fact is due to the illusion left in place by an even more basic and false structure underpinning Hegelian thinking. The basic Hegelian conception of human agency is not sufficiently material, as it does not embed possible forms of thought in possible forms of labor. Instead, it relies on a metaphysical conception of preadapted harmony between material political structures and the requirements of *Geist*. Hegel can only rest satisfied that morality is encompassed by ethical life adequately because of this metaphysical assumption. In other words, Hegel is

captive to the specious division between mental and physical labor. Now, one might think that Marx can retain *Sittlichkeit* by cleansing it of *Moralität*. But Marx sees that this is not an option. Marx must reject *Sittlichkeit* because it is a product of rationalist metaphysics that is, in turn, a product of inadequate views concerning the nature and proper philosophical role of the division of labor and its history. Put in Hegelian terms, ethical life is what it is only when it dialectically subsumes morality; there is no way to perform the surgery necessary to excise morality from ethical life and leave ethical life intact. That would seem to settle the question about Marx's ethics in the negative. Marx does not "have an ethics" if what "ethics" means is *either* Kantian *or* Hegelian ethics.

That Marx is broadly a political realist cannot be doubted. Critical Theory in its early period was discernably Marxist, albeit in a form of so-called humanistic Marxism that did not reduce culture to material base. Translated into realist terms, Marx's claim against Hegel might be put as follows: *Sittlichkeit* still incorporates a second-level form of moralism: the idea that there is a collective intelligence whose developmental essence guarantees content be given to morality. It is "raw" history, however, that gives such content through the material determination of thought, a history that has an ultimately contingent progressive developmental arc, not one that is necessary in the sense that Hegel requires. Honneth in essence holds that there is a form of *Sittlichkeit* that is not captive to morality, even though morality is still the dominant going concern in large segments of political society. He can cite an increase in scope and depth of civil rights over the last half-century in favor of his view that there is a progressive tendency in society with regard to mutual recognition. Perhaps the tendency is so embedded that wholesale lapses in such recognition would be experienced as contrary to rationality. Marx's rejection of *Sittlichkeit*, then, does not bite automatically against Honneth's *Sittlichkeit*, since Honneth rejects the same Hegelian metaphysics that Marx targets. Honneth uses Hegel's conception as a springboard for his own, but does not adopt it uncritically.

This brief excursion through Marx not only brings home that abstract theories of idealism are not explanatory; it is also the case that they are not *critical* and, therefore, not political interventions (Marx 1958: III, 7 [§11]). Hegel's *Sittlichkeit* is for Marx ideological. For all one can tell, one might exist in a social or political order that seems legitimate while it is not so, and any position at the intersection of Critical Theory and political realism will have to take ideology and false consciousness very seriously. Even more to the point, ideology compromises realistic assessment of one's political circumstance by masking existing power relations and substituting for them an idealized appearance of the same. Ideology, that is, undercuts political realism, since it is realism's charge to be able to penetrate existing relations of politics in order to criticize them. Here Geuss provides more guidance than Williams. This is to say that, at the crossroads of realism and Critical Theory, moralistic theories are not merely false; they falsify the very reality that realism seeks to understand. As Marx insisted, theories are modes of political agency, part of what Critical Theory and realism will wish to understand and counteract through critique. The point is, then, not merely to recoup the advanced edge of what social knowledge is available in the status quo. Rather, it is to allow for *radical* critique of the status quo—to permit a form of criticism that goes beyond the knowledge available "on the ground" from existing social relations. The trick is to do this without falling into the pit of moral idealizations.

Placed against this altered backdrop, the question posed to Honneth's view is not whether it is moralizing or abstract *malgré lui* in the way Kantian theories are. It is, rather, whether it can be robustly critical—i.e. critical in the radical sense. I wish to conclude by briefly considering whether the methodological underpinning of Honneth's account, normative reconstruction, allows for radical critique and, if it does not, whether that counts against its realism.



I put aside general criticisms of mutual recognition as a “master concept,” some of which may be telling. I also cannot address here other objections that might be raised, e.g. that Honneth’s view is functionalist, specifically, Aristotelian, i.e. as holding that there is a general account of human flourishing against which one may measure deviation. One might interpret certain trends in earlier Critical Theory in such a way (see Freyenhagen 2013); nevertheless, a realist will reject this essentialism as moralistic, albeit this-worldly. What I offer here is not in any sense meant to be definitive; rather, it is meant to spur thought. Normative reconstruction rests on four “premises” or precepts. First, normative reconstruction assumes that relevant social structures regulate themselves by means of norms that express shared conceptions of the good. In modernity, which operates under a standing demand for self-authorization, this is tantamount to the idea that social orders legitimate themselves in terms that reflect the ethical values and aspirations present in the society as that society recognizes them (Honneth 2011: 19–24). Call this the *legitimation principle*. Second, the relevant objects of reconstruction will be drawn from social ethical reality and not from abstract models that are not anchored in that reality. Further, only progressive ethical components are subject to reconstruction—i.e. components that are superior to those of prior social formations (Honneth 2011: 19–24). Call this the *progressive realism principle*. Third, only those practices and institutions central to securing the social good are subject to reconstruction (Honneth 2011: 24–27). Call this the *centrality principle*. Fourth, normative reconstruction is not merely descriptive, aiming to give an account of existing practices as they are understood to be within the society in question. It is critical in that it has the power to juxtapose the existing state of institutions and practices with the ideals that they are crafted to instantiate (Honneth 2011: 27–29). Call this the *critical principle*. “Ideals” here do not mean, of course, abstract principles; rather, they are what is concretely but as yet implicitly assumed in the social life in question.

For the realist attention falls squarely on the critical principle. Simply put, a realist will not want to rule out a severe mismatch between the status quo and freedom, a case that is especially possible if there are strong ideological constraints on the formation of accurate beliefs, hopes, desires, etc. But social criticism for Honneth centers on *existing* social understanding and practice as criteria for determining the degree to which the underlying ideals are met. The legitimation principle is similarly constrained: practices are legitimated to the extent that they are understood to be so, given the ideals as they exist. But again, perforce the criticism principle, this is limited to an assessment of whether the practices realize the goods they are supposed to embody; there is no essential reference to whether such underlying ideals are good in the first place. One might suppose that the progressive realism principle delivers a bit more on this front, but it merely posits measures relative to prior *existing* instantiations of value. The centrality principle is likewise conservative, since what real social structures are at the functional core of a given society may indeed be the ones that, even when rendered better in terms of their underlying ideals, are recalcitrant to criticism and change. The challenge may be set directly: what is normative reconstruction to do with a situation in which both the existing practices and the ideals they are meant to realize are inconsistent with freedom? Correlatively, since critique is limited to the potential mismatch of practice and ideal internal to a system, the result of criticism will be less of a mismatch, and the progress indexed to the criticism must be incremental. One might put matters thus: there is no account of *revolution* to be teased out of Honneth’s gradualism. Or, in terms of Geuss’ more recent work, the view fails to be “utopian” (see Geuss 2015).

Now, some may hold this to be an impeccably Hegelian result. But is it a realist one? One might think that realism dictates gradualism. After all, one works with the social understanding that one has on the ground and importing into the reconstruction standards of freedom that do not register in the ideals that underlie practices might seem an offense

to concrete criticism. But those who might object to Honneth's procedure here might also point out that a finding of deep bankruptcy on the part of an even apparently progressive social substrate does nothing to vitiate concrete criticism. One might even see in Honneth's allowance for the importance of marginal practices—i.e. in art—a concession in this direction. But, more to the point, realism does not require a moderate political response to every political situation. In some situations, moderation is *unrealistic*. Accordingly, the realist need not write off revolution as a possible result of critique. Indeed, when the requirements for massive change are real, the realist may not do so.<sup>1</sup>

## Note

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- 1 I presented an earlier version of this paper at the ETH-Zürich and would like to thank the audience there for their comments and criticisms, especially Michael Hampe, Norman Sieroka, and Lutz Wingert.

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# CRITICAL THEORY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

*Arne Johan Vetlesen*

“The environment” is not among the topics with which Critical Theory is commonly associated. This seems to be the case for all three generations of philosophers in question: from Adorno over Habermas to Honneth, to pick just one name in each of them. That said, “nature” is certainly a central category in all the major versions of critical theory, though less so in Honneth than in Adorno.

In what follows, I have chosen to focus on two classics of the Frankfurt School: Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Habermas’ *Theory of Communicative Action*. Of course, both have received enormous amounts of critical commentary. However, the role played by what is said – or left unsaid – about nature is seldom at the forefront of the discussion. Putting it there will allow me to advance a much-needed critique of blind spots I argue are largely common in the two works, despite the well-known differences between them, which as a consequence may well appear less important than what unites them – namely a neglect of the nature-related (as distinguished from society-related) aspect of capitalist modernity and its discontents, a neglect that proves more philosophically and politically catastrophic each passing day.

## Myth and Enlightenment

“The Concept of Enlightenment,” the first chapter in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, starts with a series of quotes from Francis Bacon. Bacon is taken to have defined the motives behind the “disenchantment of the world” that the Enlightenment aims at. “The sovereignty of man lieth hid in knowledge,” Bacon declared, continuing: “Now we govern nature in opinions, but we are thrall unto her in necessity; but if we would be led by her in invention, we should command her by action” (Bacon quoted in DE: 4). The scientific attitude that Bacon helped launch is “patriarchal” in that “the human mind, which overcomes suspicion, is to hold sway over a disenchanted nature” (ibid.). For Bacon as well as Luther, power and knowledge are synonymous. Bacon put it unequivocally: “The true end, scope, or office of knowledge [consist in] effecting and working, and in discovery of particulars not revealed before, for the better endowment and help of man’s life” (Bacon quoted in DE: 5). Adorno and Horkheimer take Bacon’s view to capture the overall aim of the Enlightenment: “What men want to learn from nature,” they write, “is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men. That is the only aim” (DE: 4).

Enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer go on to assert, is totalitarian. It cannot tolerate anything that would oppose it or offer an alternative to it. Animism in particular, the cosmology most common throughout the world prior to the Enlightenment, must be rejected tooth and nail: its extirpation is what the disenchantment of the world is essentially about (DE: 5). No “occult” qualities within matter are allowed for; to be fully mastered, matter must be stripped of any “illusion of ruling or inherent powers,” since “whatever does not conform to the rule of computation and utility is suspect” (DE: 6).

Even more fundamentally, Enlightenment needs to root out anthropomorphism, “the projection onto nature of the subjective” (DE: 6), identified as the basic principle of myth. Citing at this point Hegel’s analysis in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Adorno and Horkheimer depict how such projection is at work so that “the supernatural, spirits and demons, are mirror images of men who allow themselves to be frightened by natural phenomena.” This being so, “the many mythic figures can all be brought to a common denominator, and reduced to the human subject” (DE: 7). Enlightenment is epistemologically totalitarian in that irrespective of what it is confronted with – whether “a piece of objective intelligence, a bare schematization, fear of evil powers, or hope of redemption” – the judgment will always be the same: “It is man!” Genuine manifoldness, or novelty, is *a priori* disallowed for; “its ideal is the system from which all and everything follows. Its rationalist and empiricist versions do not part company on that point” (DE: 7).

For power and knowledge to become truly synonymous, however, qualities of all sorts, including gods, must be dismissed as purely illusory, as having no – scientific, provable – ontological standing. Doing away with quality means giving primacy, nay monopoly, to numbers; number becomes the “canon” of the Enlightenment and what everything that is real, and that we may have knowledge about, reduces to.

To anticipate a point that will prove vital, it is part of Adorno and Horkheimer’s argument that myth’s alignment with power and hence control over outer nature was always an inseparable feature in myth, and precisely not a kind of alignment that began with the Enlightenment. “The myths which fell victim to the Enlightenment were its own products,” they assert, yet proceed to observe that “the myths, as the tragedians came upon them, are already characterized by the discipline and power that Bacon celebrated as the ‘right mark’” (DE: 8). Recall that “the Olympic deities are no longer directly identical with elements, but signify them” and that in Homer, “the gods are distinguished from material elements as their quintessential concepts” (DE: 8). The upshot is that “the world becomes subject to man,” and “the awakening of the self” is accompanied by “the acknowledgement of power as the principle of all relations.” God and man may be divorced, but as far as the attainment and exercise of power over nature are concerned, they are fully alike.

Adorno and Horkheimer describe the dialectic involved like this:

Myth turns into enlightenment, and nature into mere objectivity. Men pay for the increase of their power with alienation from that over which they exercise their power. Enlightenment behaves toward things as a dictator toward men. He knows them in so far as he can manipulate them. The man of science knows things in so far as he can make them. In this way their potentiality is turned to his own ends. In the metamorphosis the nature of things, as a substratum of domination, is revealed as always the same. This identity constitutes the unity of nature.

(DE: 9)

While calling “anachronistic” Freud’s ascription to magic of an “unshakable confidence in the possibility of world domination” (DE: 11), there is little in Adorno and Horkheimer’s argument about the entwinement of myth and Enlightenment to suggest they hold a different

view. A number of sweeping formulations are meant to show the many ways in which “mythology set itself off the unending process of enlightenment,” supposedly corroborating their overall thesis that “Just as myths already realize enlightenment, so enlightenment with every step becomes more deeply engulfed in mythology. It receives all its matter from the myths, only to destroy them” (DE: 11f.).

Adorno and Horkheimer seek to back up this thesis by pointing to the crucial role of repetition in rituals as prescribed in mythical cosmologies. Everything that occurs, every phenomenon and movement encountered in nature, is interpreted and tackled as a matter of things repeating themselves cyclically. This, they argue, is tantamount to the conviction that there is nothing new under the sun. In subscribing to such a view, promising to explain everything that happens, everywhere, myth again betrays itself as of one piece with the Enlightenment thinking that accordingly is not its antithesis or negation but its historical successor: “The principle of immanence, the explanation of every event as repetition, that the Enlightenment upholds against mythic imagination, is the principle of myth itself.” In both cases, “what was different is equalized, as expressed in the notion about the identity of everything with everything else.” Enlightenment, then, merely repeats “what in the Heracleian epic cycle is one of the primal images of mythic power: it exorcises the incommunicable. Not only are qualities dissolved in thought, but men are brought to actual conformity” (DE: 12).

True, Adorno and Horkheimer occasionally acknowledge dissimilarities between myth and Enlightenment, for instance that magic sustains a relation to things in nature that is “one not of intention but of relatedness”; even though magic pursues aims just like science does, magic “seeks to achieve them by mimesis – not by progressively distancing itself from the object” (DE: 11). Yet the overall picture painted is that of profound continuity: Enlightenment has proved itself incapable of shaking off its debt to mythical worldviews and magical practices that predate its breakthrough in the West. The principle of immanence posits a taboo against admitting any source of quality, essence, value outside itself; outside, that is, the endeavor of science regarded as self-grounding, self-sufficient, and exhausting all there is to know, which is seen as identical to reality *per se* – what cannot be positively known, and proven to others as such by way of being so many data, so many observations *repeatable* to them, simply does not exist: this is the upshot of the marriage between positivism and scientism in the form of the *Einheitswissenschaft* that the Vienna Circle championed in the 1930s. Yet there is nothing new here, nothing that according to Adorno and Horkheimer was not at work in magic, indeed the force driving it – namely fear. The deeper aim of shrugging off the last remnants of superstition, of man’s propensity to invest the natural world with qualities modern science would show up as purely subjective as so illusory, as inhering not in nature, not *in re*, but being projected onto it by way of anthropomorphism – that aim was always the same: to free man from fear. All beliefs, rituals, and sacrifices demonstrating awe with respect to the nonhuman natural world and the creatures encountered there, and upon whom men recognized they depended, are to be looked upon as being born of that single basic motive: fear. Since fear is always uncomfortable, it immediately begets attempts to fight it, overcome it. Pre-modern, primitive cultures feared nature as what was perceived as greater than themselves, more powerful, more cunning and mysterious, outwitting man – hence the crucial function of the magician and shaman as mediator between culture and nature, ensuring that the tribe in general and hunters in particular display the respect due to the forces that are superior to man and so may crush him and frustrate his every need. This then is the promise of knowledge, of science: “Man imagines himself free when there is no longer anything unknown” (DE: 16). That this is so and must be so, Adorno and Horkheimer continue,

determines the course of mythologization, of enlightenment, which compounds the animate with the animate just as myth compounds the inanimate with the animate.

Enlightenment is mythic fear turned radical. The pure immanence of positivism, its ultimate product, is no more than a so to speak universal taboo. Nothing at all may remain outside, because the very idea of outsideness is the very source of fear.  
(DE: 16)

It is the task of knowledge to see to it that this fear is overcome by means of doing away with everything that smacks of outsideness in the sense given. Not any notion of knowledge will do, only one where (outer) nature in its entirety appears as object, ensuring that everything encountered in outer, nonhuman reality (Descartes' *res extensa*) is regarded as suited to – indeed, as *meant for* – human intervention and manipulation. As Bacon famously remarked, only by intervening into nature can man (indeed, the male subject) wrest its secrets from her so as to be able properly to exploit her. He phrased it dramatically in a passage oddly enough not cited in the *Dialectic*: “We should conquer and subdue her [nature], shake her to her foundations”; “storm and occupy her castles and strongholds, subdue Nature with all her children to bind her to your service and make her your slave” (Bacon quoted in Midgley 2014: 119). Following the taboo against anthropomorphism, the nature thus put to exclusive human use is one completely devoid of the subjectivity, spirit, and inherent purposiveness and meaning that mythic cosmologies had ascribed to it. To prove oneself “enlightened” is precisely to overcome (as childish, primitive, irrational) the inclination to perceive soul and subjective qualities as present in the whole of existence and as encountering themselves in all things. The result of admitting nature no inner life, no mental and psychic agency/subjectivity, no purposefulness and Aristotelian final cause, no goals of its own, reserving all such properties to man alone, is to render nature man’s absolute “other”: what man is, nature is not, and *vice versa*.

However, insofar as “for civilization, pure natural existence, animal and vegetative, was the absolute danger” (DE: 31), the return of the repressed (Freud) is a persistent concern. From the point of view of civilization, priding itself on progress made possible by man’s steady liberation from being at the mercy of nature, any reversion to mimetic or mythic modes of perception and behavior was bound to be feared as “a reversion of the self to that state of nature from which it had estranged itself with so huge an effort, and which therefore struck such terror into the self” (*ibid.*). To keep this danger at bay, the subjugation of nature – meaning the nature *within* as well as that outside the human subject – was made the paramount purpose of life. Self-preservation dictates nothing less.

Thus is triggered the *dialectic* of Enlightenment: seeking to free themselves from their subjection to nature, modern men become increasingly entangled in the subjection of nature to the Self. The emancipation celebrated by moderns is tainted by the unfreedom – fixity, rigidity, ultimately death – of the nature sought overcome, be it outside or inside the subject. The obsession with self-preservation comes at the price of denial, of renunciation of every trait, every aspect of living life, within or without, that threatens to defy the requirements of order over chaos, predictability over spontaneity, reason over affect.

This *leitmotif* explains why Adorno and Horkheimer declare Homer’s *Odyssey* “the basic text of European civilization” (DE: 46). No work offers more eloquent, indeed prophetic, testimony of the mutual implication of enlightenment and myth. Only through repression of instincts and continual sacrifice – what Adorno and Horkheimer deem “a denial of nature in man for the sake of domination over non-human nature and over other men” (DE: 54) – may Odysseus survive. The autonomy sought for by the prototype of the modern bourgeois subject requires strict and relentless self-control: autonomy is gained over and against nature and other men only to the extent that he (again, the subject is tacitly male) learns to repress instincts, desires, and feelings. Spontaneity would only betray him and be used against him by the social and natural other alike. Inner no less than outer nature is mastered by rational calculation and for the sake of self-preservation.

When Adorno and Horkheimer assert that “the history of civilization is the history of the introversion of sacrifice, the history of renunciation,” their point is that “everyone who practices renunciation gives away more of his life than is given back to him: and more than the life that he vindicates” (DE: 55). Their argument traces the trajectory from adaptation to renunciation to death:

Only consciously contrived adaptation to nature brings nature under the control of the physically weaker. The *ratio* which supplants mimesis is not simply its counterpart. It is itself mimesis: mimesis unto death. The subjective spirit which cancels the animation of nature can master a despiritualized nature only by imitating its rigidity and despiritualizing itself in turn. Imitation enters into the service of domination inasmuch as even man is anthropomorphized for man. The pattern of Odyssean cunning is the mastery of nature sought through such adaptation.

(DE: 57)

As soon as man suppresses his awareness that he himself is nature, all the ends for which he keeps himself alive are null and void. On their analysis of what they term “the prehistory of subjectivity,” there is no escaping the dead – literally: dead – end of the logic according to which man’s domination over himself no less than over outer nature – the very effort that grounds his selfhood – brings about the destruction of the subject in whose service it is undertaken. A result of this is the decreasing cultural tolerance for “flashes of nature” that Adorno in particular would be concerned with. Nature – meaning anything showing up within social intercourse that is deemed raw, primitive, improper – has become a moral, not merely an aesthetic provocation. There is a culturally induced imperative to rid oneself of all traits, whether in gestures, behavior, or appearance, that would betray nature in a sensuous form, especially that of sweat and bodily smell – hence the outcry when the female movie star has her photograph taken with her armpits unshaved. To always heed this imperative and to be willing to employ whatever techniques offered to improve one’s effort is to prove oneself as having successfully completed the journey from nature to culture in one’s own person.

### The Revenge of Nature

It is noteworthy that the “nature” that interests Adorno and Horkheimer never does so *per se* but always in conjunction with its dialectical counterpart culture, or Enlightenment or Civilization. As the above summary of the first two chapters of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* shows, the Frankfurters’ approach to the nature/culture constellation from beginning to end privileges its entanglement with another constellation, the power/knowledge one that they take Bacon to epitomize in the modern era.

The power/knowledge constellation as understood by Adorno and Horkheimer is not elementary, however. It is itself a product, namely of fear: the fear of nature that they regard as old as mankind’s history on earth; the fear that was sought overcome by developing knowledge of the sort that would allow man to gain control over nature and so neutralize its power over man’s fate. Never was there a relationship between man and nature not based on and shot through with fear. When Adorno and Horkheimer write that “the magician imitates demons,” they explain that “in order to frighten them or to appease them, he behaves frighteningly or makes gestures of appeasement” (DE: 9). The activities of the shaman – the individual who on behalf of his tribe functions as a mediator between the needs of the human group and the spiritual forces seen as present in nature – are so many clever tricks to “ward off danger”: to tackle his group’s fear of nature in such a way that nature continues to let humans take from her what they need in order to survive. This effort is all about appeasement



since its aim – never reached or secured once and for all – is to neutralize nature’s capacity to take advantage of her superiority over man by denying him what he craves from her.

Understood as the promise of man’s overcoming of this fear, Enlightenment must be considered an utter failure: “Enlightenment,” we have already seen, “is mythic fear turned radical” (DE: 16).

There is something reductive about this whole approach. While criticizing the cultural taboo against anthropomorphism, Adorno and Horkheimer remain naively – uncritically – loyal to the no less deeply entrenched taboo against allowing for how practitioners of “mythic” cosmologies engage in various forms of *non-fear*-driven exchange and communication with members, parts, or sites in what used to be an exceedingly rich and manifold nonhuman natural world. There is not a word about how, say, human–animal relationships form patterns of mutual dependence, adjustment, and exchange; about how such interspecies relationships are borne by love and affection as arising between particular animals and particular human individuals sharing the same location/habitat throughout their lives; or about humans’ – especially young children’s – curiosity and open-mindedness toward everything nonhuman, being a source of endless fascination precisely on account of the otherness from humans thus encountered as part and parcel of a shared world, and so as enriching it (see Shepard 1982; Descola 2013; Kohn 2013). To the extent that a stance of respect and awe is acknowledged in Adorno and Horkheimer’s depiction – say, in hunters’ attitude to their game – it is so not as a genuine or original stance, but as one (cunningly, strategically) adopted *ad hoc*, as demanded by the pragmatics of the situation and as always originating from, and never fully escaping, fear. Professing to be constantly wary of projection and its workings, as having been skillfully demasked and seen through by the likes of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud (“hermeneutics of suspicion”), Adorno and Horkheimer seem blind to their own projection of fear onto every historical instance of man’s relationship to nature.

This leads to a second point. The “revenge of nature” let loose by the dialectic of Enlightenment is only of interest to Adorno and Horkheimer in its gestalt as a revenge affecting humans. The fear-based compulsion to “rationally” – by way of science and technology – control outer nature is bought at the price of the repression of the “inner” nature of the human individual. But – as C. Fred Alford pointed out many years ago (1985: 7) – one could just as well focus on a second form of revenge of nature: namely the consequences of humankind’s careless intervention in the ecosphere. Once the importance of this second form is stated, its absence in the analysis offered in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is conspicuous. No systematic attention is given to the destruction of nonhuman nature, be it from the point of view of the humans affected by it or – more to the point – from that of the wealth of creatures and life-forms of which nature consists. In this sense, there is a nature deficit in the early version of Critical Theory for which the *Dialectic* remains the classic statement. As I will detail below, one of the implications of this deficit is that when exploitation, alienation, reification, and commodification – or, more simply, capitalism – are criticized, it is so to the extent that these processes affect humans and humans only: the exploitation, etc. to be fought is that taking place as between humans, not that taking place in man’s relationship to nature, a nature denuded of agency and drained of value, consisting of so many passive objects as opposed to active-responding subjects with a species-specific point of view of their own. In other words, the entire critique is conducted within an intra-social and intra-subjective framework, anthropocentrically so, wholly conventionally and in that respect uncritically so.

To sum up, the notion of “external forces of nature” we find in Adorno and Horkheimer is meant to capture the ways in which such forces strike at social and individual life and cause repression in those two domains; repression understood as human-caused and so, in principle, avoidable and unnecessary suffering. Their bleak message is that however successful in its own right the endeavor to control outer nature, the parallel suppression of man’s inner

nature does not end; if anything, it is intensified following the near-complete mastery of outer nature. There seems to be no way out of this vicious circle.

### The Paradox of Modernity

In his opus magnum *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas turns to Max Weber to develop his case for the “paradox of modernity” that he clearly intends as his alternative take on Western history to that argued by his Frankfurt predecessors in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Key to this paradox and the crises it entails is the state of affairs addressed in the following statement: “The rationalized lifeworld makes possible the emergence and growth of subsystems [of the capitalist economy and the state bureaucracy] whose independent imperatives [of money (monetarization, commodification) and administrative power (juridification, contractualization)] turn back destructively upon the lifeworld itself” (TCA II: 186). This tendency amounts to what Habermas famously terms a “colonization of the lifeworld,” that is, a type of domination that involves the incursion of cognitive-instrumental rationality and functionalist reason into the lifeworld.

Habermas’ argument is that this is bound to lead to various forms of pathologies within the lifeworld insofar as “capitalist modernization follows a pattern such that cognitive-instrumental rationality surges beyond the bounds of the economy and state into other, communicatively structured areas of life and achieves dominance there at the cost of moral-practical and aesthetic-expressive rationality” (II: 304f.). Specifically, such colonization distorts the linguistically generated and redeemed contributions of social integration to personality (socialization), to culture (the reproduction of tradition, the handing down of shared values), and to solidarity as between members of a social group. In other words, mechanisms belonging within the subsystems of the economy and the state drive out mechanisms of social integration from domains in which they cannot be replaced. The disturbance thus caused manifests itself as loss of meaning, anomie, and psychopathologies in the domains of culture, society, and personality, respectively. Correcting Weber’s diagnosis of contemporary Western society, Habermas states that

it is not the irreconcilability of cultural value spheres – or the clash of life-orders rationalized in their light – that is the cause of one-sided lifestyles and unsatisfied legitimation needs; their cause is the monetarization and bureaucratization of everyday practices both in the private and public spheres.

(II: 325)

In effect, then, Habermas works out a Weber-inspired analysis of modernity that accuses Weber of having failed to adequately grasp the *selectivity* of capitalist rationalization and its causes: the trajectory taken by modernization was not/is not the only one possible. In conceiving rationalization in terms of the increasing dominance of purposive rationality and in creating the impression that this tendency exhausts the meaning of such rationalization and – in retrospect – must appear inevitable, Weber overlooked the distinctness of what Habermas refers to as moral-practical and aesthetic-expressive rationality. In doing so, Weber failed to do justice to the possibility opened up with the advent of Western modernity, and specifically by way of “the linguistification of the sacred”: namely a society allowing the free interplay – harmonious coexistence – between the three forms of rationality now evolving, permitting each of them to blossom within their respective proper domain. However, in following Weber’s one-sided and ultimately reductionist understanding of rationality, Adorno and Horkheimer, Habermas argues, were led to deny any trace of reason in the structures and institutions of modern life.

Critical theory had come to a dead end. Due to what Habermas castigates as a “totalizing” critique of reason in Adorno and Horkheimer, one more deeply indebted to Nietzsche than to Weber, they throw the baby out with the bath water: having “surrendered to an uninhibited scepticism regarding reason, instead of weighing the grounds that cast doubt on this scepticism itself” (Habermas 1987: 129), Adorno and Horkheimer abandon a notion of reason worth defending in the face of the rise to dominance of the purposive-rational type. They therefore fail to appreciate that the (narrow, one-sided) cognitive-instrumental rationality now reigning at the cost of various pathologies within the lifeworld must be understood as *one type* of reason, not as reason *tout court* and so as exhaustive. This is the Nietzsche-inspired Weberian category mistake Habermas sees his predecessors as committing.

It is important to be clear about exactly why Habermas thinks *Dialectic of Enlightenment* amounts to a dead end. It is because its authors are unable to answer the question to which Habermas’ discussion leads: having followed Nietzsche in devaluing all predicates concerning validity and in holding that it is not validity claims but power that is expressed in value appraisals (“this is good,” “this is right”) – “by what criterion shall critique still be able to propose discriminations?” (1987: 125). The Nietzschean theory of power with which both Weber and Adorno and Horkheimer are so impressed is one intent on distinguishing between “active” and “reactive” forces but unable to distinguish truth from falsity, reason from unreason. What the analysis carried out in *Dialectic* leaves us with, then, is a regression: “a world fallen back into myth, in which powers influence one another and no element remains that could transcend the battle of the powers” (ibid.), i.e., what Weber, pessimistically, came to see as the irreconcilable struggles between the demons. In failing to account for modernity’s specific “dignity” as constituted by what Weber theorized as the differentiation of value spheres in accord with their own logics, allowing – at least *in principle*, if not in historical reality – the power of negation and the capacity of individuals to discriminate between “yes” and “no” – that is, to both offer one another and demand from one another the backing with reasons for any utterances (including value judgments) seriously made – Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic* “oversimplifies its image of modernity astoundingly” (1987: 112).

I have stressed what Habermas finds problematic in the position he sees Adorno and Horkheimer as ending up in because it helps highlight what he *could* have focused on in advancing his critique but does not. When he charges that their understanding of capitalist modernity is oversimplified (“narrow” in the German original) and that they fail to do justice to the complexity of the potential for rationality set loose (again: in principle) by modernity, he is *not* concerned with any of the points of criticism I raised against them above.

Habermas no less than Adorno and Horkheimer holds that there is a real danger that “reason itself destroys the humanity it first made possible” (1987: 110). Habermas’ take on this tendency for capitalist modernity to self-destruct consists in his version of the “paradox of modernity” that Weber had warned against without seeing any reason-based way out – Habermas’ version being that of the system’s incursion into and so distortion of the symbolic components of the lifeworld: culture, society, and personality. This, for Habermas, captures the self-destruction presently playing itself out in our society, with system-induced pathologies – loss of meaning, anomie, psychopathologies – as the empirical consequence within the lifeworld.

Having established that the notion that “reason itself destroys the humanity it first made possible” is one that makes sense to both Habermas and Adorno and Horkheimer (though Habermas insists on resources of resistance within reason that he accuses his predecessors of ignoring), we need to ask whether this way of conceiving the essence of the crisis mankind is facing in late modernity actually does so. I think not. For all their differences, Habermas, Adorno, and Horkheimer share a common one-sidedness when it comes to identifying the

full scope of the present crisis. What they all overlook may well prove to be not just any aspect or dimension of that crisis but its most fundamental one, its driving force.

### The Legacy of Uncritical Anthropocentricity

In 1979, in a rare discussion of Habermas' view of nature, Joel Whitebook formulated the following question: "Whether we can continue to deny all worth to nature and treat it as a mere means without destroying the natural preconditions for the existence of subjects?" (Whitebook quoted in Alford 1985: 142).

This is a pertinent question to ask. Now, while posing what is no doubt a very serious question about Habermas' position, Whitebook's manner of doing so appears to be fully compatible with the anthropocentric framework that Habermas himself subscribes to throughout his entire *oeuvre*, unapologetically at that – an anthropocentrism that also holds for his work on "discourse ethics" which I must leave aside here (see Habermas 1990, 1993). The danger Whitebook draws attention to is this: as long as human society denies all worth (or more precisely, more than merely instrumental value) to nature, that nature, short of the protection a full moral standing would have provided it with, may well be exploited for human purposes to the point of destruction, a destruction that in its turn may endanger the existence on earth of mankind itself.

To be sure, what Whitebook is pointing to is not something wholly overlooked in the above discussion. Adorno and Horkheimer were concerned that man's (and again, the masculine is to the point here) ever-intensifying and ever-perfected effort to gain mastery over outer nature would backfire – it would trigger a dialectic whereby such mastery "outside" man would come back to haunt him in his social and subjective being, leading not to the liberation hoped for – liberation from fear, but also from scarcity, toil, and hardship – but instead to suppression: control over nature proves itself historically as intimately linked with, indeed inseparable from man's control over man. The exploitation of nature does not meet the promise of allowing man to become free, but takes the form of some men's (or one class's) exploitation over others.

Simply put, what is considered wrong and deserving criticism is everything to do with the destruction wrought and the sufferings inflicted by and on humans exclusively, *nothing with that caused to nonhuman nature*, nature being a relevant factor in the criticism simply due to the fact that the exploitation in question does so mediated by outer nature. To invoke the Marxian schema on which this analysis relies: capital exploits labor in order to generate profit. It does so by controlling the processes and mechanisms (private possession of the means of production, etc.) by way of which labor performs that exploitation of man's other (Marx). There is a triad involved for exploitation to come about, a triad counting two social forces and one natural. Only what passes between the two social forces – capital and labor – is considered a suitable object of critique: they are, they define and exhaust the *loci* within which wrong takes place; nature is precluded as such locus. That nature is being exploited for the sake of man is viewed as a sheer fact of existence, and as such beyond the scope of meaningful (political, social, moral) critique. So, while nonhuman beings may also suffer, the only instance of suffering that counts is the unnecessary or "surplus" (Marcuse) one that man continues to inflict upon his fellow men.

It will not do to maintain the conventional anthropocentric framework that the Frankfurters as well as Western Marxism subscribe to, where only humans are admitted intrinsic value (or inherent worth) and where humans are socialized so as to regard themselves as apart from nature rather than as part of nature, as superior (based on some criterion – intelligence, in the culturally dominant version – handpicked by men themselves for the purpose) and so as the sole creatures on earth who are ends in themselves and so entitled to

use nonhuman nature as a big reservoir of means for human-positing ends. Space does not permit making the case for the non- (as opposed to anti-) anthropocentric position I defend, based on a strong version of ecologically informed realism where value is not understood as the prerogative of human subjects but as a quality – property, characteristic – that is constantly being brought forward, sustained, and protected in all living organisms as well as in and by the ecosystems they comprise, manifesting itself as the species-specific good-of-its-own pursued and defended in all forms of life (see Taylor 1986; Rolston 1988; Vetlesen 2015).

There is something surprisingly uncritical about how the leading thinkers in Critical Theory have simply taken over the anthropocentric perspective on the human–nonhuman, society–nature relationships. Philosophically, it is remarkable that the fact/value and is/ought distinction subscribed to by Western thinkers at least since Hume’s warning against the naturalistic fallacy – deriving something normative from the factual, something about how things ought to be from the way they are – is perpetuated by generations of theorists aspiring to critique the key premises on which Western modernity is based.

### Taking Nature for Granted

Against this background, let us investigate in more detail what Habermas’ account of modernity as worked out in *Theory of Communicative Action* says about nature.

Habermas makes a distinction between the material and the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld. We saw above that the framework he develops to analyze the crises and pathologies he views as peculiar to late capitalist modernity is built around the system/lifeworld constellation, whereby systemic imperatives of money and power cross borders, as it were: not content to remain within their proper bounds within the economy and the state, the imperatives expand their reach so as to colonize the symbolic components of the lifeworld, producing distinct pathologies there inasmuch as the lifeworld cannot without distortion be sustained instrumentally and strategically instead of by way of the communicative, validity-redeeming, and speech-act mediated give-and-take of its individual members.

But what about the other dimension within which a concrete historical lifeworld is being sustained over time, the material one? Habermas has surprisingly little to say about it – both in general and as far as its relevance for the causes of crisis and pathologies is concerned. On closer inspection, the categories for which we seek are virtually empty, vacuous, in the 1200 pages making up his major work. True, he does note what he calls “the destructive side effects of the violent processes of capital accumulation and state formation.” But instead of dwelling on how this destruction plays out in nature and from the point of view of the non-human creatures affected, Habermas goes on to observe, coolly, that “the capitalist mode of production [...] can better fulfill the tasks of materially reproducing the lifeworld [...] than could the institutions of the feudal order that preceded them” (II, 321).

I believe the reason for this view on Habermas’ part is fairly simple: Habermas takes it for granted that nature in the way it figures in the material reproduction is basically a reliable factor, likely to remain so in the foreseeable future, so that what a society such as ours needs to take from nature in the form of resources and goods, nature will deliver. Again, the way a given society goes about *organizing* its ongoing exploitation of nature seen and treated as a vast reservoir of resources and *distributing* the goods among the humans (classes, nations, individuals) in need of them is an eminently contested political and ideological issue, and as such a long-standing concern of Western Marxism (see Habermas 1976).

What is overlooked in such a perspective is that in many regions of the world today natural goods and resources that both parties to the capital–labor constellation have relied upon and have taken for granted that they can continue to count on are either becoming increasingly scarce, or downright depleted, or so degraded as to be unable to recover and replenish.

Consider the following well-documented facts. In the last fifty years, the number of animals in the world has been halved. Three out of nine critical boundaries/thresholds of the earth system have been crossed (climate change, biodiversity, and human interference with the nitrogen cycle), while four others (ocean acidification, global freshwater use, changes in land use, and the phosphorous cycle) represent emerging rifts (see Magdoff and Foster 2011: 12f.). In the course of the year's first seven months, the global economy has used up resources it takes the affected ecosystems twelve months to reproduce and replenish. And so on and so forth. Now this is what *overshoot* is all about, what happens when a society goes beyond its carrying capacity, overutilizing resources by way of employing over-efficient methods and technologies, taking from nature more than nature is able to give back, and doing so at an increasingly greater pace and with ever-expanding reach on what is one physically finite planet.

To recognize the importance of this, consider that exploitation as constituting the *modus operandi* of capitalism as we know it is two-dimensional: when capital exploits labor, that labor is put to use so as to exploit nature in ways conducive to growth and profit. Short of a nature that provides the substrate at which labor directs its effort in turning everything into commodities to be accorded a price tag on a market, the foundation for capital's ability to have those commodities produced and sold would evaporate. And it is not only that nature is invaluable to the process of making and selling commodities; nature is also invaluable to the reproduction of the human subjects that make up capital and labor as social classes. Humans are not a self-sufficient species; we cannot, strictly speaking, feed ourselves. We can only do so, and thereby help sustain humanity over time, by relying on the air, water, and soil that nature, and only nature, provides. Both humanity's and capital's existence depend on nature in this respect.

As indicated, Adorno, Horkheimer, and Habermas all subscribe to the premises of Western Marxism on this point. They all, that is, focus their critical attention so one-sidedly on the man-to-man exploitation as to neglect the man-nature one. They treat as secondary and derivative what is in fact primary: for lack of intact nature to exploit, the entire capital/labor dynamic will grind to a halt. Only at the moment when it is so degraded as to no longer be there for the taking, does the irreplaceability and indispensability for man, for capital, of the nature mistreated as mere means begin to dawn on us, reluctantly, belatedly. To fail to recognize as much is to prolong a blind spot in Marx, the nineteenth-century thinker, into the twenty-first century, a period whose distinct crises cannot be understood as long as the blind spot remains.

The point I am making is corroborated in economist Herman Daly's insistence that "the economy is a subsystem of the ecosystem, and that the containing ecosystem is finite, non-growing and materially closed" (Daly 2007: 2). Using Daly's terms, when the giants in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century economic thinking such as Smith, Ricardo, and Marx developed their theories, the world was relatively empty of humans and artifacts, products, and waste; today it is increasingly full. Hence, *the pattern of scarcity has changed fundamentally*: the limiting factor has changed from man-made to natural capital. Daly's reasoning is worth quoting *in extenso*:

In yesterday's empty world man-made capital and labour were limiting; in today's full world natural capital with its flow of natural resources and flux of natural services is limiting. The fish catch is no longer limited by the number of fishing boats (man-made capital), but by the remaining populations of fish in the sea (natural capital). Cut timber is no longer limited by saw mills, but by standing forests. Energy from petroleum is no longer limited by pumping and drilling capacity, but by the remaining geological deposits. [...] The difficulty is that the condition of maintaining productive capacity intact has in the empty world been applied only to man-made

capital. Natural capital has not been maintained intact by any depreciation or depletion set-asides. The unsustainable depreciation and depletion of natural capital has therefore been counted as income, as if it were sustainable consumption.

(Daly 2007: 252, 28)

As Daly shows, economic thinking and practice have not changed, even though the limiting factor has. Man-made and natural capital continue to be seen and treated as substitutes, although in fact they are complements instead. What Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen (1975) designated “the fallacy of endless substitution” – a fallacy he attributed equally to the neo-classical school of economics underpinning current neoliberalism and to the Marxist one – is borne out empirically in that the capitalist system tries to survive by way of the only route it recognizes, namely by exploitation-facilitated growth. In persisting on sticking to this course, capitalism is bound to undermine the sources of value (profit) for which planet earth, within whose physical and biological limits this system is bound to operate, has no substitutes. We need to acknowledge – in their interconnectedness and mutual dependency – the two dimensions in which exploitation takes place: whereas human capital is overused and overstretched so as to result in *burnout* in the individual human agents affected, natural capital is overexploited so as to result in *overshoot* within the ecosystems involved, the consequence being the disappearance of habitat, the erosion of the soil, the toxification of the seas (now exacerbated by microplastics entering the marine food chain), the extinction of species, the loss of biodiversity, etc., referred to above.

That capitalism in its contemporary global reach overexploits and depletes the two absolutely essential and irreplaceable sources of value (profit) – the living nature that abounds in the natural world and the living nature that each human being exhibits throughout her life and in each instance of performing labor – and that capitalism as we know it cannot help itself from thus ruining the conditions it depends on strike me as *the* “paradox of modernity” that presently is playing itself out. And yet it is a paradox whose origins, mechanisms, and symptoms both the first and the second generation of critical theorists seem either unable or unwilling to acknowledge. True, Adorno and Horkheimer can hardly be faulted for not having addressed the specifics of a degradation that has accelerated in the last few decades in particular. Habermas for his part cannot be that easily let off the hook, being a contemporary to the trends we have witnessed at least since the 1970s. But my main charge against all three of them – and this goes for the likes of Marcuse and Honneth as well, although I cannot argue the case here – is that the nature deficit I have identified is essentially philosophical and not a matter of being more or less up to date with the empirical facts. Whether writing prior to the most severe ecodestructive trends or writing (as do Habermas and Honneth) at a time when they proliferate to the point of looming disaster, my point of criticism is the same: the very framework within which all three generations conceive of the society–nature relationship has proved inadequate to come to terms with what is at stake.

Return now to the case of Habermas. For all its ambition to offer an exhaustive analysis of the crises that characterize late modernity capitalism, the paradox of modernity in the way I have formulated it exposes a serious conceptual poverty in Habermas’ theory. Consider, for a start, his catalog of “formal world concepts” with corresponding epistemic domains, validity claims, attitudes, and types of discourse: there is no distinct category for such natural entities and beings as trees, birds, and rivers; for habitats and ecosystems. In fact, there is no “natural world” in Habermas’ technical terminology; there is only an objective world, as distinct from a social and subjective one. And that objective world is defined as consisting of the totality of entities and states of affairs (“Tatsachen”) with respect to which propositions may be either true or false. The elementary distinctions between organic and inorganic, animal and inanimate, between nonhuman entities and artifacts, and between the grown and the

produced get lost insofar as everything covered by these distinctions is put undifferentiatedly within the “objective” world.

Indeed, on this score Habermas’ entire *oeuvre* exhibits great consistency and continuity. Since the 1960s and up to the present, the leitmotif of his notion of critique has remained the same: to prevent relations between men – social relations – from becoming like our relations with the natural world (see Alford 1985: 77). Habermas has always subscribed to and never questioned Marx with regard to the distinction-cum-ontological dualism invoked here: society holds out the promise of freedom, nature is the realm of necessity; subjects with powers of agency exist only within the human-made social and cultural domain, nature remains the domain of objects, passively awaiting whatever projects homo sapiens pursues. Conceptually, Habermas continues to regard nature the way he did in his first major statement, *Knowledge and Human Interests*. The theory of quasi-transcendental epistemic interests may have been abandoned, but the triadic model is not and the objectivating stance continues to define the framework and methodology for scientific knowledge (“Naturwissenschaft”). In short, the species-bound interest in mastery and “technical control over objectified processes” (1972: 309), secured through a combination of laboratory experiments and carefully executed interventions (Bacon), is held on to. No nature-derived or nature-directed limits to such will-to-control over nature are seriously entertained – not empirically, and not morally. Indeed, the appropriate, and in that sense rational, type of action with respect to nature is that of purposive-rational action. This is not to say that, on Habermas’ scheme, other stances, attitudes, and types of action with respect to, say, a tree or a landscape, are not possible. But it is to say that such alternatives to the objectifying, purposive-rational stance, exhibiting cognitive-instrumental rationality and its validity claims of pragmatic efficiency and propositional truth, must be considered *inferior* as far as rationality is concerned and as *mistaken* as far as the appropriate validity claim is concerned. To greet and respect trees on the grounds that they too are subjects, loci of agency (as indigenous peoples do (did)), and as prescribed in mythical worldviews, in animism and in panteism, would amount to downright *regression* when measured against the modern scientific worldview that presently is being adopted by – or imposed upon – the whole world. As long as it operates within its proper domain of knowledge and intervention, i.e., external nature, the technical cognitive interest geared to mastery and control is *the* rational stance. Habermas puts it unequivocally:

While we can indeed adopt a performative attitude to external nature, enter into communicative actions with it, have aesthetic experiences and feelings analogous to morality with respect to it, there is for *this* domain of reality only one *theoretically fruitful* attitude, namely the objectifying attitude of the natural-scientific, experimenting observer.

(1982: 243f.)

Now recall what Descartes stated in his *Principles of Philosophy*:

There exist no occult forces in stones and plants. There are no amazing sympathies and antipathies, in fact there exists nothing in the whole world of nature which cannot be explained by purely corporeal causes totally devoid of mind and thought.

(Descartes 1644: para. 187)

To be sure, Habermas expresses his position using other terms than did Descartes. But one is hard pressed to find substantive ontological, epistemological, and methodological differences between their statements.



## Reproducing Selectivity

Why is it that Habermas fails to address society's escalating destruction of the natural world? Why, that is, does he restrict his scope of criticism to the inward-directed instances of the system's colonization of the lifeworld when the outward-directed instances of the system's twin imperatives – money and power, both wedded to and depending on never-ending growth – are no less dangerous? Why does Habermas shy away from what Paul Shepard in *Nature and Madness* suggested is the pivotal question in our time: “Why do men persist in destroying their habitat?” (Shepard 1982: 1).

That the domination of nature and the domination of man go hand in hand remains a crucial insight of first-generation Critical Theory, one to which Habermas subscribes. Yet the selectivity – to turn Habermas' critique of Weber against Habermas – with which this insight is pursued is no less conspicuous in Habermas than in his predecessors. Habermas' theory remains loyal to the axiom upon which capitalist modernity is premised: both his “critical theory” of this society and that society take it for granted that, as far as danger, damage, and pathologies are concerned, what matters is the human-to-human axis, not the human-nonhuman and the society-nature one. As we have seen, cognitive-instrumental rationality in conjunction with an objectivating attitude seeking technical control and gaining mastery over nature so as to exploit her resources for human ends is perfectly legitimate within its proper domain, indeed epistemically superior to any alternatives. The same holds for the imperatives of money and power within their proper domain, the systems of economy and administration. Problems arise, crises threaten, and pathologies may follow only in the case where what is the perfectly appropriate sort of rationality within one domain starts *encroaching upon others* so as to gain primacy there – hence the system's colonization of the lifeworld.

In this entire setup – immensely theoretically complex and impressive in its empirical reach – the role of nature is oddly absent, the voice of nature silenced. Not how the systemic imperatives distort – to the point of degradation, depletion, extinction – the *integrity of nature* concerns Habermas, but only how they distort the integrity of the lifeworld. What Habermas fails to acknowledge is that the integrity of the lifeworld can only be preserved on the condition that nature's integrity is. Habermas' work fails to recognize that the two are connected in such a way as to involve the ontological *primacy* of nature over the lifeworld, revealing humankind's continuity with nature as well as non-optional dependence on her – a dependence we should safeguard and celebrate instead of either fighting it or denying it, misjudging it as something negative.

To conclude, I believe that the exposed one-sidedness of Habermas' theory of the causes of crises and the pathologies they produce mirrors the one-sidedness of the (selective, capitalist) modernization process he sets out to critically examine. This may well be the price he pays for staying too close to the object of his inquiry: the neglect of the damage done to the nonhuman world reflects in theory the indifference and carelessness fostering and accompanying those damaging practices.

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# CRITICAL THEORY AND THE LAW

*William E. Scheuerman*

Otto Kirchheimer (1905–1965) and Franz L. Neumann (1900–1954), the early Frankfurt School's resident legal and political thinkers, can be credited with bringing the imposing legacy of Weimar jurisprudence and state theory into a productive conversation with first-generation Frankfurt School Marxism. Between 1936 and 1942, a crucial conjuncture during which Max Horkheimer, the Institute for Social Research's Director, encouraged interdisciplinary social inquiry, Kirchheimer and Neumann were able to contribute creatively to the Institute's intellectual profile. Although they never garnered the attention bestowed on their Frankfurt colleagues (e.g., Adorno, Marcuse, and Horkheimer), renewed interest in their writings played a key role in the revitalization of critical legal scholarship in Germany and elsewhere in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Without a proper grasp of their legacy, it is difficult to make sense of the ambitious contributions to legal sociology and jurisprudence by the Frankfurt School's pivotal second-generation thinker, Jürgen Habermas (1929–). Their oftentimes prescient insights still provide a fruitful starting point for analyzing contemporary legal developments. Not surprisingly perhaps, we can find echoes of their ideas among Frankfurt critical theorists who are grappling with challenges posed by globalization to the rule of law and constitutionalism.

## **Neumann and Kirchheimer: Adieu to General Law and the Modern State**

Born in Kattowitz (formerly East Prussia), Neumann pursued legal studies at Breslau, Leipzig, Rostock, and ultimately Frankfurt, where his most important mentor was Hugo Sinzheimer, a prominent left-wing labor and criminal lawyer, one architect of the ill-fated Weimar Constitution, and author of some of its socialist features (e.g., Article 165, which called on labor and capital jointly to manage the economy). During the Weimar Republic's final years, Neumann—like Sinzheimer, a lawyer and Social Democratic Party (SPD) activist—wrote widely for political, legal, and especially labor law journals, with his efforts generally focused on defending labor rights and a distinctly reform-socialist interpretation of the Weimar system as situated “between capitalism and socialism.” Even Neumann's specialized writings on Weimar labor law always evinced familiarity with the ideas of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and leading contemporary political and legal thinkers (e.g., Hermann Heller, Hans Kelsen, Karl Renner, and Carl Schmitt). Working alongside another young socialist lawyer, Ernst Fraenkel (with whom he shared a legal practice in Berlin during Weimar's final years), Neumann began laying the groundwork for his most important theoretical claim when subsequently based at the Institute for Social Research: contemporary monopoly capitalism

undermines the generality of the legal norm and thereby the fundamentals of any normatively defensible conception of the *Rechtsstaat* or “rule of law” (Neumann 1957, 1978). According to this view, a resolute defense of the rule of law was both a political necessity and an essential component of a sound critical theory.

Born in Heilbronn (and tragically orphaned at a young age), Kirchheimer began his intellectual career as a fierce left-socialist critic of Weimar and the mainstream SPD. Always drawn to a politically diverse range of outspoken teachers (including the socialist Heller, but also right-wingers like Schmitt and Rudolf Smend), he acquired a broad legal and jurisprudential training, before ultimately moderating his enmity to Weimar and making a name for himself as an up-and-coming socialist jurist. His publications on a host of timely legal and political issues appeared in prominent journals like *Die Gesellschaft*. By the early 1930s, Kirchheimer, like Neumann, could look forward to a promising career as an outspoken left-wing lawyer and intellectual with links to the SPD (Kirchheimer 1972, 1976).

Hitler’s seizure of power in 1933 abruptly forced both men—Jews as well as socialists—to flee Germany and recalibrate their intellectual profiles in accordance with the inhospitable dictates of forced exile. More fortunate than many others, they escaped Nazism and eventually found their way to Horkheimer’s Institute for Social Research, now located in New York’s Morningside Heights. Deeply political creatures, Neumann and Kirchheimer, not surprisingly, immediately focused their efforts on critically analyzing the evolving Nazi political and legal order, which they both viewed as a cataclysmic culmination of basic structural tendencies operative in modern society. Like other first-generation Frankfurt School theorists who interpreted fascism as rooted in underlying societal pathologies, they emphasized the epochal implications of the transformation of classical or competitive capitalism, “based on the assumption of a large number of entrepreneurs of about equal strength, freely competing with each other on the basis of freedom of contract and freedom of trade, with the entrepreneur investing his capital and his labor for the purpose of his economic ends, and bearing the risks involved” (Neumann 1944: 258), into contemporary “monopoly” capitalism. In the latter, mammoth corporations possess structural advantages vis-à-vis small- and medium-sized firms, cartels and other anticompetitive institutions become commonplace, and the “self-regulating” market declines, as state intervention proves ubiquitous and economic risks are eliminated for the largest economic units.

The pair’s most important contribution to Frankfurt School theory was to trace what Neumann called the “change in the function of law in modern society” to capitalism’s shifting contours (Scheuerman 1996). Cautiously hopeful that monopoly capitalism might prove at least temporarily consonant with some version of welfare state democracy, for both thinkers the trauma of Weimar encouraged them to view it as inimical even to bare rudiments of a decent political and legal order. Its Marxist preoccupation with shifts in material production notwithstanding, their account broke decisively with leftist orthodoxy by highlighting modern law’s indispensable protective functions. In Neumann’s formulation, the rule of law, and particularly its conceptual centerpiece, the classical demand for relatively clear, prospective, and *general* legal norms, represented modern rational natural law’s most important legacy: “The principles which are still valid, although not solely derived from Natural Law” are the generality of law and closely related idea of an independent judiciary (Neumann 1957 [1940]: 90). On this account, general law possessed a historically transcendent “ethical function”:

The generality of laws and the independence of the judge guarantee a minimum of personal and political liberty. The general law establishes personal equality, and it forms the basis of all interferences with liberty and property. Therefore the character of law which alone permits such interference is of fundamental significance.  
(Neumann 1957 [1937]: 42)

The fundamental dilemma at hand was that the rule of law's social and economic presuppositions vanished with the transition from competitive to monopoly capitalism. Although legal reality in competitive capitalism had never seamlessly meshed with strict models of the rule of law, monopoly capitalism demanded, in both qualitatively and quantitatively unprecedented ways, discretionary and increasingly specialized legal interventions or "individual measures," inconsonant with conventional ideas of general or formal law. While "competitive society requires general laws as the highest form of purposive rationality, for such a society is composed of entrepreneurs of about equal value," contemporary society generated individualized and oftentimes discretionary legal regulation (Neumann 1957 [1953]: 168). "If the state is confronted only by a monopoly, it is pointless to regulate this monopoly by a general law" (Neumann 1957 [1937]: 52).

Core economic realities, in conjunction with corresponding political-institutional shifts, meant that the basically admirable modern aspiration for the "rule of law" was now under direct attack. Monopoly capitalism generated an ominous *deformalization* of law destructive of a host of auxiliary legal institutions (e.g., an independent judiciary). Substantial empirical evidence suggested that deformalization directly served privileged economic actors because they typically were best placed to exploit law's vague and open-ended contours. The road not just to authoritarianism but totalitarianism was paved because the rule of law necessarily constituted the indispensable basis for a bare modicum of liberty. Finally, totalitarianism entailed unmediated domination not simply by powerful political players but also—and perhaps more significantly—by big economic interests.

During the 1930s and early 1940s, Neumann and Kirchheimer undertook systematic research on National Socialism—in their account, a "totalitarian monopoly capitalist" system exhibiting contemporary capitalism's deepest pathologies—in order to corroborate this general diagnosis. Kirchheimer contributed chiefly by publishing detailed individual studies on various aspects of Nazi law (Burin and Schell 1969; Kirchheimer 1976), while Neumann employed such specialized inquiries as the basis for his *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism* (1944), a mammoth study devoted to demonstrating that Nazism's horrors stemmed directly from the structural transformations of bourgeois society, and especially general law's incongruence with contemporary capitalism. Because of its underlying economic sources, deformalization represented a universal trend. The Nazi case, however, suggested that it was likely to prove particularly perilous when monopoly capitalism lacked minimal liberal and democratic checks on it.

National Socialism also provided evidence for the *destatization* or *disintegration of state sovereignty*, a second developmental tendency Neumann and Kirchheimer viewed as operative in modern bourgeois society. In *Behemoth's* final pages, Neumann left his readers with the surprising conclusion that the conventional notion of modern states "conceived as rationally operating machineries disposing of the monopoly of coercive power" no longer was useful for describing Nazism, a system in which privileged ruling blocs (the party, upper civil service, army, and monopoly capital) controlled "the rest of the population directly, without the mediation of that rational though coercive apparatus hitherto known as a state" (Neumann 1944: 467, 470). Neumann believed that he had empirically demonstrated that Nazism's ruling interests, "each operating under the leadership principle, each with a legislative, administrative, and judicial power of its own," had effectively dispensed with general law and a "rationally operating bureaucracy" standing above them and, when necessary, resolving conflicts in a binding manner (Neumann 1944: 468). A measure of social cohesion was guaranteed not by a state apparatus acting via general law but instead primarily by imperialist plunder, with its benefits accruing disproportionately to privileged political and social groupings. As Kirchheimer noted in "Changes in the Structure of Political Compromise," the Nazi leadership—and especially Hitler—could occasionally arbitrate between

and among the regime's competing power groupings only "because the unfolding program of [military] expansion has given the various groups the possibility...of satisfying their desires without too much need of getting in each other's way" (1969 [1941]: 158).

The destatization thesis was intended, at least in part, as a rejoinder to Friedrich Pollock and other Institute colleagues (including Horkheimer) who had begun sketching out an alternative account of Nazism as a totalitarian variant of "state capitalism." According to Pollock's competing diagnosis, traditional market capitalism was being supplanted not by monopoly capitalism, but instead by a novel state-centered capitalism in which the state apparatus assumed decisive economic functions (Pollock 1982 [1941]). Neither Neumann nor Kirchheimer believed that Pollock's thesis could withstand rigorous conceptual or empirical scrutiny, in part because it badly overstated the contemporary state's autonomy, administrative coherence, and rationality. Pollock's "state," when carefully examined, in fact consisted of unwieldy conglomerations of fused public and private power interests.

Notwithstanding their critique, Pollock's view soon became dominant within the Institute. Nonetheless, Neumann and Kirchheimer's alternative position later garnered attention from many scholars—most famously perhaps, Hannah Arendt—struggling to make sense of the apparent "shapelessness" of the National Socialist power apparatus (Iakovu 2009). It also at least briefly influenced US wartime policy: from 1942 until 1945, Neumann and Kirchheimer became key figures in the Office of Strategic Services, tasked with planning for postwar central Europe, with Neumann's *Behemoth* briefly taking on a programmatic role (Laudani 2013).

Monopoly capitalism not only undermined formal or clear general law but also its key institutional presupposition, the modern state "disposing of a monopoly of coercive power." The disintegration of modern stateness or sovereignty, as evinced so clearly by Nazi Germany, illuminated another general trend: state institutions increasingly were parceled out to deeply antagonistic social (and political) interests, with the state no longer possessing a sufficient minimum of institutional coherence. In contemporary society, domination was to an ever greater degree being exercised absent not only modern law but also basic attributes of modern stateness. Rather than the statist "Leviathan" theorized by Thomas Hobbes, political institutions in Germany and elsewhere tended to approximate what the seventeenth-century philosopher had described as an ominous and disorderly "Behemoth."

As Kirchheimer observed in the aptly entitled "In Quest of Sovereignty," this general trend posed the question "as to whether the term 'state' may still be considered an appropriate starting point for an inquiry into the power relationships of social forces in present-day society" (1969 [1944]: 161). Contemporary political life was lacking in a realistic "hope of finding a permanent subject of sovereignty that would be intent on, and capable of, balancing the interests and volitions of different groups and factions" (1969 [1944]: 191). Carl Schmitt's reactionary decisionist model of sovereignty, Kirchheimer speculated, simply reproduced a worrisome historical conjuncture in which "emergency in permanence becomes the genuine symbol of the very absence of that system of coordination to which history traditionally affixes the attribute of sovereignty" (1969 [1941]: 191).

As Marxists, Neumann and Kirchheimer occasionally hinted at the possibility of transcending or at least transforming modern state power in a postcapitalist society. In the context of a class-divided or socially antagonistic society, however, the modern state continued, on their view, to serve basic protective functions. The premature realization of "statelessness" in contemporary capitalism was likely to generate, as Nazism demonstrated, unmediated control by those possessing *de facto* power. Only the modern state could effectively rein in privileged power blocs: its dismantlement under present-day conditions portended not utopia but instead dystopia.

Influenced by Hermann Heller, Neumann defined the state as a “sociologically sovereign institution” or “the totality of men [sic] who exercise the highest legal power, and the totality of men to whom such legal power is delegated” (Neumann 1986 [1936]: 23). The state exercised power by means of both general law (and the rule of law) and, when necessary, individual commands or decisions. On this view, the modern state faced the task of squaring the circle of general law with sovereignty, or “highest right” with “highest might,” a task rendered effectively impossible by the socially antagonistic contours of modern bourgeois society. In an innovative reinterpretation of modern political and legal theory, Neumann tried to show that the tradition’s great canonical figures from Hobbes and Locke to Hegel could be plausibly interpreted as struggling to explain how sovereignty and the rule of law might be successfully synthesized. On his reading, they were doomed to fail; even liberals like Locke, otherwise hostile to the state, ultimately justified far-reaching emergency or executive prerogative. The only thinker who pointed to the possibility of successfully resolving the contradiction turned out to be Rousseau, whom Neumann—revealingly—tentatively interpreted as a proto-socialist, or at least: a theorist who pointed in the direction of Neumann’s own desire for an egalitarian and socially homogeneous replacement for capitalism (Neumann 1986 [1936]: 136–137; Scheuerman 1994: 109–112).

Despite the tensions between sovereignty and law, the relationship remained partly symbiotic; law may require state coercion. The decay of general law, not surprisingly, transpired in conjunction with state sovereignty’s disintegration. Both processes, because intimately linked to basic trends in the structure of material production, necessarily predated National Socialism. Legal deformalization not only plagued the Weimar Republic but there as well

[t]he sovereignty of the state was no longer to be exercised by an independent bureaucracy, by the police and the army, but was supposed to rest in the hands of the entire populace which, for this purpose, would organize itself in voluntary associations.

(Neumann 1957 [1937]: 49)

Given Weimar’s deep political and social divides, however, this experiment failed. Without the mediating force of the modern “rational” state, outfitted with coercive mechanisms in principle capable of restraining powerful interests, domination merely took more direct forms.

Even in his writings from the early 1950s, Neumann—now a somewhat chastened Marxist, ensconced as Professor of Political Science at Columbia University—continued to underscore sovereignty’s protective functions. Although “fashionable to defame the concept of sovereignty,” he noted in a 1953 essay, amid conditions of inequality it performed useful protective functions. In international law, for example, the idea of state sovereignty attributed formal equality to all states “and a rational principle is thus introduced into an anarchic system. As a polemical notion, state sovereignty in international politics rejects the sovereign claims of races and classes over citizens of other states.” Consequently, Neumann concluded, the “notion of state sovereignty is thus basically anti-imperialist” (Neumann 1957 [1953]: 181–182).

### **Habermas: Rethinking the Rule of Law, Democracy, and the Social Welfare State**

Throughout his long and distinguished career, and thus decades prior to the publication of *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (1996 [1992]), Jürgen Habermas (1929–) has regularly directed his daunting intellectual acumen

to questions of legal theory and legal sociology (Specter 2010). Habermas systematically engaged legal matters while working on his *Habilitation* (or second dissertation), *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* [1989 [1962]], under the guidance of the project's advisor, the Marxist political scientist Wolfgang Abendroth.

In 1950s West Germany, Abendroth represented a direct link not only to an indigenous Marxism Nazism had virtually extinguished but also to the vibrant universe of left-wing Weimar jurisprudence. A student of Sinzheimer and Heller, Abendroth's main accomplishment in Adenauer's Germany was to update the original socialist idea of a "social *Rechtsstaat*," a concept Heller (and, though sometimes forgotten, also the young Neumann) had formulated in Weimar's waning days, and which subsequently garnered codification in Article 20 of the Federal Republic's Basic Law (1949). Against right-wing disciples of Carl Schmitt who read the Basic Law's endorsement of a "social *Rechtsstaat*" as nothing more than a call for modest state intervention in a sound bourgeois social order, Abendroth insisted that it not only left open the possibility of democratic socialism but immediately demanded extensive egalitarian reforms and the creation of an expansive democratized social welfare state. With the emergence of massive concentrations of economic power threatening "formal" democracy, in conjunction with the collapse of the classical liberal state/society divide, Abendroth believed only a far-reaching democratization of both state and economy could fulfill the Basic Law's demand for Germany to become a full-fledged "social rule of law."

The concluding programmatic sections of Habermas' *Structural Transformation* directly mirrored Abendroth's agenda. There Habermas offered a radical gloss on the idea of a social *Rechtsstaat*, following Abendroth's call for systematic democratization of the messy institutional configuration that had emerged in the context of organized capitalism and the collapse of the classical liberal separation of state and society. Habermas' claim that new forms of participatory critical publicity had to be realized in emerging "neo-feudal" institutional settings represented a creative application of Abendroth's original agenda (Habermas 1989 [1962]: 222–235).

It was partly under Abendroth's aegis that Habermas became so intimately acquainted with left-wing currents in interwar German law and legal thought, including some crucial contributions from Neumann and Kirchheimer. Like Neumann and Kirchheimer, Abendroth was not only a politically engaged leftist intellectual with a legal background, but one socialized in a context where socialist jurists like Renner and Sinzheimer, along with figures like Kelsen, Heller, and Schmitt, constituted major figures and (sometimes) interlocutors. Not surprisingly perhaps, well into the 1970s Habermas' legal reflections constituted an implicit and sometimes explicit dialogue with older traditions of left-wing German legal thought and *Staatsrecht* [public law]. To be sure, the young Habermas' writings always evinced more appreciation than either the *Staatsrechtler* or his Frankfurt Marxist predecessors for normative and philosophical questions and especially democracy's normative foundations. Yet the diagnostic parallels to Neumann and Kirchheimer remain striking.

In a lengthy introductory chapter to *Students and Politics* [*Student und Politik*] (1961), Habermas appropriated Neumann and Kirchheimer's core intuition from the 1930s: with the transition from competitive to monopoly or organized capitalism, the liberal rule of law—and especially the generality of legal statutes—disintegrates. There and then also in *Structural Transformation* [ST] Habermas argued that contemporary capitalism generates unchecked administrative and judicial discretion and increasingly authoritarian political and legal oversight. Even if fascism had been militarily defeated, authoritarianism still haunted not just the fledgling German Federal Republic but also other advanced capitalist societies. Directly echoing Neumann, he interpreted the idea of the generality of law as the very linchpin of the rule of law, a concept whose normative potential he emphatically underscored in



opposition to orthodox Marxist accounts, and which he envisioned as building on normatively praiseworthy elements of modern natural law (Habermas 1989 [1962]: 177–179; 284n88). As Habermas noted with evident frustration in a 1963 essay, Marx “went beyond Hegel to discredit so enduringly for Marxism both the idea of legality itself and the intention of Natural Law as such that ever since the link between Natural Law and revolution has been dissolved” (Habermas: 1974 [1963]: 113). Accordingly, the young Habermas tried to correct for this analytic rupture within Marxism by highlighting the rule of law’s implicit normative and political potential. By showing how it could be reconceived as a politically progressive *social* rule of law, Habermas hoped to overcome the unfortunate delineation of legality (and its origins in modern natural law) from radical politics. An updated version of the rule of law, in short, was indispensable to radical reform (Habermas 1974 [1963]: 116–118).

ST devoted significant energy to showing how the rule of law and the crucial idea of legal generality not only contributed to the calculability and security of competitive capitalism but also constituted part and parcel the bourgeois public sphere, a notion its author stubbornly refused to view as an altogether obsolescent leftover from liberalism. The liberal rule of law had proved critical to the bourgeois public sphere’s implicit emancipatory potential:

The bourgeois idea of a law based state, namely, the binding of all state activity to a system of norms legitimated by public opinion (a system that had no gaps, if possible), already aimed at abolishing the state as an instrument of domination altogether.

(Habermas 1989 [1962]: 82)

As Neumann had previously suggested, one might begin to conceive of the possibility, given certain social conditions, of overcoming the perennial contradiction between state sovereignty and law, or *voluntas* and *ratio*, and perhaps therefore a complete and more perfect rule of law “in which domination itself was dissolved; *veritas non auctoritas facit legem*” (1989 [1962]: 82).

Of course, this emancipatory agenda—for Habermas, as for his Frankfurt predecessors—remained unfulfilled in capitalism. The bourgeois public sphere’s idealized social and economic presuppositions were never met even during the golden age of competitive capitalism, which rested on social exploitation and political exclusion. Bourgeois society’s implicit utopia necessarily proved false. However, if “the objectively possible minimizing of bureaucratic decisions and a relativizing of structural conflicts” could be achieved in a *postbourgeois* context, Habermas speculated, the modern state might someday undergo the requisite transformation (Habermas 1989 [1962]: 235).

Notwithstanding his criticisms of the bourgeois public sphere, Habermas clearly admired classical liberalism’s aspiration for a “dissolution of domination into that easygoing constraint that prevail[s] on no other ground than the compelling insight of a [deliberatively grounded] public opinion” (1989 [1962]: 88). The simple idea that domination might be “dissolved” by means of free-wheeling rational discourse arguably inspired much of his subsequent work in an astonishing range of fields over the course of many decades. At times even more emphatically than either Neumann or Kirchheimer, as part of this story Habermas underscored not just general law’s “ethical” (and basically *protective* and *defensive*) functions, but also its key role as modern law’s *normative cornerstone*: law’s generality gave more-or-less direct expression to identifiably universalistic modes of moral-practical rationality on which its potential legitimacy rested. As late as 1976, he described law’s generality, defined as the quest for semantically general norms (and prohibition of individual measures), as indispensable to the quest to view modern law as potentially expressing “universalizable interests”

(Habermas 1976: 265). As Habermas there immediately conceded, Marxist critics had powerfully deconstructed the illusions of bourgeois formal or general law. Yet their critique, he added, itself presupposed modern law's implicit normative claim to offer a "rational basis" for state and society, a normative claim—he noted—that had been interrogated by a rich tradition of rational natural law extending from Hobbes to Hegel (Habermas 1976: 265).

Congruent with this emphasis on law's general semantic structure, the young Habermas sometimes endorsed Neumann and Kirchheimer's view that the deformalization and closely related "materialization" of modern law provided direct evidence for capitalist-based legal decay (Habermas 1989 [1962]: 177–179). The transition from competitive to contemporary capitalism, in short, produced a potentially disastrous legal decline, as classical general law was supplanted by discretionary, vague, and sometimes oddly moralistic ("unconscionable," "in good faith") legal directives. Such trends, as Neumann and Kirchheimer had previously argued, not only undermined basic legal protections but also provided a thin veneer for unmediated domination by privileged social interests. To be sure, Neumann and Kirchheimer always acknowledged the necessity of nonclassical law in the democratic welfare state: if a democratically elected parliament were to regulate individual monopolies, for example, it was not only silly but reactionary to deny it the authority to do so. Nonetheless, their failure to develop a sufficiently nuanced account of the nexus between democracy and the rule of law, in conjunction with vestigial elements of Marxist functionalism, probably prevented them from fully theorizing the issues at hand. In the final analysis, their diagnosis inferred a dramatic and somewhat one-sided Marxist *Verfallsgeschichte* [narrative of decay] rather than a more ambivalent and multipronged social process (Scheuerman 1994).

In striking contrast, even in Habermas' earliest writings, a competing and arguably more satisfactory interpretation of recent legal trends could be discerned. The democratization of new modes of political decision-making, even when unavoidably resting on non-general legal bases, could in principle compensate for perils resulting from the deterioration of law's *semantic* attributes. Even if legal regulation no longer took a clear, prospective, and general form, new participatory mechanisms might still secure greater democratic legitimacy. Citing Abendroth, Habermas noted that participatory innovations might in fact generate legal "predictability...not in every particular, to be sure, but certainly along general lines," as new "regularized procedures" emerged (Abendroth cited in Habermas 1989 [1962]: 230; also, Habermas 1961). Open-ended "materialized" law perhaps posed no necessary danger to either autonomy or legal security as long as the liberal rule of law was reconfigured as a social *Rechtsstaat*. Civil and political rights could be supplemented by social rights guaranteeing a share in social benefits and equal participatory rights in a decision-making context where state and society fused.

Only in this way can the political order remain faithful today, under the conditions of a public sphere that itself has been structurally transformed, to that idea of a public sphere as an element in the political realm once invested [but no longer necessarily so] in the institutions of the bourgeois constitutional state.

(Habermas 1989 [1962]: 226)

To the extent that the postwar welfare state had *already* tentatively moved in this direction, one could start to counter overly pessimistic views of recent legal trends. And to the degree that it might prospectively do so far more ambitiously, such anxieties might be put to rest altogether.

This (initially latent) analytic and diagnostic challenge to previous Frankfurt School legal scholarship became more pronounced during the 1980s. On my reading of Habermas' complex trajectory, a subtle yet crucial shift in emphasis can be discerned.

First, in his socio-theoretical magnum opus, *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984 [1981], 1989 [1987]), Habermas turned to a substantial literature in legal sociology to posit that *general* or *abstract* legal regulation sometimes counterproductively served as a conduit by means of which the “media-controlled subsystems of the economy and the state intervene[d] with monetary and bureaucratic means” in ways that undermined rather than buttressed autonomy (Habermas 1989 [1985]: 356). Inappropriate modes of general law contributed to a deleterious “colonization” of the lifeworld in social spheres—his examples included the family and schools—where they improperly undermined existing communicative structures: pathological “juridification” (*Verrechtlichung*) resulted. Law’s semantic generality no longer appeared, as it had for him in the 1960s and 1970s, as a normatively admirable though practically ambivalent feature of modernity’s moral-practical universalism, but instead as an attack on its most admirable features.

Second, in his Tanner Lectures, devoted to legal theory and delivered at Harvard during 1986–1987, Habermas broke even more cleanly with views of legality that emphasized its semantic generality and tied it “too concretely...to specific semantic features” (Habermas 1988: 242). A proper understanding of law’s universalistic (or general) normative energies, he argued, would do well to focus on general or universal processes of moral-practical rationality operative in processes of adjudication and especially democratic legislation. A normatively coherent notion of the rule of law, he concluded, would have to show how “legal procedures institutionalized for legislation and for the administration of justice guarantee impartial judgment and provide the channels through which practical reason gains entrance into law and politics” (Habermas 1988: 279). Such a view, in any event, could no longer rely on overly concretistic ideas of the rule of law that reduced its moral-practical universalism to law’s *semantic* generality.

The Tanner Lectures conveniently neglected to mention that Habermas had probably defended just such a position as late as 1976, and that his earlier writings, following Neumann and Kirchheimer, also emphasized the importance of law’s semantic virtues. By 1992, with the appearance of *Between Facts and Norms* (1996 [1992]) [*BFN*], he was ready to come clean. Though his great magnum opus in political and legal theory was perhaps indirectly inspired by Neumann and Kirchheimer—like Habermas, and unlike many others in the Frankfurt tradition, thinkers who stubbornly demanded that critical theory take modern law seriously—they only made a fleeting appearance in *BFN*. In a revealing but easily missed endnote, Habermas distanced himself from Neumann’s tendency to highlight law’s semantic generality, polemically grouping Neumann’s views alongside those of the infamous Carl Schmitt: “In Germany the discussion over the generality of legal statutes is still colored by the rather extreme views” of Schmitt, who unduly influenced postwar leftist German legal theory via Neumann: “I did not escape this influence myself” (Habermas 1996 [1992]: 564–565n75).

Whatever the merits of Habermas’ somewhat polemical exegetical claim about the Schmitt-Neumann nexus, there is no question that *BFN* successfully transcended not only Habermas’ previous legal theorizing but also that of Neumann and Kirchheimer. Given the work’s immense complexity, my discussion here remains unavoidably circumscribed.

An imposing contribution to contemporary political and legal scholarship, *BFN* relies on a broadly Neo-Kantian reworking of contract theory, and a proceduralist theory of (deliberative) democracy resting on it, to offer a rich account of the mutually dependent nexus between modern democracy and the rule of law. Synthesizing socio-theoretical and sociological legal theories with normative political and legal philosophy, Habermas’ volume weighs in not only on the most fundamental questions of political and legal philosophy, but also on a host of specific jurisprudential matters. Habermas there offers a creative account of what he calls the equiprimordiality of public and private autonomy to demonstrate how human rights and popular sovereignty need to be seen as mutually constitutive. Detailed discussions

of the adjudicative process, and competing views of legal interpretation, are systematically analyzed, as are the modern constitutional state's basic organizational principles (e.g., the separation of powers). Since legality's legitimacy rests ultimately on its deliberative democratic moorings, much of the volume is necessarily devoted to formulating both a normatively demanding and realistic democratic theory. In contrast to earlier writings, the author's original Hegelian-Marxism fades into the background, as does the tradition of Weimar *Staatsrecht* to which the young Habermas, like Neumann and Kirchheimer before him, tried to wed it. Not only Neumann and Kirchheimer's specific understanding of the rule of law, but also their Marxist critique of capitalism, tends to get pushed to the sidelines. Habermas' interlocutors in *BFN* prove suitably diverse, but the most striking shift perhaps is the author's dramatically heightened interest in Anglophone (and especially US) political and legal theory.

Despite major theoretical and programmatic shifts, one core element of Habermas' thinking in *BFN* remains both directly congruent with his earlier reflections and pertinent to our discussion here. In *BFN*'s final chapter, Habermas revisits the question of how a reformulated conception of the rule of law might contribute to political and social reform. As in his earliest writings, legal and social reform are tied at the hip, with a reconstructed model of legal regulation—here described as “proceduralist” law—serving as a core component of his (updated) version of radical reformism.

Unless subject to far-reaching reform, *BFN* argues, the capitalist welfare state produces apathetic and sometimes passive *clients* but not autonomous democratic *citizens*. Much of the blame is placed at the doorsteps of the two dominant approaches to legal regulation, i.e., classical (liberal) formal law and conventional (materialized) welfare state law. Even if classical liberals are still wrong to overstate the differences between social rights, on the one side, and civil and political rights, on the other side, the welfare state's shared normative ground with traditional liberal law comes at a high cost. Like its classical liberal predecessor, social welfare state-type legal institutions rest latently on a troublesome economic and productivist image of society: both legal paradigms privilege private over public autonomy. Stated in the simplest terms, just as classical liberalism favored the *bourgeois*, the modern welfare state too often sanctions passivity and civic privatism.

Habermas' alternative proceduralist model instead aspires to “secure the citizens' private and public autonomy *uno actu*: Each legal act should at the same time be understood as a contribution to the politically autonomous elaboration of basic rights” (Habermas 1996 [1992]: 410). In this model, specific addressees of legal regulation should conduct “public discourses in which they articulate the [relevant legal] standards and justify the relevant aspects” of possible state regulation to a greater degree than is presently achieved (Habermas 1996 [1992]: 425). The lawmaker would select from competing forms of legal regulation (potentially including formal and materialized law) “according to the matter that requires regulation...Choosing among alternative legal forms reflexively does not permit one to privilege just one of these forms” (Habermas 1996 [1992]: 425). In short,

Dealing with the law reflexively requires that parliamentary legislators first make meta-level decisions; whether they should decide at all; who should decide in the first place; and assuming they want to decide, what the consequences will be for the further legitimate processing of their broad legal programs.

(Habermas 1996 [1992]: 439)

Here citizens and ultimately lawmakers would deliberate about the specific regulatory tasks at hand and make meta-decisions about the best way to tackle them. In doing so, Habermas comments, they might still opt to employ familiar (i.e., formal and materialized) legal means. Yet they might also experiment with novel types of legal and administrative oversight.

Habermas sees proceduralist law as potentially playing a vital political role. If properly institutionalized, it might allow the welfare state to refurbish its democratic credentials and also successfully “tame the capitalist economic system” (Habermas 1996 [1992]: 410). In contrast to neoliberals who want to “break it off,” and also against those on the traditional left who seek its expansion along overly statist lines, Habermas advocates for a more “reflexive” welfare state, in which the administrative apparatus employs “mild means of indirect steering” so as to restructure the economy in socially and ecologically sensitive ways (Habermas 1996 [1992]: 410).

As in his *ST*, and with at least some faint echoes of Abendroth’s unabashedly leftist “social *Rechtsstaat*,” the fate of the welfare state is again directly welded to the prospect of reformed legal regulation. Notwithstanding major changes in his thinking since the early 1960s, Habermas continues to view a proper understanding of law, in general, and social welfare state legal regulation, in particular, as essential to viable left-wing politics.

### **The Frankfurt Legacy and Recent Critical Theory: Law Beyond the State?**

The writings of the first-generation Frankfurt legal scholars Neumann and Kirchheimer have had a significant resonance over the course of many decades. Many historians and political scientists—including one of Neumann’s Columbia University advisees, Raul Hilberg (2003)—immediately began employing his surprising thesis concerning National Socialism’s statelessness and “polycratic” power structure. Though the general revival of interest in the 1960s and 1970s in the early Frankfurt School sometimes neglected their place in the Institute’s history,<sup>1</sup> radical German legal and political scholars (e.g., Ingeborg Maus, Ulrich Preuss, and Jürgen Seifert), including many affiliated with the new journal *Kritische Justiz*, creatively built on Neumann and Kirchheimer to formulate trenchant criticisms of the jurisprudence of the German constitutional court, energetically reapplying the critique of legal deformalization to contemporary trends. Others (most prominently, Claus Offe) hoping to revitalize an identifiably Marxist theory of the state also referenced Kirchheimer and Neumann. Radical criminologists (e.g., the Italian Dario Melossi) during the same period found inspiration in Kirchheimer’s Frankfurt School-era writings on criminal law.

Habermas has also impacted a broad range of scholars working on legal questions. Recent theorists of constitutionalism (e.g., Andrew Arato, Günter Frankenberg, Chris Zurn) have relied productively on key elements of his agenda, while yet others have done so in order to develop sophisticated theories of legal and juridical interpretation (i.e., Klaus Günther). Axel Honneth, Habermas’ successor at Frankfurt, tries to resuscitate Habermas’ critique of juridification in his *Freedom’s Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life* (2014), while Hauke Brunkhorst reformulates Habermas’ contributions to a theory of social evolution (during the 1970s) as part of his own monumental “critical theory of legal revolutions” (Brunkhorst 2014). As part of their efforts to make sense of human rights and constitutionalization “beyond the nation state,” some third-generation Frankfurt critical theorists (e.g., Seyla Benhabib, Jean L. Cohen) have reworked important elements of Habermas’ legal thinking as well.

Such recent critical theory-inspired legal-theoretical work on globalization, interestingly, provides distant yet recognizable echoes of early Frankfurt theory’s anxieties about destitution and the decline of state sovereignty. As discussed above, though drawn to the Marxist view that socialism might fundamentally transform the modern state and state sovereignty, Neumann and Kirchheimer ultimately worried that the “rational” state’s premature demise in contemporary capitalism posed major threats. Neumann, in particular, staked out a rather defensive posture vis-à-vis traditional ideas of state sovereignty.

Habermas' oeuvre perhaps suffers from a similar analytic tension. *ST* tentatively suggested that radical social reform might fundamentally overhaul modern state sovereignty, as political domination per se "dissolved." However, his subsequent embrace of a reworked version of Niklas Luhmann's systems theory, with one clear implication being that *some* facets of the modern state (i.e., the administrative apparatus) could not realistically be rendered directly subject to radical democracy, pointed in a more cautious direction. By accepting some elements of systems theory, Habermas has tried to distance himself from holistic social theories that misleadingly inferred that social integration can be achieved via a central political agency (the state). Yet that analytic move simultaneously implies that the state administration is partly impervious to the "communicative power" motoring democracy and essential to its legitimacy.

Most recently, in his writings on globalization and the European Union (EU), Habermas follows Brunkhorst in sharply delineating modern stateness from the prospect of (democratic) constitutionalization:

A "state" is a complex of hierarchically organized capacities available for the exercise of political power or the implementation of political programs; a "constitution," by contrast, defines a horizontal association of citizens by laying down the fundamental rights that free and equal founders mutually grant each other.

(Habermas 2006: 131)

Analytically, one consequence of this divide is the reemergence within Habermas' thinking of what we might loosely describe as an anti-statist strand, albeit one lacking its original Marxist moorings. The key programmatic result, in any event, is the provocative thesis that it is both realistic and normatively desirable to pursue far-reaching democratization and constitutionalization "beyond the nation-state" absent corresponding forms of postnational stateness. In his political writings, Habermas thus praises the EU for having undertaken a historically significant legal and institutional innovation: the EU rests on "the primacy of supranational law over the national law of the monopolists on the means for a legitimate use of force" (Habermas 2012: 20). Representing a potentially constructive delineation of constitutionalization from stateness, the EU legal order successfully "binds the member states... even though it does not dispose over their sanctioning powers" (Habermas 2012: 25).

Habermas' interpretation has ignited some controversy. Given our analysis here, some reasons for possible concern can be quickly identified. Following Neumann, one might wonder whether the (alleged) dissolution of state sovereignty in the context of extreme inequality represents a step forward, or instead simply portends the decay of (state-based) protective devices useful to the politically and socially vulnerable. Within the EU's (allegedly) non-statist political and legal order, in fact, there is massive evidence not just of growing popular dissatisfaction, but also that the system is rigged in favor of big financial interests and the most powerful member-states. The present situation, in which controversial austerity programs are being promulgated via emergency (and legally dubious) top-down mechanisms, might be more plausibly viewed as corroborating Kirchheimer's unsettling prediction that sovereignty's premature dissolution means "emergency in permanence...because society has reached a stage where the equilibrium of group forces is utterly unstable" (Kirchheimer 1969 [1944]: 191).

Not surprisingly perhaps, other theorists working within the Frankfurt critical tradition have expressed qualms about condoning and even celebrating state sovereignty's decay. Ingeborg Maus, a political theorist inspired by Neumann, preserves some elements of the traditional discourse of state sovereignty, in part because she continues to see an integral link between democratic politics and the notion that in international affairs states should

be treated as legally equal and independent entities (Maus 2015). Popular sovereignty may require, as Rainer Schmalz-Bruns has suggested in a powerful critical response to Habermas, familiar elements of stateness: state-like organizations undergrid self-government. Democratic equality and liberty are best guaranteed by fair and reasonable procedures which can realistically be expected to have a determinative influence or impact on action. Influence of this type can perhaps only be achieved by forms of institutionalization with which we rightly associate familiar elements of stateness (Schmalz-Bruns 2007; also, Scheuerman 2009).

## Note

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- 1 For an important exception, see Söllner (1978) and, more recently, Stirk (2000).

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## Further Reading

Recent years have seen the appearance of a number of useful works on Neumann and Kirchheimer. Duncan Kelly situates Neumann's political and legal theory in relation to the ideas of Weber and Schmitt in his *The State of the Political: Conceptions of Politics and the State in the Thought of Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, and Franz Neumann* (Oxford: British Academy, 2003), while Jürgen Bast's *Totalitärer Pluralismus* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999) provides a systematic theoretical survey of Neumann's thinking within the context of interwar Marxism. Mattias Iser and David Strechers' edited volume, *Kritische Theorie der Politik. Franz Neumann—eine Bilanz* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2002), includes contributions from Raul Hilberg, Axel Honneth, Claus Offe, Ulrich K. Preuss, and others with longstanding interests in his legacy. A fine introduction to Neumann's work is Bernd Ladwig's "Die politische Theorie der Frankfurter Schule," in Andre Brodacz and Gary S. Schaal (ed.), *Politische Theorie der Gegenwart I* (Opladen: Verlag Barbara Burdrich, 2016, 4th ed.), 33–74. Frank Schale provides an overdue intellectual biography of Kirchheimer in *Zwischen Engagement und Skepsis: Eine Studie zu den Schriften von Otto Kirchheimer* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2006). Hubertus Buchstein is performing the overdue task of editing Kirchheimer's collected works (forthcoming with Nomos Verlag); in the process, he has discovered many previously overlooked pieces. In my *Frankfurt School Perspectives on Globalization, Democracy, and the Law* (London: Routledge, 2008), Neumann and Habermas are employed to make sense of the legal transformations wrought by economic globalization. In a volume edited by Kenneth Baynes and Rene von Schomburg (*Discourse and Democracy: Essays on 'Between Facts and Norms'* [Albany: SUNY Press, 2002]), a wide range of scholars investigate Habermas' recent legal theory. For an important and philosophically nuanced effort to do so, see Hugh Baxter's *Habermas: The Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).



# CRITICAL THEORY AND POSTCOLONIALISM

*James D. Ingram*

While it is possible to define Critical Theory narrowly, as the tradition that has grown out of self-conscious reference to the authors of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, postcolonialism, which emerged gradually out of different currents on several continents, is a more diffuse project. For the purpose of this chapter, “postcolonialism” will refer to critical writing that studies and seeks to make sense of the social, political, and cultural legacies of Western imperialism and colonialism. Its prefix reflects the fact that postcolonialism follows anti-colonialism, the struggle against Western imperialism, as well as the thinking that emerged with this struggle, in at least two respects: postcolonialism developed after most countries achieved formal decolonization and seeks to understand this new condition, and it often draws intellectual and political inspiration from the struggle and its leading thinkers, such as Mohandas Gandhi, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and C.L.R. James. Postcolonialism explores how the Western colonial and imperial domination that began in 1492 and ultimately encompassed most of the rest of the globe shaped and continues to shape our world—its social, political, and economic structures, but also the knowledge and identities of colonizers and colonized alike. In so doing, it represents a critical effort to understand one of the fundamental structures of power, knowledge, and identity in the modern world, and is to that extent itself a kind of global critical theory (Kerner 2018).

On this basis, we might imagine Frankfurt School Critical Theory and postcolonialism to be kindred, allied, or overlapping projects. On a methodological level, they have much in common. Both reject traditional humanistic and social scientific claims to produce timeless, perspectiveless knowledge. Instead, both assume that, as Horkheimer and Adorno put it in the 1969 Preface to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, truth has a “temporal core” (2002: xi) and that their task is to investigate the complex histories and current relations of power in which they are themselves situated. Both enterprises are accordingly highly reflexive, subjecting their own standpoint to endless scrutiny, asking how it is possible to arrive at knowledge that rises above the forces that produced it. In this pursuit, both enterprises reject traditional disciplinary boundaries, ranging widely across the humanities and social sciences in an effort to achieve as inclusive a view on the past and present as possible, even as both deny that a holistic “view from nowhere” is possible. Finally and most importantly, both see themselves as practical, seeking knowledge not for its own sake but in the name of emancipation, in order to help reverse the blindness, domination, violence, and unreason that have marked our history, from within and in light of which they to try think about present predicaments and future possibilities.

Yet despite these affinities and despite the fact that postcolonialism usually appears, along with feminism, anti-racism, queer theory, and others besides, on lists of approaches that

make up “critical theory” in a broad sense, Critical Theory and postcolonialism have had remarkably little to do with one another. On Critical Theory’s side, this is mainly because it was from its beginnings essentially a European or Euro-American enterprise. While Critical Theorists have sought to critically diagnose modernity as a global condition, they seldom if ever questioned the idea, inherited from the philosophical tradition out of and against which they wrote, that they could do so from modernity’s homeland and most advanced point, the West. On the other side, postcolonial writers, observing this, have more often than not regarded Critical Theory as part of the problem. As Edward Said wrote in a seminal text: “Frankfurt School critical theory, despite its seminal insights into the relationship between domination, modern society, and the opportunities for redemption through art as critical, is stunningly silent on racist theory, anti-imperialist resistance, and oppositional practice in the empire” (1993: 278). With many of his allies and followers, Said accordingly took his theoretical cues from elsewhere—mostly, like many of his fellows, from Foucault and others then regarded as the Frankfurt School’s “poststructuralist” rivals.

This chapter seeks to illuminate the contours and deeper reasons for the mostly missed encounter between postcolonialism and Critical Theory. While the Frankfurt School’s lack of interest in or appeal to postcolonial critics can be explained in part by their different locations and objects, Critical Theory’s Eurocentric focus on the West versus postcolonialism’s on the relations between the West and the rest of the world, they are divided by deeper theoretical and methodological issues. On a first approximation, these could be said to revolve around Critical Theory’s pursuit of a project of universal history as against postcolonialism’s hostility to the very idea of one. Yet this difference turns out to reveal deeper lines of affinity and divergence. As I will show, to the extent that the first generation of Critical Theory pursued this project of universal history negatively, the work of Benjamin, Horkheimer, and Adorno has struck deep resonances with postcolonial authors. These resonances were in turn stilled with Critical Theory’s subsequent shift under Habermas and his successors to a more positive construal of modernity’s legacies and potentials. None of this, however, need stand in the way of a productive dialogue between the two approaches today, as I show in the final section by surveying some promising efforts by scholars working within the Frankfurt School tradition to renew and expand Critical Theory by opening it to postcolonial arguments, approaches, and concerns.

### Critical Theory

From its beginnings, Critical Theory was founded on a tension. On the one hand, following in the legacy of Western philosophy, German Idealism, and Marxism, Critical Theory has hankered after a view of the whole to apprehend our global situation in all its elements. On the other hand, the very need to be “critical” arose from its conviction that all historical and contemporary attempts to take a universal perspective, be it in philosophy or in science, were fundamentally compromised, founded on their disavowal not only of their own partiality but, worse still, of their deep implication in structures of irrationality and domination. Even Adorno, for whom “the whole is the false” (1974: 50), shared the aspiration to speak of the contemporary condition as a whole.

Adorno continually reflected on the question of universal history, which, as he put epigrammatically in *Negative Dialectics*, “must be construed and denied” (1973: 320). This suggestion was more fully developed in a 1964 lecture where he acknowledged his debt to Benjamin’s notion of “negative universal history,” with its unforgettable image of “progress” as a single, mounting catastrophe (2006: 89–98). For Adorno a dialectical understanding of universal history must recognize that modern history constitutes a whole, which today takes the form of Benjamin’s catastrophe, yet at the same time seek to do justice to the particulars

that resist it and provide a glimpse of a redeemed world that would escape it. Such a view of modernity as a negative whole, unified in its tendency to assimilate, dominate, and control, always considered in light of the nonidentical particulars it suppresses and excludes, would turn out to resonate deeply with postcolonial concerns (Vázquez-Arroyo 2008). But neither Adorno nor his colleagues ever thought to consider how this negative universal might appear from a non-Western point of view.

To say that early Critical Theory tended to overlook Western imperialism is not to say that its thinkers were ignorant of it. Bruce Baum (2015) has shown how Horkheimer and Adorno, in their analyses of Nazi as well as American society in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, *The Authoritarian Personality*, and other studies of the 1940s and 1950s, were highly sensitive to the role of antisemitism and racism—two of the most important vectors and legacies of the imperial period—in the ideological and psychological structures of modern unreason and domination, even if their analyses did not extend beyond the West. Through the subsequent decades, Adorno in particular continued to assume a Marxian analysis that naturally encompassed imperialism and neo-imperialism, even if this seldom rose to the surface of his writings. In a 1968 lecture, for instance, he noted that “theories of imperialism have not been rendered obsolete by the great powers’ withdrawal from their colonies” and that capitalism continues to ensure that “human beings in large parts of the planet live in penury” (2003: 116, 121). But the observation comes as an aside, a passing example of the pervasive violence and irrationality of the modern world.

The same could be said of other Frankfurt School thinkers of the period: they were not unaware of the Western domination of the rest of the world that reached its zenith in the age of high imperialism and continues in less conspicuous ways into the present, but saw it as one index among others of the violence, irrationality, and hostility to otherness that characterize modernity as a whole. That modernity, however, remains basically Western. Herbert Marcuse, who chose to remain in the United States after the war and adopted an increasingly militant, revolutionary stance in his later years, may be the exception that proves the rule. In the late 1960s, Marcuse became a fierce critic of imperialism, vehemently opposing the US war in Vietnam and trumpeting the revolutionary potential of Third World liberation struggles. Yet he never dwelled on the specificities or long-term continuities of Western imperialism, or on its deeper significance for non-Western societies.

This configuration shifted with the disappearance of the School’s founding generation and the passing of the torch first to Jürgen Habermas and his contemporaries, then to their successors. In the shrinking world that emerged after the 1960s, the blithe Eurocentrism of the first generation became less and less plausible. Throughout his career, Habermas has directly engaged the question of the universality of his theory in a way his predecessors never had, from British debates about cultural relativism in the 1960s and 1970s to American debates about multiculturalism and cultural pluralism in the 1980s and 1990s to more recent discussions about human rights and democracy. In the new century, Habermas has gone farther still, entertaining the “postsecular” idea that modern societies can learn from religious worldviews and positing that the diffusion of modern technical and social forces will produce a world of “multiple modernities” (Mendieta and Habermas 2010). In these discussions, Habermas has tended to articulate a position that defends the validity of modern, rational solutions on a formal level while stressing their contextualism and revisability when it comes to their content. This reflects the architecture of his mature theory as a whole: while his communicative approach, from universal pragmatics (1979) to discourse ethics (1998), argues that truth must result from the testing of arguments in an open-ended discourse, any particular truth is contextual and provisional, just as the moral content of human rights must always be filled out and revised through open debate in particular cultural and political contexts (2001).

Frankfurt School Critical Theory in Habermas's wake can be seen as running in two quite different directions. One tendency that emerges from his reconstructive approach is to conclude that the lessons, positive and negative, of Western development are specific to particular societies and must be applied with caution, if at all, outside of them. Habermas himself took this tack when asked about the implications of his theory for the Third World. He demurred, allowing, "I am aware of the fact that this is a eurocentrically limited view. I would rather pass the question" (Dews 1992: 183). This strategy has been followed by his immediate successor at Frankfurt, Axel Honneth, who has pursued the Hegelian, reconstructive side of Habermas's approach. The result in Honneth's later works such as *Freedom's Right* (2014) and *The Idea of Socialism* (2017) has been to restrict his claims to the sorts of societies whose normative development he reconstructs.

The opposite tendency, to emphasize the universal validity of the logic of communication, is on display in the work of Rainer Forst, who has in effect doubled down on the formal, Kantian side of Habermas's legacy. In defending the universality of the normative basis of his practical philosophy, the "right to justification," Forst stresses that general and reciprocal justifications are owed to concrete agents in particular discourses with respect to specific demands (2012). Yet precisely because justifications must always be demanded and offered in particular contexts, the logic of reason-giving transcends them: the principle's universality is vouchsafed by its contextual realization. On Forst's approach, context sensitivity thus makes way for robust claims to universality.

Although the Frankfurt School in its second and third generations could be said to have opened itself to questions of social-cultural difference and Eurocentrism in a way its founders never did, a deeper shift in its orientation had an opposite effect. This grew out of Habermas's frustration with what he saw as the first generation's one-sided diagnosis of modernity. Whereas Horkheimer, Adorno, or Benjamin submitted modernity as a whole to withering scrutiny, finding it suffused by domination, irrationality, and regression, Habermas became convinced that for Critical Theory to be a constructive as well as a critical enterprise and to avoid sinking into mere moralism or utopianism, it needed to take a more differentiated view. In order to ground the critical enterprise, he undertook in a series of works through the 1970s culminating in his *Theory of Communicative Action* to reconstruct modern social and cultural evolution as a learning process.

As Amy Allen (2016) argues, with this step Habermas arrived at a developmental account of the social, moral, and epistemic superiority of modern Western societies. In the name of immanent critique, on which claims to knowledge and validity must be shown to arise from within the historical process itself, Critical Theory came to rest on a Eurocentric narrative of superior Western insight. Moreover, although she makes less of this, such narratives, be it in Habermas or in Honneth, tend to present Western development as internally generated, eliding the West's deep and profoundly asymmetrical relations with the rest of the world. Allen allows that Habermas undertook such an account in order to criticize modernity's pathological tendencies, but insists that its consequence has been to reinstate a view of Western development as the universal standard of modernity and rationality.

Allen's assessment of later Critical Theory has been widely shared by postcolonial authors, who tend to regard it as another version of modernizing Eurocentric progressivism, a late representative of a tradition that stretches from the Scottish Enlightenment via Kant and Hegel to Weber and Parsons (Bhambra 2007). The result may appear paradoxical. The first generation of Critical Theory, which of course preceded the emergence of postcolonialism but evinced virtually no interest either in the anticolonial struggles that preceded it or in the non-Western world as whole, nonetheless produced an approach to European modernity that has deep affinities with its postcolonial critique (Spencer 2010). Adorno is a particular

favorite of postcolonial authors (Gilroy 2004; Said 2007), while Benjamin's dark reflections on history are a staple of postcolonial literature.

Later Frankfurt School thinkers, beginning with Habermas, were much more open to claims from outside the West, and even engaged them. They did so, however, in part by developing a framework that has seemed to many to resurrect the worst tropes of Eurocentric progressivism, erecting the West as the standard of modernity and Enlightenment. It must be observed that this has not prevented generations of scholars from the postcolonial world from absorbing insights from later Critical Theory that they then deployed in creative and productive ways. At the same time, Habermas and his successors have engaged with issues of concern well beyond the West, from cultural and religious pluralism to the universality of human rights and the prospects for democratic global governance, that were entirely unknown by their predecessors. All the same, the long-term development of Critical Theory has produced a lasting fissure between it and postcolonial theory, as I will now outline from the other side.

### Postcolonialism

Unlike the Frankfurt School, postcolonialism has never had a center. To the contrary, it has developed not as a school but as the convergence of different intellectual currents. The first arose with the emergence in the 1980s in the United States and United Kingdom of scholars who married the continental, especially French, philosophy then being imported into the Anglophone academy with a focus on the legacies of Western imperialism within historical and contemporary thought and culture. Launched by Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), this wave was led by scholars working in literature departments in Britain and the United States, such as Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha. A second tributary was a group of Indian historians who called themselves, in homage to Antonio Gramsci, "Subaltern Studies," whose leading figures include Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, and Dipesh Chakrabarty. Against nationalist and Marxist approaches they found poorly adapted to the specificities of South Asian colonialism and resistance, they adapted Gramsci's cultural Marxism in order to write "history from below." While these currents sometimes merged—Guha and Spivak coedited a collection with a foreword by Said in 1988—their interests tended to remain distinct: the postcolonialists worked mainly on Western discourse and culture, the Subaltern Studies group mainly on problems arising from South Asian historiography.

If these literary and historical tendencies represent the historical core of postcolonialism, their interests have tended to converge with a wave of scholars from Latin America, such as Enrique Dussel, Aníbal Quijano, and Walter Dignolo. And any account of postcolonialism today would be incomplete without reference to scholars of postcolonial Africa (Achille Mbembe, Mahmood Mamdani), the African diaspora (Paul Gilroy, David Scott), and settler-colonial states like Canada and Australia (James Tully, Elizabeth Povinelli).

How can authors of such diverse geographical and disciplinary provenance be said to constitute a single approach? While the differences among them are many, an inventory of common postcolonial elements and themes is possible. Following Said's original gambit, all postcolonialists are concerned with *representation*, specifically with how the identities of "the West" and its (post)colonial "others" (in Said's case, "the Orient") were constituted by the colonial encounter, overwhelmingly through Western imposition. If Said adopted a broadly Foucauldian approach to map the entwinement of power and knowledge in the creation of an exotic but deficient "Orient" whose legacies continue to structure thinking in the West and non-West alike, Spivak's effort to trace the discursive erasure of subaltern figures from history, literature, and theory owed more to Derrida.

In history and the social sciences, writers like Chatterjee and Chakrabarty explored the ways in which Western social science and theory, despite its pretensions to universality, are in fact deeply parochial, reflecting a specifically European history. To the extent that they structure scholarly and even popular discourse, other histories and experiences are distorted or become inaccessible. On these analyses as well as more speculative philosophical accounts like those of Dussel and Mignolo, this critique extends into an argument that the basic conceptual vocabulary of modernity, from knowledge to history to subjectivity, has been shaped by the West's elevation of itself and its perspective as the standard for other peoples and cultures, which appear deficient by definition. And this cultural and philosophical diagnosis has in turn rested on a material analysis, especially for Dussel (1998) and other Latin American authors, of the global social, political, and cultural structures that evolved in the wake of 1492—the state-system, world capitalism, patterns of racial and cultural subordination—and continue to operate everywhere, from the metropolises of the world system to its remotest provinces.

Two of the intellectual currents mentioned above can serve to illustrate some of the ways postcolonialism has investigated these issues. The Subaltern Studies group, as mentioned, was founded out of frustration with the failure of Western models of historiography to do justice to South Asian experience (Chakrabarty 2005). Chatterjee, for instance, documents the failure of imported models of community and citizenship to accord with Indian experience, both historically, in displacing indigenous traditions and possibilities at the time of independence (1986), and in the present, as imported models of democratic citizenship and civil society fail to map the ways in which most of the population is integrated into the political system (2004). Chakrabarty addresses similar concerns in the field of history, showing how the categories of Marxist and liberal history fail to capture Indian experience. Postcolonial scholars are thus faced not only with a historical archive but also with present cultural and political realities that are intrinsically resistant to the modern concepts, derived from European experience, that they are nevertheless obliged to use. Chakrabarty's conclusions leave postcolonialism in an ambivalent relation to modernity not unlike that depicted by Adorno: while postcolonial critics must "provincialize Europe" (2000) by ceaselessly pointing out the particularity and limits of its concepts and frames of reference, they should not imagine they can simply cast them aside. Since it is no longer possible to escape the frame of Western modernity, they can only critically probe its limits.

With postcolonial thinking in Latin America, especially as reconstructed by Mignolo and his colleagues under the banner of "decolonial theory" (2007a), the study of Western imperialism and its legacies followed a different course to different conclusions. Most simply, its analysis starts earlier, since authors focusing on British and French imperialism had tended to overlook the sixteenth-century colonization of Latin America. But there are deeper theoretical and methodological differences arising not only from the region's distinct experience but also from their disciplinary home in philosophy and the social sciences rather than the humanities. Dussel's "philosophy of liberation," for instance, which he has developed since the 1970s, combines a critical reflection on the one-sidedness of European philosophy, from epistemology to ethics to politics, with the lessons of the world-systems school of Marxian political economy (1995). For him, the deficits of Western thought, including Critical Theory, can be remedied by a focus on non-Western experience mediated by Western authors, learning from Levinas to attend to *alterity* and from Marx to attend to *materiality*.

This stands in contrast to Quijano, a sociologist hailing from Peru, which has a long tradition of indigenous resistance. Quijano depicts the colonial relation in starker terms, seeing Western modernity as a single, encompassing logic, what he terms the "coloniality of power"

(2000). Developed through Spanish and Portuguese imperialism, this system of “coloniality/rationality” operates primarily at an epistemic level, exercising domination through a thick web of racial, economic, political, and familial categories. Mignolo has generalized this critique into a “geopolitics of knowledge” (2000). On his account, coloniality/rationality effaces the “local knowledges” of subaltern, especially indigenous groups, subordinating them to Western “global designs.” Like scholars from settler-colonial contexts, such as Povinelli and Tully, this decolonial perspective finds in the continued existence of indigenous traditions a critical vantage point and normative resources outside the circuits of Western modernity. Thus, whereas Chakrabarty sees no alternative to “provincializing” Europe by chipping at the limits of its categories, Mignolo has developed strategies for tendentially stepping outside them, from “border thinking,” which seeks to recast modern notions from non-Western perspectives (2000), to “de-linking,” which experiments with throwing off the normativity of Western modernity altogether (2007b).

Other contributions to postcolonial discourse have emphasized other themes, from Homi Bhabha’s argument for the “hybridity” of the cultural products of the colonial encounter (1994) to Achille Mbembe’s focus on the unmediated violence imperialism has bequeathed to the postcolonial world (2001). Postcolonialism has been enriched and complicated by calling attention to gender (Mohanty 1984; Spivak 1988) as well as cultural, ethnolinguistic, religious, and other differences within postcolonial societies, giving an important impetus to the rise of intersectionality within critical theory broadly speaking.

Across its considerable diversity, there can be little doubt that postcolonialism falls under the heading of critical theory in a generic sense. Thus, Mignolo affirms that decolonial thinking is “a particular kind of critical theory”—“assuming,” he adds,

that critical theory in the Marxist genealogy of thought, as articulated by Max Horkheimer, is also a particular kind of critical theory and not the norm or the master paradigm against which all other projects should be compared, measured, evaluated and judged.

(2007a: 155)

All the varieties of postcolonial thought surveyed here are close to the negative model of modernity the Frankfurt School’s first generation inherited from Marx. Postcolonialism, that is, tends to remain at the level of critique, mapping with ever greater specificity the imperial legacies and logics that shape relations, subjectivities, and forms of knowledge. By the same token, it has shown little interest in, with later Critical Theory, finding a universal normative basis for its criticism or prescribing general remedies. Indeed, to the extent that it associates universalism with Western imperialism, postcolonialism has tended to regard it with suspicion and even hostility—even when, in the case of Chakrabarty or Said, it concludes that universalism in some form is inescapable or ethically imperative. And postcolonialism has tended to hew closer to Critical Theory’s first generation in its diffidence concerning practical-political questions, often shying away from the more programmatic stances of Habermas and his successors.

Moreover, insofar as the two approaches have been inclined to exempt any part of social reality from skeptical scrutiny, they have done so in opposite directions. Whereas later Critical Theory has sought to reconstruct the positive potentials of modernity—reflexive science, postconventional culture and morality, postnational and deliberative-democratic politics—certain post- and especially de-colonialists have sought to recover the remnants of non-Western culture that lie at the edges of global modernity. Consequently, when postcolonial writers have sought to open up positive horizons, they have done so by stressing openness to *difference*. As David Scott put it, borrowing terms Stephen White used to distinguish

Habermasian Critical Theory from its postmodern or poststructuralist contemporaries in the early 1990s,

postcolonial criticism, like other orientations on the cultural Left, has ... privileged the "responsibility to otherness" over the "responsibility to act"—the opening up of cognitive space for the play of difference over the affirmation of institutional frameworks that embody normative political values and normative political objectives.

(1999: 135, citing White 1991: 20)

Critics have attributed postcolonialism's preference for cultural alterity to a nostalgic romanticization of tradition and the non-West. The most forceful criticisms along these lines have tended to come from Marxist critics who regard it as symptomatic of deeper deficits (Lazarus 2011; Parry 2004). Such critics reproach postcolonialism for its narrow focus on culture, that is, on discourses, ideas, and identities, to the exclusion of the material relations—in the first instance, globalizing capitalism—that underpin them and brought them into being. Postcolonialism's tendency to schematize or oversimplify is then said to lead to distortions on both sides of the colonial encounter: on one side, by reifying and homogenizing "the West" or "coloniality," losing sight of the complexity and internal divisions with Western history and imperialism; on the other side, by idealizing and distorting the non-Western or subaltern "other," denying not only the complexity but also the modernity of postcolonial societies. According to this line of criticism, isolating "Orientalism" (Said), "coloniality/rationality" (Quijano, Mignolo), or simply "the West" as a reified structure, even for heuristic purposes, neglects the fact that "modernity" or "the West," no less than "the Orient" or "the subaltern," must be understood together as the evolving products of a single, complex, dynamic process.

Postcolonialism's sympathy for the different and the marginal as well as its alleged propensity to exaggerate and overgeneralize the homogeneity of Western modernity is of course what draws it to early Critical Theory's portrait of modernity as a bad universal. But a possible objection should be noted. It could be argued that my emphasis on postcolonialism's totalizing tendencies depends on considering only its most general lines of argument. On a widely held view, it is characteristic of postcolonialism to stress *locality*, not only the specific origins of ideas and identities, but more deeply the specific location, in space, time, and culture, of different perspectives, including of course the critic's own. Seen in this way, postcolonialism is first of all concerned with particulars. It is not for nothing that its leading figures are housed in departments of literature, history, anthropology, and geography—sciences of the particular, methodologically committed to starting with concrete objects they then seek to contextualize, historicize, and situate. The corpus of postcolonialism, including even the more generalizing and theoretical work I have privileged here, is overwhelmingly made up of concrete critical studies.

Here we arrive at a deeper difference between postcolonialism and Critical Theory in all its forms, from Marx to Habermas and beyond. While Critical Theory may share with postcolonialism an orientation to the particular in the form of a commitment to reflexivity, an ethical imperative (in the first generation), or a practice of "immanent critique" (in the second and third generations), it has always been devoted to making sense of the whole. Indeed, postcolonialism's preference for the particular may help explain its affinity with the Frankfurt School's first generation, to the extent that the bulk of Adorno's and Benjamin's oeuvres consist of works devoted to concrete moments and objects, rather than more generalizing philosophical treatises. (This may also help account for postcolonialism's affinity for Foucault, who, for all his philosophical importance, was a historian.) This feature marks



an important distance from the Frankfurt School, which ever since Horkheimer's programmatic 1937 essay has sought to develop *theory*, even as it draws on and seeks to inform history and the social sciences. Postcolonialism, as a theoretically informed *approach*, has instead favored discrete historical and cultural studies. To this extent, they represent different kinds of enterprise.

### Postcolonializing Critical Theory?

All the differences I have pointed out so far between postcolonialism and Critical Theory, and the unbridgeable gap between it and Critical Theory's more recent generations notwithstanding, in recent decades practitioners of both have noted their affinities and sought to bring them into dialogue, even in some cases to synthesize them. Thus, for example, Dussel, who has engaged in a career-long dialogue with Western critical philosophy from a non-European perspective, invited a group of Frankfurt School luminaries to Mexico City to discuss the commonalities and differences between Critical Theory and his own philosophy of liberation (2011). Eduardo Mendietta, a translator and interpreter of Dussel, has sought to combine the insights of Habermasian Critical Theory, postcolonialism, and pragmatism (2007). And studies of race and racism, two of the most important contemporary legacies of Western imperialism, have been particularly rich fields for scholars drawing on the Frankfurt School tradition, from Lucius Outlaw to Linda Martín Alcoff.

As Critical Theory has expanded—a casual count finds more than a dozen active book series and a score of journals just in English—the number of authors working within this tradition who draw on postcolonialist themes and ideas has grown, producing a field too broad to survey here. Instead, I want to convey a sense of the constructive possibilities at the intersection of the two discourses by considering three recent initiatives by American scholars working within the Critical Theory tradition: Thomas McCarthy, Amy Allen, and Susan Buck-Morss. Their otherwise diverse projects share the aim of reconsidering the terms of Critical Theory in light of issues and problematics taken from postcolonialism and the history of imperialism. In so doing, they converge on perhaps the most sensitive point at which the different generations of the Frankfurt School and postcolonialism meet: the question of universal history.

McCarthy, a translator of and important commentator on Habermas, stepped away from theory and toward real-world problems with his 2009 book, *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development*. Much of the volume is given over to the history of racism and imperialism. McCarthy undertakes a selective genealogy of these phenomena through the modern period with a view to their hidden legacies, from the lasting effects of slavery, segregation, and discrimination in the United States to the uses of “development” as a pretext for (neo-) imperialism. Worth noting is the methodological innovation this already represents over the later Frankfurt School. Rather than starting with a positive reconstruction (Honneth) or normative framework (Forst), McCarthy begins with the historical evils he wishes to combat. This genealogical “history of the present” then sets the stage for the more forward-looking parts of the book. In terms he developed in earlier work, he thus puts the critical or “deconstructive” work of theory *before* its “reconstructive” side, even if he assumes a Habermasian normative framework (2005: 14–15). This brings him in at least one respect closer to the methods of postcolonialism than to the protocols that have tended to prevail in recent Critical Theory.

McCarthy follows these genealogical investigations with more theoretical reflections on how Critical Theory should understand “development” today. Although this idea has been intricately woven through the history of Western imperialism, from the “civilizing missions” of the nineteenth century to the economic and military interventions of the twenty-first,

he insists that it is now critically and normatively indispensable. Instead of abandoning the idea, he therefore proposes a “critical theory of global development”:

the unreasonable, unjust, and undesirable elements of actually existing development—those which owe their establishment and persistence primarily to force and violence, structural and symbolic as well as intentional—are corrected or eliminated, while those which are reasonable, just, and desirable—which evince good reasons, basic fairness, and desirable consequences when examined “from and for the margins”—are retained and revised.

(2005: 184)

Harmful uses of development must be criticized, but the idea can be preserved subject to a critical dialogue open to all, especially its victims. McCarthy thereby shows how Critical Theory can confront Eurocentrism and white supremacy as enduring structures by opening modernity to critical perspectives from outside the West—a move toward which Habermas himself has always in principle been open. While McCarthy’s critical theory of global development does not go as far as some postcolonialists would like insofar as it retains an idea they see as a central plank of modern imperialism (Escobar 1995), it affirms and radicalizes modernity’s openness not only as incomplete, but as always in need of new external as well as internal critics.

Allen, a feminist scholar working at the intersection of Critical Theory and poststructuralism, goes farther. Her 2016 study *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* asks specifically what Critical Theory can learn from its postcolonial critics. Departing from a critique of McCarthy, she takes issue with his defense and reconstruction of the idea of development. Against this, she argues that Critical Theory cannot free itself from Eurocentrism without abandoning the notion of progress on which it has rested since Habermas. Combining painstaking readings of the oeuvres of Habermas, Honneth, and Forst with a range of postcolonial arguments, she shows that, in each case, the validity of the theorist’s critical standpoint relies on a normative framework that takes Western modernity as the standard of social and epistemic development. (Forst’s Kantian approach, which simply posits its own normative ground in practical reason, is somewhat different. Here, Allen worries that his reliance on the authority of reason will reinforce the West’s traditional presumption of its own superior rationality.)

Taking her motto from Adorno, “progress begins where it ends” (2005: 150), Allen argues that “one can be against progress as a ‘fact,’ as a backward-looking claim about what has led up to ‘us,’ while still being for progress as a forward-looking moral and political imperative” (2016: 127). One can do this by adopting a stance of what she calls “meta-normative contextualism”: accepting the contingency of our own moral standards *without* giving them up. This, she argues, is sufficient for us to engage in what she regards as the first task of Critical Theory: a critical “history of the present” that takes Foucauldian rather than Habermasian inspiration, uncovering hidden mechanisms of domination and unfreedom. A peculiarity of this argument is that it plays out principally on the ground of normative foundations, a concern that only moved to the center of Critical Theory with Habermas and led him to develop a justificatory account of modernity in the first place. Her alternative models, Adorno and Foucault, had little interest in the question of foundations—and neither, one suspects, would a reader convinced by her arguments.

Allen’s proposal may be most interesting, then, for its methodological contributions. On one level, she argues for the same reversal of priorities that McCarthy performs insofar as she suggests that we put critical genealogy ahead of normative construction or reconstruction. But her version of critical history cuts deeper than his. Rather than focusing on instances

of unfreedom and irrationality that can be readily denounced from the perspective of our own agreed-upon morality, such as racism and imperialism, Allen advocates a return to bolder critical projects like *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Foucault's *History of Madness*, and much work in postcolonialism: critical histories that explore the dark side of central elements of the modern self-understanding, such as reason, Enlightenment, or modernity itself. This version of critical history, which proceeds by assuming, with Adorno, Foucault, and postcolonialism, "reason's entanglement with domination" (2016: 176), enables us to "problematize" our own horizon and commitments. This greater self-critical purchase, I take it, represents her real case against Forst's Kantianism as well as McCarthy's progressivism.

But perhaps the most inventive recent effort to open Critical Theory to postcolonial concerns comes from Buck-Morss, a wide-ranging theorist and highly original interpreter of Benjamin and Adorno. In her 2000 article, "Hegel and Haiti," Buck-Morss argues that Hegel's famous "Lordship and Bondage" chapter in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the subject of endless elaboration from Kojève and Sartre to Fanon and Honneth, was in fact inspired by the contemporaneous Haitian Revolution. While Hegel left no record of any such influence, she establishes its plausibility through a deep dive into the historical archive that serves at the same time to upset the orderly, progressive model of Eurocentric history Hegel left us. She thereby takes the opportunity not only, as Benjamin directed in his "Theses on the Concept of History," to "brush history against the grain" (2002: 392), showing how one of the great monuments of Eurocentric thought opens onto the only successful revolution against colonial slavery. She also uses this episode as Benjamin further suggested, to "blast open the continuum of history" (ibid.: 396), recovering the potentials of past hopes and struggles for the present. As she writes,

If the historical facts about freedom can be ripped out of the narratives told by the victors and salvaged for our own time, then the project of universal freedom does not need to be discarded but, rather, redeemed and reconstituted on a different basis.

(2000: 865)

What the Haitian Revolution—along with its suppression by Hegel and nearly all subsequent Western historiography and philosophy—thus reveals is a hidden history of the irrepressible, unpredictable, explosive desire for emancipation, which can always erupt anew.

Methodologically, Buck-Morss's innovation lies in reaching beyond the alternative of Adorno or Habermas to a version of universal history that would be neither negative nor reconstructive, but redemptive. Such an approach would consist neither simply in critically diagnosing the roots of the bad present with Allen and Adorno, nor in recovering its progressive normative potential with McCarthy and Habermas. Rather, with Benjamin, it would probe the silences and omissions of Eurocentric history, finding in its exceptions, anomalies, missed connections, and thwarted potentials examples that can open us to new possibilities. As she put it in a 2009 sequel to the essay, "universal history engages in a double liberation, of the historical phenomenon and of our own imagination" (149). Such a history reveals that today the universal aspect of the Age of Revolution is not its realization of Spirit in European modernity, which allowed Hegel to consign Haiti along with most of the world to oblivion, but the Haitians' demand for freedom. With this Buck-Morss implicitly defends Benjamin against Adorno's appropriation of his lessons on history. For what Adorno erased from Benjamin's image of progress as catastrophe was the possibility that the historian could sift history's shards into constellations that enable us to recover their explosive power. Beyond a virtuosic theoretical performance, then, her essay offers another vision for Critical Theory after postcolonialism: a model for returning to universal history from the

standpoint of its victims with a view to redeeming their hopes by creatively reactivating them for the present.

I will not attempt to adjudicate among these visions for a postcolonial Critical Theory. What seems most promising is precisely the distance between the critical-reconstructive project McCarthy adapts from Habermas, the reflexive, self-critical one Allen finds in Adorno and Foucault, and the more expansive, redemptive one Buck-Morss derives from Benjamin, a distance that suggests possibilities beyond what are commonly mooted as Critical Theory's methodological alternatives. These are of course by no means the only models on offer, but they show how Critical Theory can draw fresh sustenance from the investigation of objects and approaches beyond its customary concerns. One aspect of postcolonialism's contribution to a future Critical Theory would surely be to "decolonize" it, as Allen suggests—to wean it from an idealized version of Western history as the universal site from which its critical and normative resources must be drawn. Another might be, borrowing Chakrabarty's term, to "provincialize" it by making it aware of the parochial aspects of its concepts, categories, assumptions, and frames of reference. Certainly, the Frankfurt School's long history of ignoring the postcolonial world or treating it as an afterthought suggests that postcolonialism could play an important role in these tasks. But, beyond this, these efforts by authors situated within the Frankfurt School tradition to go beyond its traditional and present limits suggest that a still greater contribution of postcolonialism to Critical Theory could be as an impetus to creativity as it seeks new resources to grapple with modernity as a global phenomenon.

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### Further Reading

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# CRITICAL THEORY AND RELIGION

*Peter E. Gordon*

## Introduction

Published nearly a hundred years ago, Max Weber's synthetic contribution to the sociology of religion (known as the *Religionssoziologie*, included in the posthumous edition *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, 1921–1922) contains insights that remain of tremendous value to the contemporary reader today. Most impressive is the author's capacity to relate religious beliefs or formal doctrines to social conditions without mechanistic reduction. Because Weber's interpretative method takes seriously the meaningfulness of human conduct as seen from the agent's own point of view, the external logic of causality in sociological phenomena persists only as modified by a theory of affinity or "relation" that allows internal consciousness to appear as a motivational force for action. But this method generates a paradox when the author turns to the historical process of disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) in which he assigns particular importance to the role of the intellectual. According to Weber, it is the specific burden of the intellectual to transform the world into a problem of "meaning" ("*Sinn*"-Problem): the intellectual seeks "to endow his life with a pervasive meaning...to find unity with himself, with his fellow men, and with the cosmos." The thirst for meaning may of course afflict other social strata as well, but in traditionalist cultures the practical uses of magic and lack of education leave less room for a theoretical drive for holistic explanation which "extends to infinity." This ambition results in a historical irony: because intellectualism "suppresses belief in magic," the processes of the world are gradually "disenchanted" until eventually they simply "are" or "happen" but "no longer signify [*bedeuten*] anything." Intellectuals thus bear a special if not unique responsibility for generating the modern impression that life experience offers no metaphysical solace, even though the articulation of meaning in "the total pattern of life" was originally the intellectual's own *raison d'être* (Weber 1963: 125).

This Weberian paradox anticipates the self-sabotaging pathogenesis of modern reason as theorized in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. From Weber, Adorno and Horkheimer borrow the basic contours of a process of world-rationalization and disenchantment that betrays its own promise of emancipation and ends in an experience of unreflective fatalism or "myth." Unlike their predecessor, however, Adorno and Horkheimer do not fasten their attention on the problem of "meaning" *per se*, nor do they seem especially concerned with the dissolution of *religious* meaning in particular. Weber traced the loss of meaning in modern society specifically to the breakdown of holistic religious schema and the emergence of uncoordinated value-spheres (thus creating the normative disorientation he called "modern polytheism"). But critical theory at least in its first-generation or "classical" phase assigned little explicit

importance to the phenomenon of secularization. On those rare moments when Adorno and Horkheimer appeal to a lost plenitude of “meaning” in the human past, they more often portray it in naturalistic rather than metaphysical-religious terms: on their view the dialectic of enlightenment begins not with the dissolution of religion but with the rise of an instrumental-rational attitude that breaks up the human being’s communion with nature. For them, the expulsion from Paradise begins not with the loss of religious meaning but with the loss of humanity’s noninstrumentalist and mimetic bond with nature.

Despite some notable exceptions, however, critical theory has been and remains committed to a program of secularization. It is true that Adorno alludes to a “messianic light” in the concluding section to *Minima Moralia*, but this does not permit us to imagine him as a partisan of religion. Critical theory abjures the idealist attempt to see the world *sub specie aeternitatus*. On the contrary, it invokes redemption only to underscore the cognitive necessity of viewing the world from a wholly negativistic perspective that refuses to accept its imperfection as eternal: the final sentence of the book announces that for critical theory the reality or irreality of redemption “hardly matters” (Adorno 1974: 247). This figurative appeal to a messianic viewpoint must at least be squared with Adorno’s later claim in *Negative Dialectics* that philosophy can only overcome its idealistic hubris if it performs a “disenchantment of the concept” (Adorno 1970: 23). It is true of course that at the last years of his life Max Horkheimer awakened to the possibility that theism might serve as a possible resource for critical resistance. Atheism, by contrast, had lost its earlier enlightenment-era status as an ideology of opposition to the sacred union of State and Church, and it was all too often in his view an ideological license for conformity. For a philosopher who had been raised in an observant Jewish home but whose pessimistic attitude toward this-worldly political transformation betrayed an enduring debt to Schopenhauer (alongside of but in tension with Marx), the religious appeal to God as the “wholly other” obviously held an important biographical meaning (Schmidt 1977). But whether this late reprisal of religious themes in Horkheimer’s final essays signifies something more general about the dialogue between religion and critical theory seems doubtful. The most intensive attempt to forge this dialogue can be found in the work of the Catholic theologian Johann Baptist Metz, who (drawing upon Walter Benjamin’s thoughts on the remembrance of past suffering) urges us to deploy “anamnestic reason” as a critical force against oblivion and leveling rationalization (Metz 1992: 189–194).

But the true locus for any assessment of this relationship is the work of Jürgen Habermas. If critical theory is to retain its relevance in contemporary debates over the place of religion in modern society, it must build upon the enduring foundations that Habermas has laid, though in the self-reflexive spirit of critical theory it must also examine these foundations without falling back on the complacent trust in the legacy of the Frankfurt School as an ahistorical or settled doctrine. In Habermas’s systematic contributions to philosophy and social theory, we can detect a renewed interest in Weber’s distinctive approach to the historical sociology of religion. But Habermas also offers an important corrective to Weber. Although Weber disavowed any interest in metaphysical teleologies of history, he nonetheless saw in rationalization a nearly irresistible world-process that would eventually dissolve most forms of traditional religion throughout the Occident and (by inference) across the globe. Such historical meta-narratives, however, no longer conform to the empirical data. Most sociologists today dispute the classical theory of secularization or at the very least they offer so many counterexamples of persistent and novel modes of religiosity that the classical theory resembles a man condemned to death by a thousand cuts.

From a political rather than empirical perspective, the expectation of religious decline also nourishes an unhelpful attitude of intellectual condescension. In the present moment of global and cultural fracture too much is at stake; especially when confronted with the



bewildering persistence of a religious piety that assumes the form of dogmatic and even violent militancy, intellectuals can no longer afford to play the role of a mirror image to the dogmatism they condemn. The attitude of a privileged cognitive insight that once inspired Voltaire to satirize the religion of *les classes inférieures* seemed valid only as long as philosophers still claimed for themselves a metaphysical vantage superior to the rest of the social world. Once intellectuals began to shed this illusion of an eternal perspective, the confidence that religion itself is a mere illusion without a future began to lose its plausibility. This is one of the important lessons in what Habermas calls the turn to “post-metaphysical thinking.” No longer excluding itself from a conversation among diverse perspectives philosophy must commit itself to the challenge of speaking with, rather than above or against, its religious interlocutors. The urgent and admittedly provocative question, however, is whether this shift to post-metaphysical thinking also demands a cognitive shift in the way intellectuals conceive of their own critical work: does an intellectual practice that no longer aims to dismantle the religious belief of others as illusory entail a self-reflexive attitude that also injects doubt into one’s own atheistic premises? In other words, does critical theory presuppose or logically require a cognitive commitment to atheism? In what follows, I will (1) reconstruct Habermas’s argument concerning the prospects for religion in modern society and (2) offer some controversial thoughts on the question as what the shift to post-metaphysical thinking may entail for critical theorists themselves in their ongoing encounter with religious fellow citizens.

### The Earlier Habermas on Religion

In his 1962 habilitation, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (*Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*), Habermas offered a stylized sociological-historical analysis of the rise of “publicity” or *Öffentlichkeit*, as a defining “category of bourgeois society.” The chief purpose of the book was to trace the gradual emergence of publicity both as a philosophical ideal and as an ideological instrument by which the rising bourgeoisie gained both social legitimacy and eventually political power against the traditionalistic authority of the *ancien régime*. For the absolutist monarch, publicity meant chiefly the public “display” of divinely sanctioned authority through spectacles that were performed “before” a politically subordinated assemblage of notables. With the bourgeoisie, however, this notion of publicity gave way to the ideal of a social or discursive space, whether in newspapers, cafés, or literary salons, in which inherited social power counted less than the critical power of unconstrained communication. This ideal also served an ideological function insofar as it helped to justify the bourgeois claim to act as the representative of universal “reason,” even while this claim obviously stood in contradiction with the property restrictions and educational privileges that made access to the public sphere possible. Habermas shows how this ideal nonetheless pointed to an unrealized image of genuinely universalized and *pour l’art* has not entirely liberated nonhierarchical communication: publicity was at once ideology *and* more than ideology. In the twentieth century, however, this ideal suffered further deformation as unidirectional forms of communication and institutional power inhibited the rational practice of public criticism. In homage to the theory of the “culture industry” as presented by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Habermas showed how publicity had devolved in mass society into a “refeudalized” performance. Publicity was once again a kind of spectacle enacted “before” rather than “within” a public that was beginning to lose its sense of democratic agency (Habermas 1989: 200).

In this argument Habermas devoted hardly any attention to the phenomenon of religion. But he did take note of the fact that feudal publicity was a kind of “status attribute” that adverted to the aristocrat or monarch, who “presented himself as an embodiment of some sort of ‘higher’ power.” In this pre-bourgeois system, the function of publicity was to make

“something invisible visible.” The typical categories of feudal esteem such as “highness, majesty, fame, dignity, and honor” all presupposed that the public power of the ruler derived from the intangible but irresistible phenomenon of an “aura” that surrounded his person and were displayed through personal conduct in the “Christianized form” of the classical virtues. Officials in the Church exemplified in the most overt form the sacred character of this aura in religious rituals such as the High Mass but also in public processions. The fact that the Mass was conducted in Latin rather than a language accessible to the great mass of Christian believers drives home Habermas’s claim that feudal publicity chiefly assumed the form of publicity “before” rather than “within” the public itself (Habermas 1989: 7–9). The explicit reference to a feudal “aura” may help us to appreciate the way in which Habermas followed Walter Benjamin’s argument that in traditional aesthetic experience the artwork comes wrapped within an “aura” of uniqueness—a sign, Benjamin claimed, that even the bourgeois cult of *l’art pour l’art* has not entirely liberated itself from its religious and ritualistic origins. Like Benjamin, Habermas implied that the public could only gain genuinely political agency once the aura of feudal performance was dissolved. But for students of Habermas’s generation in the German Federal Republic, this argument also carried a further and quite specific historical resonance: the memory of fascist spectacles with their auratic rituals of modern power left Habermas with a deep aversion to any practice of modern politics in which authority carried even the slightest hint of the sacred.

The commitment to secularization as a prerequisite for the critical-rational procedures of modern democracy became a more explicit theme in *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), especially in the chapter in Volume II on the “linguistification of the sacred” (*die Versprachlichung des Sakralen*). Here, Habermas claimed that a social theory can trace the emergence of communicative rationality historically by reconstructing the historical path of disenchantment. Borrowing from Durkheim as well as Weber, Habermas argued that the “socially integrative and expressive functions” that in traditional cultures were once managed by “ritual practice” gradually lose their ground as rational criticism broadens its domain and penetrates into what were once “sacrally protected” contexts of normative authority: “The disenchantment and disempowering of the domain of the sacred,” Habermas wrote, “takes place by way of a linguistification of the ritually secured, basic normative agreement.” What this means is that social solidarity, which according to Durkheim retains its force only when a culture adheres to certain values as sacred and beyond criticism, ultimately transforms in character.

The aura of rapture and terror that emanates from the sacred, the *spellbinding* [*bannende*] power of the holy, is sublimated into the *binding/bonding* [*bindenden*] force of criticizable validity claims and at the same time turned into an everyday occurrence. [Die Aura des Entzückens und Erschreckens, die vom Sakralen ausstrahlt, die bannende Kraft des Heiligen wird zur bindenden Kraft kritisierbarer Geltungsansprüche zugleich sublimiert und veralltäglicht].

For Habermas, this stylized narrative describes an important shift in the nature of social solidarity: “the authority of the holy is gradually replaced [*ersetzt*] by the authority of an achieved consensus” (Habermas 1985: 77).

Despite its impressionistic quality, the basic contours of this narrative might be corroborated with evidence from the history of religion. The cult of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi offers an intriguing illustration. During the era stretching from the seventh to fourth centuries B.C.E., the *Pythia* or high priestess (whose name derives from the *pythein* or smell of decomposition of the monstrous python that was slain by Apollo) served as the Delphic Oracle, whose prophecies made her one of the most authoritative religious figures in ancient Greek

society. One account of this ancient cult suggests that the high priestess put herself into trancelike or frenzied state brought on from breathing the fumes of the decomposing python, and her inchoate cries were then rendered into intelligible and poetic form by an assembly of priests (*Osioti*) (Farnell 1907: 189). A more recent account with strongly feminist implications suggests that the High Priestess spoke intelligibly on her own and that her words, rather than the second-order interpretations of the male priests, remained authoritative (Fontenrose 1978: 196–227; Maurizio 2001: 38–54). In either case, this example of an archaic religious practice serves as a helpful illustration for the basic phenomenon of linguistification: a sacred source of normative instruction may originate in mystery but eventually it must somehow communicate its lessons to the religious collective. In committing itself to a linguistic form, however, the sacred eventually leaves itself vulnerable to interpretation and conceptual dispute. A similar process of linguistification is evident in many world religions, e.g., the transformation of the Mosaic revelation into the elaborate argumentative systems of the Talmud; or the process by which the parables and miracles associated with Jesus Christ in the New Testament served as inspirational material for the highly sophisticated metaphysical systems of medieval scholasticism. All such cases demonstrate how an originally auratic experience must eventually become linguistified and will then be exposed to critical deliberation and disagreement. But this process, once begun, cannot easily be stopped; its ultimate effect is to fragilize and even dissipate the power of the sacred. Habermas quotes Durkheim: “One begins by putting articles of faith beyond discussion; then discussion extends to them. One wishes an explanation of them; one asks their reasons for existing, and, as they submit to this search, they lose part of their force” (Habermas, TCA, II, 84).

*The Theory of Communicative Action* is not, of course, primarily a contribution to the philosophy or history of religion. But the theory of a linguistification of the sacred shows us that critical theory has typically sustained a strong commitment to the paradigm of secularization, even when it has taken care to acknowledge the historical relevance of traditional religious phenomena for the emergence of modern social norms. Critical theory derives much of its original impetus from the left-Hegelian practice of rational demystification, whether the object of its demystifying practice is institutionalized religious doctrine, as in Feuerbach’s critique of Christianity, or the reified structures of the market economy and its ideological supports, as in Marx’s critique of capitalism. Such a demystifying practice cannot easily dispense with and perhaps even presupposes the regulative ideal of a wholly demystified explanation: when Marx seeks to reveal the real mechanisms of an exchange system that presents itself in social experience only in the mystified guise of commodity fetishism, he already aligns himself with a rational practice of disenchantment. Even the metaphor of “fetishism” (despite its admittedly condescending attitude toward aboriginal religious customs) suggests that the mature author of *Capital* still drew inspiration from Feuerbach’s critique of religion as the reified projection of purely human capacities. Seen in this light, Marx appears as a proponent of thoroughgoing secularization.

Critical theory obviously extends this practice of disenchantment and directs its rational power against all forms of reification, whether in the realm of economics, culture, or consciousness. In his 1958 lecture, “Revelation and Autonomous Reason” (*Offenbarung und autonome Vernunft*), Adorno summarized this commitment to secularization in programmatic fashion: “Nothing of theological content will persist without being transformed: every content will have to put itself to the test of migrating into the realm of the secular, the profane” (Adorno 1958/2005: 392–402). It could be argued that in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas intensifies the demand for a thoroughgoing secularization of historically religious contents and even implies their irrelevance to secular modernity: only this can explain his claim (quoted above) that over time the transcendent authority of the holy is “replaced” (*ersetzt*) by the mundane authority of an intersubjectively stabilized consensus.

## Religion and Translation

At least since the publication of the essays in *Post-Metaphysical Thinking* (1988), Habermas appears to have slackened the secularist requirement that modern society must reach a point of normative independence that leaves its religious origins behind. The question as to whether this signals a genuine change in Habermas's thinking or merely a shift in emphasis is a matter of some controversy (Bernstein, 2016; Calhoun, Mendieta, and VanAntwerpen 2013; Gordon 2016: 466–481). But it is at least clear that in his more recent work Habermas has modified the strong language of “replacement” (with its secularist overtones and its suggestion of epochal discontinuity) and now allows that religion may be “irreplaceable.” In this recent work, he typically uses terminology such as “critical appropriation” that would seem to grant at least the possibility of enduring lines of historical continuity between religious and secular society.

This twofold gesture—(a) the willingness to acknowledge the fact of *historical continuity* and (b) the proviso that religious contents can only retain present-day *validity* if they submit to the trial of rational appropriation—runs through much of Habermas's more recent reflections on religion. In “Metaphysics after Kant,” we are told that even contemporary philosophy cannot wholly shrug off the questions that once inspired theological discourse (Habermas, 1992b). Habermas writes that he does not believe that “we, as Europeans, can seriously understand concepts like morality and ethical life, person and individuality, or freedom and emancipation, without appropriating the substance of the Judeo-Christian understanding of history in terms of salvation.” All of these modern concepts emerge from metaphysical and religious notions regarding a “plenitude of meaning” in the cosmos. Obviously, these concepts may not meet with universal and rational assent from a post-metaphysical perspective that has surrendered the underlying appeal to a plenitude of meaning. Habermas remains confident that a post-metaphysical age can continue to draw normative sustenance from its religious inheritance. But the acknowledgment of a historical *genesis* (a) does not automatically grant the continued *validity* (b) of such metaphysical themes within a post-metaphysical age. Although the older metaphysical questions do not simply vanish, they can survive in a mundane form only if they are subjected to a genuinely critical appropriation. The semantic contents of religion may derive *from* religion but they are not valid *as* religion. This means that they achieve a new validity only “within the narrowed and sharpened spotlight of what can still convince the daughters and sons of modernity with good reasons” (Habermas 1992b [1988]: 14–15).

The requirement of “good reasons” signals a strong affinity between critical theory and the Rawlsian idea of a “translation proviso.” In agreement with Rawls, Habermas remains convinced that within the bounds of our formal democratic institutions, claims that are grounded in “comprehensive doctrines” cannot be permitted to count *as* reasons. The diversity of such comprehensive doctrines within modern society means that any such claims could not expect to meet with general assent. In formal institutions of political deliberation, our fellow citizens must therefore be required to provide a rationalizing “translation” of their arguments into a medium of justification that does not rely upon potentially exclusive metaphysical schemes. In a spirit of discursive inclusion that should benefit the rational and democratic public sphere, Habermas believes that the translation proviso must be retained within the bounds of formal democratic institutions, since public servants “have a duty to remain neutral among competing worldviews.” This requirement of neutrality means that the practice of translation still turns “metaphysical” language into “post-metaphysical language,” and in this sense philosophy remains faithful what Habermas has called “methodological atheism.” But methodological atheism does not rule out of bounds all appeals to religion in modern society at large. Habermas has specifically challenged the stricture that the proviso

should apply to *all* citizens even within the more informal or noninstitutional setting of the “political public sphere” (Habermas 2008: 128–129). To impose such a constraint, he claims, would only impoverish public discourse. Democratic deliberation should remain free to draw upon a broad range of insights, including the redemptive teachings of the many world religions, which long ago shed their merely local validity and assumed a “post-Axial” or quasi-transcendental perspective with norms of potentially universalizing application (Lafont 2007: 239–259).

Modern philosophy, in other words, must resist the arrogance of a “secularist” ideology. Rather, it must adopt a stance that remains cognitively open to learning from all citizens, including citizens who still subscribe to the various religious traditions that modern philosophy sublated into its critical practice. Such openness is an urgent matter, Habermas suggests, since “religious traditions have a special power to articulate moral intuitions, especially with regard to vulnerable forms of communal life” (Habermas 2008: 131). A liberal theory of democratic deliberation that announces itself as merely political rather than metaphysical must not deny at least the *possibility* that it could take up such intuitions to the benefit of our shared political existence. Habermas makes this point forcefully in his essay on “Religion in the Public Sphere.”

The liberal state has an interest in unleashing religious voices in the political public sphere, and in the political participation of religious organizations as well. It must not discourage religious persons and communities from also expressing themselves politically *as such*, for it cannot know whether secular society would not otherwise cut itself off from key resources for the creation of meaning and identity.

(Habermas 2008: 131)

Habermas has further argued that if we do not commit ourselves to this collective work of rational appropriation (via translation), the “semantic potential” of our various religious traditions could one day become inaccessible and therefore lost. Nor can we rest assured that salvaged religious content will remain available for all time. This potential, he explains, “must be mastered anew by every generation” (Habermas 1992b: 15).

The urgent question that still confronts critical theory today is whether the acknowledgment of *historical inheritance* itself already implies that secular society somehow remains *normatively dependent* on the religious norms it has taken up into the medium of an open-ended and critical discourse. In the closing paragraph of “Themes in Postmetaphysical Thinking,” Habermas offers some thoughts on this question. Although he believes that religion “has largely been deprived of its worldview functions,” he grants that it is “still irreplaceable [*nach wie vor unersetzlich*] in ordinary life” insofar as it furnishes practices and rituals that bring us into contact with the transmundane or the “extraordinary.” It follows that “even postmetaphysical thinking continues to coexist with religious practice.” It is interesting to notice that in the passage quoted above the older secularist language of substitution from *The Theory of Communicative Action* (namely, the claim that in modern society the binding power of religion is replaced, or *ersetzt*) has been relaxed. Habermas now admits that religion may *not* be replaced, that it is irreplaceable, or *unersetzlich*. But here we confront a deep perplexity. Once we acknowledge the possibility of religion’s “indispensable” role in ordinary life and its coexistence with secular modernity, we may be tempted to admit to a far stronger relationship of dependency:

This ongoing coexistence even throws light on a curious dependence [*Abhängigkeit*] of a philosophy that has forfeited its contact with the extraordinary. Philosophy, even in its postmetaphysical form, will be able neither to replace nor to repress

religion as long as religious language is the bearer of a semantic content that is inspiring and even *indispensable* [*unaufgebbare*], for this content eludes (for the time being? [*vorerst?*]) the explanatory force of philosophical language and continues to resist translation into reasoning discourses.

(Habermas 1992 [1988]: 60; my emphasis)

This is a striking admission. As I have noted above, critical theory was born from the spirit of a left-Hegelianism that took the demystification of religious or quasi-religious phenomena as a precondition for human emancipation. It presupposed that modern society would eventually reach a point of thoroughgoing normative independence from its religious past. This was a crucial feature of the legacy of German Idealism that (following Kant) defined Enlightenment as the human being's release from the condition of dependency or "tutelage" (*Unmündigkeit*). The left-Hegelian tradition—from Feuerbach to Marx—sought to disenchant the mystified forms of human experience whether these were manifest in the form of the divine or the commodity. The passage quoted above suggests that once critical theory has taken up the lessons of post-metaphysical thinking this left-Hegelian presupposition must now be discarded as the remnant of an unwarranted metaphysics.

The shift to post-metaphysical thinking thus appears to signal a turn away from the secularist confidence that once characterized the left-Hegelian tradition. The new demarche brings to critical theory a more chastened and pragmatist sensibility; it suggests that a socially and historically situated reason must adopt an attitude toward religion that is: (a) empirically fallibilistic and (b) normatively agnostic. As an empirical matter, it may seem obvious that critical theory (a) cannot presume to know the historical outcome of social processes in which it is itself implicated. This fallibilistic readiness to adapt itself to new historical conditions displaces the old expectation that secularization was the inevitable end point of societal rationalization. Critical theory, in other words, cannot boast of any foreknowledge regarding the future possibility of a society that could stabilize without factual dependency on its inherited religious traditions. We must therefore allow for the empirical possibility that the practice of a secularizing translation of religious insights will continue into a future without limit. But as a normative matter the situation is far less obvious: must critical theory also (b) jettison its self-understanding as a practice that commits itself to the normative goal of secular consciousness? In other words, does the new spirit of fallibilistic reason and its admission of an ongoing and possibly endless dependency on the normative resources of religion also entail a compromise with the left-Hegelian ideal of demystification itself?

### The Weberian Premise

To answer this question, it is crucial to examine the underlying Weberian assumptions that have helped to motivate the recent turn in critical theory to religious themes. In his 1918 Munich address, "Science as a Vocation," Weber suggests that the gradual process of increasing mastery over nature through "intellectualization" has led over the course of history to a condition of world-disenchantment that is destined to evacuate the world of all "meaning." For this situation, he ascribes primary if not exclusive responsibility to the modern sciences, both natural and social, which have extended Plato's original discovery of the concept as a "tool" and have used this instrumental power to unlock the world's apparent mysteries. It is Weber's grim forecast that instrumental reason will ultimately create a world in which any belief in an objective "meaning" will "die out at its very roots."

This well-known "meaning problem" (*Sinn-Problem*) retains its plausibility, however, only if we subscribe to Weber's original belief that the phenomenon of the world's objective meaning derives specifically from religion. Although Weber did believe that it remained

possible for modern social actors to decide individually upon their own ultimate value commitments (and hence it remained possible for even the social scientist to find some ultimate sense of value-orientation in the disenchanting practices of science), he nevertheless saw the decisionistic and individualistic value-commitments of modern social actors as pale afterthoughts of the original and socially comprehensive value-orientations that had once united whole societies within the shared experience of a meaningful cosmos. The modern social actor “has to decide which God is for him,” whereas social actors in traditional communities were born into common frameworks of meaning. This is a crucial distinction between the fragmented world of modern “polytheism” and the value-holism of the religious past. In his contributions to the historical sociology of religion and especially in his analysis of the Protestant ethic and its role in the genesis of modern capitalism, Weber saw the strong experience of value-holism as a distinctively religious inheritance. Despite his occasional notes of warning regarding the prospects for a reprisal of “monumental” styles (in the arts, for example), he did not believe that such atavistic forces could survive over the long term. He could not imagine that any remaining sources of normativity in the modern world could offer sufficiently powerful value-orientations to reunite whole communities in the way in which religion once had in the past.

Animating Weber’s theory of value was a historically grounded (if ultimately nonempirical) belief that religion is not one source of value among many but is in fact a special or privileged source of normativity that remains in some sense irreplaceable. Only this can explain Weber’s belief that the dissolution of traditional religion had brought about an unprecedented “meaning problem” for modern society. At the beginning of this chapter, I alluded to the paradoxical role of intellectuals in Weber’s sociology of religion. On the one hand, it is task of the intellectual to explain the meaning of the world, and in religious societies intellectuals therefore devote themselves to creating elaborate systems of theological and metaphysical meaning. On the other hand, intellectuals are inclined to a form of rational reflection without constraint that ultimately conspires to break down those systems of meaning. Weber clearly saw in himself a personal manifestation of this paradox: although he devoted much of his sociological efforts to the understanding of the religious past, he also considered his sociological work an exercise in disenchantment that could only intensify the problem of modern meaninglessness. He saw in religion a special source of normativity that could no longer be recovered.

Critical theory is still haunted by a Weberian belief in the privileged normative status of religion. In Habermas’s work, both the earlier thesis regarding the linguistification of the sacred and its later reformulation as a reappropriation of the semantic potentials of religion (via rationalizing translation) imply a continuity in normative contents even if this continuity is subjected to critical scrutiny. But the thesis of “dependency” appears to go even further. It suggest that religious traditions bear within themselves “key resources” that have grown otherwise scarce and perhaps remain “indispensable” for the construction of meaning. According to this thesis of dependency, modern society has reached a point of normative impoverishment due to the overwhelming dominance of systemic imperatives and the general effects of an instrumental reason that has unshackled itself from human ends. This Habermasian thesis turns back to Weber’s idea of religion as a special source of normativity, but it resists his pessimistic view that this source cannot be retrieved: it claims that *via* translation modern society can still draw upon the semantic potentials of religion for normative instruction and as a resource for the construction of meaning.

Adorno, I suggest, took exception to the thesis of dependency. In “Religion and Autonomous Reason,” he observed that modern societies had the unfortunate habit of admiring religious traditions as if they were preserved behind a “glass case, through whose walls one can gaze upon the eternally immutable ontological stock of a *philosophia* or *religio perennis*.”

He saw this attitude not as a genuine homage to religion but instead as symptomatic of a modern condition in which “the belief in revelation is no longer substantially present in people” and can be maintained “only through a desperate abstraction.” According to the classical Marxist critique, religion functions as a compensatory structure that simultaneously expresses and mystifies social oppression. In the *Contribution to a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, Marx called religion “the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world.” Adorno reprises the key elements of this Marxist critique when he notes that “the turn toward transcendence” functions as “a screen image for immanent, societal hopelessness.” For Adorno, then, the suggestion that modern society can find in traditional religion its necessary supply of moral and political insights is not so much a solution to contemporary injustice as it is an index of our failure to find a solution. He was especially skeptical regarding the proposal that we apply the ethical precepts of traditional religion to modern life. “[T]he concept of the neighbor refers to communities where people know each other face to face,” he observed.

Helping one’s neighbors, no matter how urgent this remains in a world devastated by those natural catastrophes produced by society, is insignificant in comparison with a praxis that extends beyond every mere immediacy of human relationships, in comparison with a transformation of the world that one day would put an end to the natural catastrophes of society.

(Adorno 1958/2005: 141)

Adorno, then, explicitly rejects as an impossibility the proposal that we translate the language of religion into a modern and secular idiom:

The concept of daily bread, born from the experience of deprivation under the conditions of uncertain and insufficient material production, *cannot simply be translated* into the world of bread factories and surplus production, in which famines are natural catastrophes wrought by society and precisely not by nature.

(Adorno 1958/2005: 141)

This disagreement regarding the prospects for a continuing dialogue with religion would seem to be a major line of fracture in the discourse of critical theory. On the one hand is the proposal that religion as a stock of normative insights and meanings can still be made available for secular use; on the other hand, we confront a skeptical challenge to this proposal. How is this disagreement to be resolved?

### Feuerbach’s Critique

In *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach wrote that “What the human being calls Absolute Being, his God, is his own being. The power of the object over him is therefore the power of his own being.” According to the left-Hegelian critic of religion the divine being that we call God does not reflect a metaphysical reality; it is only “the human being’s very own essence” that has been “set apart from” the human being as an externalized projection of the human being’s own subjectivity (*sein entäußertes Selbst*) (Feuerbach 2008: 26). The experience of subordination to this externalized projection as an independent power is therefore an illusion; it can be dismantled through a rational critique that permits the human being to reappropriate its own projection. Feuerbach saw in the history of religion a gradual attempt to overcome the distance between God and humanity: eventually he believed that this distance would be sublated completely—the human being would recognize that its relation of dependency to



an externalized being was really an expression of its confidence in its very own purely human capacities. Religion would simultaneously complete itself and be annulled by resolving itself into anthropology. "What yesterday still passed for religion, has ceased to be so today; and what is regarded as atheism today will be religion tomorrow" (Feuerbach 2008: 32).

The critical theorists of the first generation were both heirs and critics of this left-Hegelian perspective. Even while they took up the advantageous legacy of a critique of mystification they looked with skepticism upon its undialectical narrative of human emancipation. For Adorno and Horkheimer, it no longer made sense to celebrate without qualification the anthropological drive for radical independence; they traced the origins of modern social pathology all the way back to the earliest phases of self-assertion when the human animal sought to overcome its fear and dependency on external nature. The thesis of a dialectic of enlightenment means simultaneously a fortification of the ego and a weakening of the bonds that connect the human being to its own natural condition. Although the rise of instrumental reason enables the human subject to gain control over nature, this control is bought at a very steep price: our mimetic-naturalistic relation to our own worldly surroundings is lost as humanity comes to experience itself as merely a force for domination. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the forgetting of mimesis represents a crucial moment in the pathogenesis of the modern subject: already in the story of Odysseus (the "first bourgeois") they discern the ironic truth that the bourgeois ego can emerge only as a consequence of repression. The modern ideal of liberal freedom as independence walls us off as monads who can enjoy only the most limited and distorted forms of material pleasure. In the drive for radical independence, humanity lost what we might call an experience of *responsiveness* to the world and to our own embodied and social being.

Feuerbach's critique of religion points in two directions. (1) In its call to overcome God as the alienated projection of purely human capacities, it contains a triumphalist polemic against *any* experience of human dependency: on this reading, the turn from theology to anthropology looks as if it only *intensifies* the model of the human being as an agent of unconstrained domination. But (2) the critique of God as alienated species-being also contains a complaint against religion as a force that *obstructs* our experience of our own intra-human condition. On this reading, the infinitely rich conditions of sensual existence and the responsiveness to one another that constitute this existence lose their primary significance when we project features of our own humanity upon a being who is seen as (in some sense) exempt from these conditions. This second strand of Feuerbach's critique of religious alienation clearly informs the left-Hegelian critique of alienated labor. Indeed, Marx's analysis of the alienation that underwrites commodity fetishism bears a closer resemblance to Feuerbach's analysis of the alienation that expresses itself as devotion to God:

The more the worker spends himself, the more powerful becomes the alien world of objects which he creates over and against himself, the poorer he himself – his inner world – becomes, the less belongs to him as his own. It is the same in religion. The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself.

(Marx 1994: 72)

The major accomplishment of critical theory *after* the analysis of the dialectic of enlightenment was to develop a theory of intersubjectivity that acknowledged (alongside of but against instrumental rationality) the this-worldly utopia of a noncoercive social solidarity that obtains in the ongoing practices of communicative reason. What we might call the "intersubjective turn" in critical theory both broadens and deepens the anthropological emphasis that comes from the left-Hegelian's critique of religion: it sees in language itself an experience of purely human responsiveness that remained obscure in the bourgeois model of

thoroughgoing independence. But it also takes care to show that this experience of responsiveness itself has a rational form, so that the appeal to the sensual aspect of our species-being cannot be mistaken for a nostalgic appeal to some prelapsarian fantasy of humanity's prerational existence.

Among the most perplexing questions for critical theory today is whether it wishes to retain its bond to the left-Hegelian critique of religion or whether it wishes instead to acknowledge our enduring debt to religious sources of normativity. Any attempt to answer this question must confront an unusual dilemma: the left-Hegelian critique sees religion chiefly as an obstruction that impoverishes our experience of our own humanity; the new thesis of dependency looks to religion as a rare resource for preserving or even enhancing this experience.

### The Future of Disenchantment

In our contemporary political moment, the dilemma of choosing between these two models of religion may strike us as especially fraught. On the one hand, the left-Hegelian view tends to see adherents of religious tradition as victims of an illusion. Clearly this condescending perspective does not extend the welcoming hand of equal respect and recognition to religious believers as such; it looks upon them with an attitude of merely *prospective recognition* that awaits their advance on the path of secularizing enlightenment. On the other hand, the thesis of dependency hardly seems any more charitable in its attitude toward religion, since it saddles the believer with the burden of rationalizing and universalizing translation as a precondition for participation in institutional politics. Habermas has attempted to meet this particular objection with the recommendation that the work of translation should be shared in common by *all* participants in political discourse irrespective of their religious or irreligious commitments. This recommendation is supposed to sustain a level terrain of mutual respect for all those who have a stake in forging a common future in multireligious and multicultural societies. The difficulty with this recommendation is that it merely masks without dismantling the secularist verdict on religion. One can require that secular citizens also participate alongside their religious co-citizens in translating the normative *contents* of religion, but this very requirement still leaves intact the secularist assumption that these contents are of value only if they can be stripped of their religious form. It is here that the attitude of intersubjective recognition reaches its limit: the translation proviso clearly marks the point at which religious believers cannot expect wholesale recognition for the substance of their belief *qua* belief. In distinguishing between, on the one hand, the potentially universalizable and rational contents of religious traditions and, on the other, their particularistic and conventional forms, the translation proviso demonstrates its own enduring commitment to the left-Hegelian critique of religion.

If the foregoing conclusion is correct, then the apparent dilemma in critical theory—between the left-Hegelian critique of religion and the post-metaphysical thesis of dependency—may be less of a dilemma than we thought. The practice of a critical appropriation (via rationalizing translation) of religion's normative potentials still subscribes at a deeper level to the left-Hegelian thesis: it holds that the teachings of religion can be of relevance to humanity only when they can be enlisted for mundane purposes. Here we can see how translation performs the same task as the overcoming of alienated projection: it too is a secularizing and disenchanting practice that transforms theology into anthropology.

Translation, however, has at least two distinctive advantages over the older mode of critique. The left-Hegelian conception of religion subscribes to an undifferentiated universalism: all human beings are expected (eventually) to countenance the mundane conditions of life that are shared across the entire species—religious particularity dissolves into

anthropological generality. The post-metaphysical conception subscribes instead to a *differentiated* universalism: it takes up the challenge of forging common norms for the species *across* but not in ignorance of religious distinctions, opening itself without hubris to the unity in diversity of human cultures and faiths. To its opponents, of course, the left-Hegelian conception may look just as metaphysical as the faiths it wishes to surpass: the expectation that humanity must advance *beyond* religion bears witness to the enduring power of Christian-eschatological thinking. The post-metaphysical conception dispenses with this remnant of Hegel's metaphysics, and it admits at least the possibility that religion may remain a permanent fixture of human society. Translation is supposed to be a *mutual* practice of communication among all concerned parties, whereas left-Hegelian criticism remains stubbornly monological: it takes up a privileged stance that is external to the faiths it examines. If political liberalism wishes to keep its distance from all "comprehensive doctrines," then it has good reason to prefer the modest work of shared translation over the monological practice of left-Hegelian criticism.

But these advantages should not mislead us. The emancipatory spirit of rational demystification belongs to critical theory as its birthright, and this is not a spirit it should be asked to disavow. Even in its new guise of post-metaphysical thinking, critical theory still cleaves to the secular faith in anthropological capacities for mutual recognition and mimetic connection that can be awakened in all human beings notwithstanding the great diversity in our cultures and religious traditions. Translation works only as a *reverse* alchemy: it undoes the magical bonds of social solidarity and turns the sacred into the profane, secularizing the redemptive lessons from which we may continue to draw instruction. But we should be mindful of the fact that the sources of normativity are not and have never been the exclusive property of our religious traditions alone. Weber's thesis of disenchantment saw human history as a process of normative loss only because he neglected the mundane experiences that persist alongside religion as secular resources for morality and meaning. The notion of a special dependency on religion seems valid only so long as we continue to believe in Weber's thesis. Once we grant the possibility that we can draw instruction from nonreligious experiences the thesis of our curious dependency on religion must collapse. The "methodological atheism" that animates the practice of secularizing translation thus turns out to be *more than* methodological. It is a name for our regulative ideal of a society that could, at least in principle, achieve normative stability without drawing upon the resources of the religious past.

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# CRITICAL THEORY AND FEMINISM

*Amy Allen*

The story of the relationship between feminism and the Frankfurt School through its first three generations is a complicated one. As has been noted recently by Stuart Jeffries, women were noticeably absent from the early Frankfurt School, an absence that Jeffries maintains is “odd, even disgraceful, for a putatively radical group of thinkers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (Jeffries 2016). Moreover, although one can find interesting insights into the relationship between femininity, masculinity, and domination in works such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002) and Adorno’s *Minima Moralia* (1974), the early Frankfurt School’s nostalgia for the bourgeois nuclear family and paternal authority is strikingly at odds with the feminist critique of patriarchy. Moreover, none of the members of the early Frankfurt School engaged substantially with the feminist theory of their day, despite the fact that Simone de Beauvoir, for example, was their contemporary. Nor, with the exception of Herbert Marcuse – who described the “Women’s Liberation Movement” in 1974 as “the most important and potentially the most radical political movement that we have” (Marcuse 2006, 147) – were they particularly sympathetic to the demands of the feminist movement that was emerging in the late 1960s as part of the broader student movement (for the disagreement between Adorno and Marcuse over the student movement, see Adorno 1999; for a perceptive analysis of the bodily gendered aspects of the infamous “bared breasts” student protest against Adorno, see Yun Lee 2006).

By contrast, Jürgen Habermas, the leading figure of the second generation of the Frankfurt School, has favorably discussed feminist theory and practice – most notably in the context of the development of his discourse theory of law and democracy (Habermas 1996, 418–427) – and he has engaged with and taken on board feminist critiques of his work – most notably in his incorporation of Nancy Fraser’s conception of “subaltern counterpublics” in his analysis of the public sphere (see Fraser 1992; Habermas 1996, 312). However, his system–lifeworld distinction has been criticized by feminists for being blind to the nature and significance of gender oppression in such a way as to render his theory insufficiently critical (Fraser 1989). Moreover, his staunch rationalism is arguably at odds with the mainstream of contemporary academic feminist theorizing, which has tended to draw inspiration from the French poststructuralism of which Habermas was highly critical (Habermas 1987). Indeed, as Johanna Meehan has noted, “Habermasian theory stands squarely in a tradition of Enlightenment-inspired political theory and deontological ethics which many feminists have thoroughly rejected,” such that one might wonder “why feminists *should* read Habermas at all” (Meehan 1995, 1).

Axel Honneth, Habermas's successor in Frankfurt and a leading figure of the third generation of the Frankfurt School, has arguably gone much further than his predecessors in his engagement with feminist theory and his theorization of feminist movements. He is not only engaged in substantial, public, book length debates with prominent feminist theorists (see Fraser and Honneth 2003; Stahl et al., forthcoming), but also draws on the (admittedly partial and increasingly fragile) achievements of feminist movements in his theorization of struggles for recognition and social freedom (see Honneth 2014, 154–176). To be sure, as Christopher Zurn acknowledges, “Honneth is...no radical calling for the overthrow of the sex-gender system” (Zurn 2015, 21), but his encounter with certain strands of feminism – particularly feminist ethics of care and debates about equality and difference – has been deep and sustained, and has impacted the formation of his theoretical position (see especially Honneth 2007).

Although the picture is somewhat mixed, then, it would not be unreasonable to conclude from these opening reflections that critical theory as the Frankfurt School tradition has conceived and practiced it is not *necessarily* feminist. And yet, some of the most prominent and important feminist theorists of the last three decades have either drawn inspiration from or developed their views in sustained dialogue with Frankfurt School critical theory. This list includes, at a minimum, such important feminist thinkers as Seyla Benhabib, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, Angela Davis, and Nancy Fraser. Indeed, one might argue, as is implied by the title of one of Fraser's classic essays (see Fraser 1989), that pushing Frankfurt School critical theory in a feminist direction is a way of making it more genuinely critical, thus enabling this tradition to live up to its own best methodological insights and its radical political promise. This suggests that Frankfurt School critical theory's commitment to what Fraser calls, echoing Marx, “the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age” (Fraser 1989, 113) actually entails a commitment to feminism as a mode of both theory and practice – whether its practitioners realize this commitment or not.

In what follows, I survey the landscape of feminist critical theory, tracing its notable peaks and also attempting to discern promising paths for the future. I begin not at the beginning but rather in the middle, with a discussion of those feminist critical theorists whose work emerged in conversation with Habermas, in the wake of his communicative turn. Two of these thinkers in particular, Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser, are widely recognized as important third-generation Frankfurt School theorists in their own right. I thus start by reconstructing the key points of their influential debate (Benhabib et al., 1995). Next, I trace the impact of the Benhabib–Fraser debate with a discussion of the problem of the subject in post-Habermasian feminist critical theory. Finally, I consider some recent work in feminist critical theory that rejects the Habermasian approach and returns to the insights of the first generation of the Frankfurt School. I conclude by outlining some of the challenges that lie ahead for the project of feminist critical theory.

### Feminist Contentions

In 1990, the Greater Philadelphia Philosophy Consortium sponsored a symposium on the topic of feminism and postmodernism, with Seyla Benhabib and Judith Butler as speakers and Nancy Fraser as respondent. Their exchange was published in the journal *Praxis International* (11: 2 July 1991) and subsequently expanded into the book, *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (1995). In many ways, this text could be seen as the high-water mark for Habermasian feminist critical theory. It not only crystallized many of the core issues at stake in the debate between Habermasian critical theory and French post-structuralism – a debate that was also arguably at its height in the 1990s – it also articulated the significance

and stakes of this debate for feminist theory and practice. In so doing, it set the agenda for a good deal of subsequent work in feminist critical theory.

The opening salvo in the debate is Benhabib's strong critique of postmodernism and its limited potential for feminism. Borrowing from the work of Jane Flax (1990), Benhabib defines postmodernism in terms of three theses: the death of man, the death of history, and the death of metaphysics (Benhabib et al., 18). The death of man refers to the rejection of traditional conceptions of subjectivity as constitutive of knowledge, which postmodernism replaces with the idea of subjects as socially constructed in webs of power, knowledge, and discourse. The death of history entails the rejection of totalizing Enlightenment narratives of historical progress understood as necessary, universal, and directed toward the Absolute. The death of metaphysics expresses the rejection of a unitary conception of Being or reality – the Absolute – and of the strong foundationalist claims about truth enabled by such metaphysical notions. Benhabib argues that each of these theses can be articulated in a strong and a weak version, and that whereas the weak versions are relatively uncontroversial, the strong versions undermine the emancipatory ideals of the feminist movement and therefore should be rejected. Thus, whereas the weak version of the death of man thesis suggests a subject situated in history, social practice, language, and so forth, the strong version dissolves the subject into nothing more than an effect of power and discourse. Whereas the weak version of the death of history thesis rejects grand metanarratives of historical progress, the strong version rejects any and all large-scale historical narratives such as those that are necessary to explain gender subordination. Whereas the weak version of the death of metaphysics thesis rejects grandiose claims to comprehension of the real as the ground of truth (which virtually no modern philosophers accept anyway), the strong version undermines the very possibility of philosophy, and, for Benhabib, social criticism without philosophy is impossible.

As Benhabib sees it, postmodernist feminists endorse strong versions of each of these three theses; in so doing, they undermine

the feminist commitment to women's agency and sense of selfhood, to the reappropriation of women's own history in the name of an emancipated future, and to the exercise of radical social criticism which uncovers gender "in all its endless variety and monotonous similarity."

(Benhabib et al., 29)

Such a stance is unacceptable from the point of view of feminist critical theory insofar as this project takes the commitment to emancipation – an expression of what Benhabib calls elsewhere the anticipatory-utopian aspect of critique (Benhabib 1986, 226) – as central to its enterprise.

Benhabib aims her critique not only at Butler, whom she accuses of dissolving the subject in relations of power and discourse (Benhabib et al., 21–22), but also at Fraser, who advocates a relatively strong version of the death of metaphysics thesis under the heading of "social criticism without philosophy" (Fraser and Nicholson 1990). Although Butler's contribution to the debate, framed as a reply to Benhabib's challenge that defends certain "postmodern" ideas while simultaneously questioning the very validity of this label, is interesting and important in its own right, I will pass over it in order to keep the focus on the disagreement between Benhabib and Fraser. Fraser characterizes the debate between Benhabib and Butler as one between critical theory, with its focus on concepts like autonomy, critique, and utopia, and post-structuralism, with its deconstructive conceptions of subjectivity, identity, and agency and she disagrees with the assumption that feminists can't have both. Thus, whereas Benhabib positions herself as a critic of postmodernism and a defender of Enlightenment conceptions of autonomy, critique, and normativity, Fraser characterizes this as a

false antithesis. In so doing, she stakes out a more capacious vision of feminist critical theory that aims to incorporate the key insights of poststructuralist thinkers such as Butler and Foucault.

In response to Benhabib, then, Fraser argues that one can defend medium-strength versions of the three theses – versions that capture more of the radicality of poststructuralist critique while remaining perfectly compatible with the emancipatory aims of feminist critical theory. With respect to the death of man thesis, Fraser sides with Butler in arguing that the subject can be both constituted by power relations and capable of critique – as she says, memorably: “nothing in principle precludes that subjects are both culturally constructed and capable of critique” (Benhabib et al., 67) – though she chides Butler for trading the language of normativity and critique for that of resignification. This move makes it difficult for Butler to distinguish between better and worse subjectivating practices, or between, as we might put it, subjection and subordination (see Allen 2008, 72–95). On this point, Fraser concludes, “feminists need to develop an alternative conceptualization of the subject, one that integrates Butler’s poststructuralist emphasis on construction with Benhabib’s critical-theoretical stress on critique” (Benhabib et al., 69). Regarding the death of history, Fraser argues that it is possible to give up on grand metanarratives, traditional philosophies of history, and strong conceptions of historical progress and yet to continue to read history in a way that is guided by an interest in women’s emancipation. Finally, with respect to the death of metaphysics, Fraser defends her claim that situated social criticism – what she calls social criticism without philosophy, that is, without appeal to grand metanarratives or strong foundationalist assumptions – is perfectly adequate to ground feminist critiques of male dominance. Fraser argues that feminism doesn’t need an “ahistorical, transcendental discourse, claiming to articulate the criteria of validity for all other discourses” (Benhabib et al., 65) to ground its critical and normative claims; historically, socially, and culturally situated claims will do just fine, and they are the best we can hope for in any case.

Even with the hindsight of more than twenty years, it is difficult to discern precisely what is at stake in the debate between Benhabib and Fraser over the death of metaphysics and death of history theses. To be sure, Fraser seems less worried than is Benhabib about the specter of radical contextualism that arguably threatens all notions of immanent or situated critique. Still, Benhabib is quite clear even in her critique of postmodernism that she is no defender of ahistorical, transcendental metadiscourse (see Benhabib et al., 24), and it is perhaps not quite fair of Fraser to suggest otherwise. Indeed, in her earlier work, Benhabib had been sharply critical of Habermas for what she regarded as the excessively rationalist, proceduralist, and formal nature of his theory of communicative rationality and his discourse ethics (Benhabib 1986). In contrast, Benhabib sought to develop a more Hegelian version of communicative ethics, one that stressed the crucial role of the contextual, the particular, and the concrete in moral-political deliberation. Benhabib characterized her position as an interactive universalism: a more historically self-conscious form of universalism according to which the moral point of view is understood as “the contingent achievement of an interactive form of rationality rather than as the timeless standpoint of a legislative reason” (Benhabib 1992, 6).

When we compare Benhabib’s interactive universalism with Fraser and Nicholson’s social criticism without philosophy, the differences, at least as regards the question of metaphysics, seem slight and mostly terminological. Fraser and Nicholson present their model as an alternative to legitimating metanarratives of any sort, whether they come in the form of a Hegelian philosophy of history (about which more in a moment) or in the form of an ahistorical, foundationalist epistemology or moral theory. A legitimating metanarrative, on this view, is any philosophical theory that aims to secure the legitimacy of first-order discursive practices (Fraser and Nicholson 1990, 22). Following Jean-François Lyotard, Fraser and Nicholson argue that



the problem with such metanarratives is not so much their narrative or historical structure but rather their very claim to *meta* status, a status which, at least in our “postmodern” era, simply cannot be made good. As they put it: “a so-called metadiscourse is in fact simply one more discourse among others” (Fraser and Nicholson 1990, 22). Thus, while it is true that their model of social criticism without philosophy is avowedly nonuniversalist, pragmatic, and fallibilistic (Fraser and Nicholson 1990, 34–35), “nonuniversalist” here seems to signal not much more than a rejection of the type of decontextualized foundationalism that Benhabib also criticizes.

In other words, both Benhabib and Fraser are resolutely post-metaphysical and anti-foundationalist thinkers. As such, their views with respect to the question of metaphysics are arguably much closer not only to each other but also to that of Judith Butler – particularly her notion of “contingent foundations” (see Benhabib et al., 35–57) – than they seem willing to acknowledge. Similarly, Benhabib and Fraser seem remarkably close on the point about the death of history. Both agree that the rejection of grand Enlightenment metanarratives of historical progress counseled by Lyotard need not entail a refusal of all large-scale, causal-explanatory historical narratives; indeed, such narratives are, they agree, necessary for understanding the maintenance and reproduction of structures of gender subordination and, as such, for fulfilling what Benhabib called critical theory’s “explanatory-diagnostic” aim (Benhabib 1986, 226). To be sure, there are subtle differences between Benhabib’s and Fraser’s conceptions of history that don’t fully emerge in this early debate. Whereas Benhabib’s conception of history is rather straightforwardly left-Hegelian – though her Hegel is, in line with her postmetaphysical stance, a Hegel without the Absolute – Fraser’s social criticism without philosophy model makes room for a significant genealogical component (see Allen 2017). Still, both Benhabib and Fraser seem to hold on to some version of a detranscendentalized and postmetaphysical yet recognizably left-Hegelian understanding of history. Indeed, both have been criticized in recent years from the direction of postcolonial feminism for failing to interrogate fully enough their Hegelian, teleological, modernist commitments (see Hutchings 2008, 2014).

### The Problem of the Subject

However, as Benhabib herself has argued, it was the “problem of the subject” – the implications of the death of man thesis for thinking about agency and critique – that was most central to this debate (Benhabib 1999, 337). And with respect to that problem, the differences between Benhabib’s and Fraser’s positions are more significant. Indeed, their positions could be seen as laying down two distinct paths for the development of post-Habermasian feminist theory. On the one path, there are those who follow Benhabib in developing the notion of a situated, narrative self as a compelling alternative to the poststructuralist position; on the other path are those who follow Fraser in attempting to integrate (at least some aspects of) the poststructuralist position into feminist critical theory.

Benhabib presents her narrative conception of the self as an alternative to Butler’s poststructuralist, performative conception. She claims that the narrative conception is better able to illuminate the vicissitudes of gender identity in a way that enables us to understand the “varieties of resistance and cultural struggles of the present” (Benhabib 1999, 338). According to this conception, “to be and to become a self is to insert oneself into webs of interlocation; it is to know how to answer when one is addressed and to know how to address others” (Benhabib 2002, 15). As Benhabib notes, we are all born into various webs of interlocation or narrative – including familial, gender, ethnic, racial, religious, national, cultural narratives, and more – and “we become who we are by learning to be a conversation partner in these narratives” (Benhabib 1999, 344). Moreover, although we are not in a position to choose the webs of interlocation in which we find ourselves, “our agency consists in our capacity to weave out of those narratives and fragments of narratives a life story that makes sense for us, as unique

individual selves" (Benhabib 1999, 344). We are, in other words, not just the protagonists but also authors of our own stories. Contra Charles Taylor, however, from whom she borrows the notion of "webs of interlocution," Benhabib offers an anti-essentialist model of the self that emphasizes not our substantive first-order strong evaluations but rather the second-order capacity to take an evaluative stance with respect to one's life. By construing the core of identity as an ability rather than a substance, Benhabib highlights the temporal dimension of identity; the process of achieving narrative coherence is, for her, "an interminable task, for narration is also a project of recollection and retrieval" (Benhabib 1999, 350). Particular events in our past take on new significance in the light of present events, new characters get written in and written out of our life stories, and so forth, all of which prompt us continually to reconstruct our narrative identity. Benhabib also highlights our inability to master our own narratives completely; not only are our own motivations and intentions often opaque to us, our narratives must also attain some degree of fit with the continually unfolding narratives of those others with whom our own life stories are inextricably intertwined.

In her book, *Moral Textures* (1998), María Pía Lara also develops the concept of narrative for feminist critical theory, though her account focuses more on the aesthetic dimension of narratives – as a corrective to the narrow Habermasian focus on moral validity – and also on their collective deployment within the public sphere – that is, on the potential of narratives to generate social and political transformation by reconfiguring the limits of the possible. However, like Benhabib, Lara links narratives to reflexive agency (Lara 1998, 71); moreover, on her account, narrative agency is integral to both autonomy and authenticity (Lara 1998, chapter 4). For Lara, "emancipatory narratives can themselves create new forms of power, configuring new ways to fight back against past and present injustices, thus making institutional transformations possible. This is the power I call 'illocutionary force'" (Lara 1998, 5). The illocutionary force generated by the feminist transformation of gender narratives has, on Lara's account, expanded our existing moral vocabulary, including our conceptions of justice and autonomy (see Lara 1998, 80).

Lois McNay characterizes this turn to narrative as an attempt to do justice to the post-structuralist emphasis on difference while holding on to the universal normative foundations provided by Habermasian communicative ethics (see McNay 2003, 15). Although she is sympathetic with Benhabib's critique of poststructuralism and also with the turn to narrative within feminist critical theory more generally, she is critical of Benhabib's and Lara's attempts to bring together a Habermasian theory of communication and an account of narrative agency. McNay raises two concerns. First, she worries that these accounts "deploy an exaggeratedly syncretic concept of narrative identity that underestimates the blocks, both psychic and social, to the formation of a coherent sense of self" and, as a result, they foreclose "an understanding of complexities and contradictions within the construction of gender identity" (McNay 2003, 7). Second, she argues that "the normative emphasis on narratives as inherently reflexive and as authentic expressions of experience arises because the analysis of narrative structures is detached from a thorough analysis of power relations" (McNay 2003, 12; for a related critique of Benhabib, see Allen 2008, 163–170; for a compelling reconstruction and defense of Benhabib, see Lucas 2016).

For McNay, the problem ultimately lies in the attempt to integrate a conception of narrative agency into the Habermasian framework. As she puts it,

a universal basis for feminist critique can only be retained by relying on a delimited and problematic concept of narrative which underplays the complexities of gender identity and, in some ways, replicates rather than overcomes the rationalist tendencies in Habermas's work.

(McNay 2003, 16)

(For what it is worth, this seems to me to be a more compelling critique of Benhabib than of Lara, precisely because of Lara's focus on the disclosive power of the imagination and of aesthetic validity.) For these reasons, McNay argues for an alternative model of narrative agency on Ricoeur's more complex and psychoanalytically inflected conception of narrative (see McNay 2000, 2003) and connects this to a Bourdieusian analysis of power and social suffering (see McNay 2003, 2014).

While Benhabib, Lara, and McNay may disagree about how best to articulate a conception of narrative agency within the context of feminist critical theory, they could each be seen as offering this conception as a compelling *alternative* to a poststructuralist account of subjectivity. A different trajectory of the feminist contentions debate can be found in the work of those theorists who have attempted to *integrate* some version of a poststructuralist account of subjectivity and identity into a broader feminist critical theory. In my own work, for example, I have attempted to bring together the Foucaultian and Butlerian account of subjection – which is, I argue, crucial for the explanatory diagnostic task of analyzing gender subordination in all of its depth and complexity – with a Habermasian conception of autonomy understood as communicatively and intersubjectively generated (Allen 2008). This approach is inspired by Fraser's response to Benhabib, inasmuch as it entails understanding critical capacities as themselves “culturally constructed” – but no less critical for all of that (Benhabib et al., 67). In other words, it is an attempt to develop Fraser's called for alternative conceptualization of the subject that integrates Butler's emphasis on construction with Benhabib's emphasis on critique (see Benhabib et al., 69).

This integrative project has two principal aims. The first, *interpretive*, aim is to intervene in the Foucault/Habermas and Butler/Benhabib debates, challenging superficial misunderstandings on both sides and developing readings of both thinkers that show there to be more middle ground between them than is typically assumed. For example, I contest the standard reading of Foucault as an anti-subjective and anti- or crypto-normative thinker while simultaneously developing a more contextualist reading of Habermas's notion of autonomy that is compatible with a Foucaultian conception of power and subjection. The second, *conceptual*, aim is to use this interpretive recasting to rethink the relationship between subjection and autonomy, in a way that allows us to understand individuals as both constituted as subjects through relations of power – that is, through processes of subjection in the dual sense of that term – and yet still capable of a kind of situated critical reflection that deserves to be called autonomy – even if that reflection can never be done from a point of view outside of power.

In her book, *Identities and Freedom* (2013), Allison Weir pursues a similar integrative project, with a focus on the concept of identity. Her goal is to rethink the notion of identity in the wake of its persistent and ongoing critique. One of Weir's key moves is to take on board the poststructuralist critique of identities as being constituted by subordination, power, and exclusion while insisting that identity is not reducible to these negative forces. Identities, for Weir, are *also* sources of values, of connections to ourselves and to each other, and to ideals; as such, they are not only sources of subordination, but they are also enabling conditions for individual and collective freedom.

Weir develops this more complex and internally differentiated conception of identities in relation to power by bringing together the work of Charles Taylor and Michel Foucault. Weir takes Taylor and Foucault to be representative of two familiar yet distinct ways of understanding identity: respectively, identity as an enabling source of meaning and identity as a subordinating trap. Taylor's positive conception of identity is grounded in a first person, existential account of what matters to or has meaning for me and why and an understanding of the social as an enabling condition for individual freedom and agency; Foucault's, by contrast, is grounded in a third person, genealogical account of how the ascription of identity is a function of power and a conception of power relations as coextensive with the social

body. While Taylor offers a compelling account of existential meaning and authenticity, he tends to understand the social in benign terms that blind him to the complexities of power; while Foucault offers a bracing account of how notions of identity can serve to anchor power relations deep in the self, he also tends to underplay the role of resistant and alternative identifications in enabling resistance to subjection. Moving beyond both thinkers, Weir argues that freedom requires “a practice of relation to self and others that involves both analysis of relations of power and identification with resistant identities” (Weir 2013, 23). This also means moving beyond the opposition between the first- and third-person perspectives by means of a shift to the second person, that is, to questions about “my identification and connection *with* and *to* particular people, communities, and ideals” (Weir 2013, 29). But the trick is to do this without losing sight of the fact that we don’t fully understand ourselves – as individuals or collectives – unless and until we understand the relations of power through which we are constituted. In this way, Weir cleverly positions the perspective of Habermasian communicative action as the sublation of Taylor’s communitarianism and Foucault’s poststructuralism – a new twist for post-Habermasian feminism.

### Back to the First Generation?

For much of the last thirty years, the influential strand of feminist critical theory discussed above has developed in critical dialogue with the work of Habermas. As Wendy Brown noted in 2006,

to the extent that feminist theory does engage [the Frankfurt School] tradition today, it is primarily through Jürgen Habermas; and within Habermas’s extensive oeuvre, it is his theorization of the public sphere and communicative rationality – his later, markedly Kantian and more liberal thinking – that feminist theory has taken up.

(Brown 2006, 2)

On Brown’s view, however, the excessive focus on Habermas has come at a cost for feminism. As she puts it, “whatever the value of Habermas’s work on communicative ethics, it cannot be said to bear the philosophical reach or political radicalism represented by the early Frankfurt School”; as a result, with this focus on Habermas, “something in feminist thinking has been tamed” (Brown 2006, 2). Robyn Marasco makes a similar assertion: “That feminist critics find nourishment from Habermasian discourse ethics suggests the extent to which contemporary critical theory has curbed its political aspirations and narrowed its theoretical field” (Marasco 2006, 88).

Although the post-Habermasian strand of feminist critical theory has been highly influential, it has never exhausted all of the possibilities for a feminist critical theory. Indeed, there have always been influential feminist critical theorists – including Brown herself – who have rejected the Habermasian turn and instead have drawn inspiration from the early Frankfurt School, in particular Adorno (Cornell 1992), Walter Benjamin (Brown 2005), and Marcuse (Willett 2001; Davis 2004). Marasco (2006) offers a masterful analysis of the productive tensions between first-generation Frankfurt School critical theory and feminist theory. Canvassing the analyses of femininity and male domination in the work of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse, Marasco offers an immanent critique of early critical theory, revealing the extent to which, for each of these thinkers, “the feminine embodies the hidden kernel of ‘truth’ contained in the past – whether distant (nature) or recent (family) – and protects it from the totalizing sweep of bureaucratic capital” (Marasco 2006, 106). However, as Marasco further argues, this linking of the feminine with a negative utopian horizon – by

associating it either with a mythic sexuality that precedes and exceeds bureaucratic instrumental rationality or with a nostalgic conception of maternal love in the bourgeois family – “proves a particularly shaky foundation upon which to rest a redemptive critique, precisely insofar as woman’s desires, experiences, and forms of life are themselves the effects of bourgeois rationality” (Marasco 2006, 106). As Adorno puts it,

the feminine character, and the ideal of femininity on which it is modelled, are products of masculine society. The image of undistorted nature arises only in distortion, as its opposite.....The feminine character is a negative imprint of domination. But therefore equally bad.

(Adorno 1974, 95)

Although these two ways of reading femininity may seem starkly at odds, Marasco argues that they are two sides of the same dialectical coin. In the early Frankfurt School,

woman appears to be nothing more and nothing less than the way she has been seen through the lenses of male dominance. Negatively, she is reduced to a by-product of history, a consequence of male power whose desire is both produced and exhausted by domination. Positively, she enjoys the status of the relic, a trace of “prehistory,” to remind us that things might be otherwise.

(Marasco 2006, 108)

Ultimately, however, what might seem like a disabling theoretical impasse contains, according to Marasco, the kernel of an important methodological insight that feminists can learn from reading the early Frankfurt School. As she puts it,

the production of gender through rationalities of male dominance poses a conundrum for a feminist critique of dominance: any words, concepts, forms of life, desires, experiences, and practices deployed for feminist aims are those historically available through the complex of social power. We can neither step outside the history of male dominance nor take solace in the assurance of its progressive softening or radical overcoming.

(Marasco 2006, 110)

But this diagnosis should not lead us to conclude that feminist critique has run out of steam or is necessarily chasing its own tail; rather, for Marasco, “critical theorists show us that, while it is impossible to think or represent ‘woman’ apart from how ‘she’ has been thought and represented by male dominance, this is precisely the melancholy conundrum that animates critique” (Marasco 2006, 111).

In recent years, Adorno’s work in particular has sparked sustained critical interest from feminists (see Heberle 2006). As Renee Heberle argues, many of Adorno’s central philosophical concerns resonate deeply with those of feminist theorists, and “much of Adorno’s thinking predicts some of [the] basic conundrums of feminist theorizing” (Heberle 2006, 2). Like much work in feminist theory, Adorno’s philosophy challenges and deconstructs dualisms such as nature and history, desire and reason, object and subject (see Heberle 2006, 5); it makes concrete lived experience fundamental to philosophical thinking (see Heberle 2006, 6); and it elaborates a theory of the nonidentical that problematizes essentialist conceptions of identity (see Heberle 2006, 6).

In her recent book *Power and Feminist Agency in Capitalism* (2017), Claudia Leeb draws out the importance of the Adornian account of the nonidentical for contemporary feminist

theory. Drawing extensively on Adorno, read alongside Marx and Lacan, Leeb reframes the debates about identity and subjectivity discussed in the previous section. The core animating idea of Leeb's book is what she calls the political subject-in-outline, which she develops out of her reading of Adorno's notion of the nonidentical and Lacan's conception of the real. Leeb describes the political subject-in-outline as moving "within the tension of a certain coherence (the subject) necessary to effect change, and permanent openness (the outline) necessary to counter its exclusionary character" (Leeb 2017, 5–6). At the individual level, the subject-in-outline is constituted as a subject by power relations but is never wholly constituted, and thus always remains open for transformation; at the political level, the subject-in-outline has a certain coherence (such as is afforded by the category "women") while remaining permanently open to further expansion and inclusion. On Leeb's reading of Adorno, his unique combination of interests in psychoanalysis and cultural Marxism enables him to provide a theoretical bridge between Lacan and Marx. Thus, in addition to using Adorno to reframe the kinds of feminist debates about subjection, autonomy, and identity that were prominent in Habermasian feminist critical theory, Leeb's book joins forces with recent work by Nancy Fraser (2013) and Wendy Brown (2015) in shifting the focus of feminist critical theory back to the critique of capitalism.

## Conclusion

In recent years, the most interesting and exciting work in feminist theory and gender studies has been in the areas of intersectionality theory, queer and trans\* feminism, and transnational and postcolonial feminisms. By way of conclusion, I would like to raise some questions about whether and how Frankfurt School critical theory can participate in and contribute to these debates.

Although the topic of intersectionality remains hotly debated among feminist theorists (for an overview, see Allen 2016b), it has also been called "the most important contribution that women's studies, in conjunction with other fields, has made so far" (McCall 2005, 1771). The concept of intersectionality has a long and complex genealogy (see Collins 2011), with roots that stretch back to nineteenth-century Black feminist analyses of the intersections of racism and sexism (see Gines 2014), but contemporary intersectionality theory takes its inspiration from the work of legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (Crenshaw 1991a, 1991b). Although some feminist critics of intersectionality theory construe it as a theory of identity, the core claim of intersectionality can perhaps more productively be interpreted as a claim not about identity but rather about power. On this view, the goal of an intersectional approach is to develop a single framework for analyzing power that encompasses sexism, racism, class oppression, heterosexism, and other axes of subordination and that theorizes their complex interconnections.

To the extent that Frankfurt School critical theory retains the ambition of offering a critique of actually existing power relations in the societies that it aims to critique, and assuming that it would accept the claim that the contemporary societies that are the object of its critique are structured by relations of racial, gender, class, and sexual subordination, it stands to benefit from developing an intersectional analysis of power and domination. However, in order to do so, critical theorists will have to develop a more complex and differentiated conceptualization of power and domination than those currently on offer. Iris Marion Young's analysis of the five faces of oppression (Young 1992) and Nancy Fraser's bivalent model of identity-based misrecognition and class-based maldistribution (Fraser and Honneth 2003) could be useful starting points here, but both stand in need of further elaboration and development. Such elaboration would arguably also need to take place through a much more sustained critical engagement between Frankfurt School critical theorists and

woman of color (Black, Latina, and indigenous) feminists than has heretofore been the case. One promising point of departure here would be the work of Angela Davis, not only one of Adorno and Marcuse's most prominent students, but also an important Black feminist, critical philosopher of race, and theorist of what she calls the "intersectionality of struggles" against carceral racism, colonialism, and patriarchy (Davis 2016, 144).

As far as queer and trans\* feminism go, work in these fields often foregrounds issues of embodiment (see Ahmed 2006, Salamon 2010) and affect (Berlant 2011, Chen 2012) that are far afield of the largely discursive concerns of much work in Habermasian and post-Habermasian feminist critical theory. Adorno may have interesting resources to offer here, given his emphasis on bodily suffering, particularity, and affect (see Yun Lee 2006). However, in order to make use to those resources in the context of queer and trans\* theory, one would have to read Adorno very much against the grain, in light of his own problematic views of homosexuality as an immature form of sexuality (see Cornell 2006, 33–34).

Finally, with respect to transnational and postcolonial feminisms, the stumbling block here is likely to be post-Habermasian critical theory's commitment to and investment in a normatively loaded conception of modernity. To the extent that Frankfurt School critical theorists are committed to the idea that European modernity and Enlightenment represent the outcome of a progressive historical learning process, their work is strikingly at odds with a wide range of work in post- and decolonial theory, including that of prominent transnational and postcolonial feminists such as Chandra Mohanty (2003), Gayatri Spivak (1999), Saba Mahmood (2005), and Jasbir Puar (2007). These theorists (and many others) have exposed and rigorously problematized the ways in which the normative conceptions of European modernity held so dear by contemporary Frankfurt School theorists are entangled with ideologies of colonial and imperial domination. It remains to be seen whether and how a critical theory tradition that is, at least in its contemporary form, relatively unified around its commitment to modernity and which tends to view feminism itself as an outgrowth of the modern, Enlightenment conception of freedom as autonomy can respond to this challenge (see Weir 2013). Once again, the work of the early Frankfurt School, with its rigorous skepticism of the concept of progress, may provide important resources here (see Allen 2016a).

It seems to me an open – and important – question to what extent the Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory can fruitfully engage with, learn from, and contribute to these contemporary debates in feminist theory. A plausible case could be made for the claim that in order to do so, it will need not only to shift its focus to questions of power, embodiment, and affect that have not been high on its theoretical agenda in recent years but also to attenuate or at least critically interrogate its residual modernist commitments. Although reorienting critical theory in these ways may run the risk of putting feminist critical theory at odds with more mainstream, Habermasian and post-Habermasian Frankfurt School approaches, doing so may be necessary if feminist critical theory is to remain not only sufficiently critical but also sufficiently feminist.

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# CRITIQUE, CRISIS, AND THE ELUSIVE TRIBUNAL

*Judith Butler*

In January of 2017, the International Consortium of Critical Theory Programs began formally with two Mellon grants: one to Northwestern University and another to the University of California at Berkeley. Both among the Mellon officers and other scholars who were canvassed about the Consortium, there were a number of skeptical responses, some more predictable than others. Some were interested in the Consortium but did not want to work with the term “critical theory” because it has been over-institutionalized as a European mid-twentieth-century project, one bound by the intellectual response to European fascism and emergence of technologies that amplified possibilities of domination and destruction. They suggested that critical theory is hopelessly bound up with that European legacy, that it cannot be transported easily or well. So the questions we had to answer were: what is critical theory now, and what global forms does it take?

The first impulse was to identify all the places in the world where Adorno was read or appropriated for local purposes, but it quickly became obvious that such a move keeps the Frankfurt School as the locus of critical theory and identifies those foreign sites only as instances of its appropriation. Theory is only appropriated or instantiated in those global sites, but not generated, and certainly not generated in a novel relation to established critical theory. Without emerging from the Frankfurt School, critical theory nevertheless takes form in non-European intellectual legacies, through different languages and vocabularies.

Even “The Frankfurt School” proves to be no steady referent; internally complex, the School harbored ongoing debates about how best to define conditions of belonging. Some of the most exemplary critical theorists have rejected the term. Jürgen Habermas argued that a form of transcendental reflection on norms and a focus on communicative practice had to replace critical theory’s reliance on the reflexive operation of a historical subject and its form of immanent critique (Habermas, 1985: 119–121). Of course, most people continue to regard Habermas as the most important living representative of the Frankfurt School, contextualizing the transcendental fresh start in the context of an evolving history of that school. That fact alone underscores that critical theory can, and does, change, and that as much as its contemporary forms differ from its previous ones, they also extend the historical life and cultural range of critical theoretical activity in the present.

As important as it is to reflect upon the Frankfurt School as the central form of critical theory in Europe and in many other regions of the world, it is equally important to allow critical theory to enter into history, as it were, and to assume a number of global forms. Otherwise, we are left with a predictable form of cultural imperialism: Mahmood Mamdani has maintained that it cannot be the case that theory is manufactured in the North and

simply applied to the South, or that the South offers nothing but illustrative examples for theoretical points articulated in the North. If we ask what form theory now takes and what makes it critical, another set of geographical and historical coordinates become necessary for situating critical theory for the present. Perhaps there is, in fact, a more important point, namely, that our understanding of space and time changes once the global framework is invoked. What is meant by “the Global South,” for instance, and what geopolitical realities does it include, marginalize, and efface? This is one question posed by the problem of the subaltern (Spivak, 1988). Locations are not the unambiguous and given spatial coordinates for theory. They emerge only on the condition that there is a map of knowledge and discourse that establishes them as such (Spivak, 1995).

So the task is neither simply to document how the term “critical” operates in various locations nor to discover the new vocabularies that do critical work at a distance from recognized forms of critical theory. Our ability to identify such vocabularies is possible not because we know in advance what is “critical” and then apply that criterion to the instance. In order to remain open to new senses of the critical, we have to allow for dissonance, even contradiction, to exist between older and newer versions of critical thought. Indeed, the term “critical” may have to be relinquished as new vocabularies emerge as a result of translation practices. The idea that critical theory can be found in other vocabularies presumes the success of a translation practice within a multilingual field to find a one-to-one correspondence between terms. But why should we presume that all critical practices are translatable into the language of “critical theory” when the global terrain of critical knowledge is one in which the limits of translatability are constantly exposed, including the translatability of “critique” itself?

This raises a crucial question: when the term “critical” or “critique” proves simply not to be translatable into another language, does that mark the limit – or the end – of critical theory itself? Or does that difficulty imply that we can no longer undertake critical theory without engaging the task of translation, working with linguistic impasse and resistance, those who are resistant to a language that is foreign and hegemonic and for whom, the possibility of new translations whose so-called inadequacy is the source of their fecundity, even their unexpected promise? There can be no global effort to connect critical theory projects without letting the term “critical theory” dissolve and transform in the course of translation itself. The project which simply asks how the Frankfurt School has been appropriated and transformed in different locations and languages keeps in place the European referent for critical theory. We had to let critical theory leave Frankfurt or perhaps to resituate and decenter Frankfurt within a global framework.

We could have sought to give a forum for critical theory from the south, accepting that “the South” is a unity of some sort with a distinct epistemological standpoint or perspective more or less purified of extra-hemispheric contaminations. There seem to be, however, too many important quarrels about the geographical presumptions made by such theories, whether they apply rightly or evenly across South America, whether they apply to Africa, to the legacy of Apartheid in Africa, to South Asia, and to the geopolitical tensions between the south and north of South America, or Africa, whether something called the South is in the process of creeping North and now includes Greece, and whether colleagues who are marginalized in the Middle East, the Balkans, Russia, and East and Southeast Asia are left out of the hemispheric metaphors that seek to correct one very dominant form of exclusion only by producing another. How do we think, for instance, about the Critical East? It will not suffice, for instance, to say that the Global South includes the Middle East or the Balkans, for instance, since those geopolitical specificities become effaced in the making of a fictional monolith called the South. Further, the history of colonization and present forms of exploitation and intervention by the United States in Latin America make it necessary to know how the north enters the south, and how the south (its labor, natural resources, and goods) enters the north or, in the case of migrants, often stopped at the border.

The hemispheres are defined as much by passages and blockages, imperial interventions, and the migratory paths of refugees and exiles. The Global South is shorthand for a wide range of efforts to challenge the Eurocentrism of critical thought in this time. Sometimes that term occludes the very knowledge efforts for which it stands, especially those that emerge from indigenous populations. At the same time, hemispheric domination can hardly be doubted, given the North's economic exploitation of the South. It remains important to track how hemispheric discourse operates, and what it foregrounds and occludes in order for it to have a useful place in critical theory. One operation of contemporary critical theory is to track and evaluate those maps of knowledge that help us rethink the global forms of critical thought.

I have suggested that no single conceptual understanding of what critical theory is can serve as the criterion for identifying its various instances, since the global forms of critical theory are still in the making. But if there is no core set of presuppositions for calling something critical theory, then does an unruly nominalism then follow? Will anything that anyone claims to be critical theory qualify (or conversely, nothing anyone claims as critical theory will qualify)? We might respond to this challenge by asking, at what point and for what purpose do knowledge projects take up the mantle of critical theory? A certain commitment seems to run through the various instances, namely, that theoretical activity that seeks to respond to the historical conditions of its emergence, interdisciplinary in form, must seek both to reflect and intervene upon those conditions in the service of realizing a normative aspiration. Even this brief formulation is, of course, controversial. Can a reflection upon a historical condition intervene upon that condition, changing the condition itself? Is an interdisciplinary approach required to grasp the multidimensional aspects of the phenomenon? How do we develop a way of thinking, for instance, about domination and subjugation that does not replicate or ratify those forms of power? Further, is critical theoretical activity undertaken *by a subject*? Or does *critique name a particular relationship between the historical conditions of thought and the forms of judgment that seek to intervene upon, and transform, historical life for the purposes of realizing political ideals such as equality, freedom, and solidarity, to whatever degree that proves possible?*

These important questions cannot be adequately addressed in this chapter. I propose instead to focus on two dimensions of critique that remain actively contested during the present time: the first is that the Latourian position that claims that critique is invariably subjective and negative (and that this accounts for the "exhaustion" of critical theory in the present); the second is that critique maintains a vexed relation to both law and judgment in light of the absence or failure of legal institutions that embody ideals of justice in times of crisis. This has relevance for us during a time in which the refugee crisis raises questions about where judgment and justice are to be found – in or outside the law?

### Is Critique Over?

Some contemporary critics doubt that critical theory in whatever form has the vocabulary and power to accomplish any of the aims named above. Bruno Latour, for instance, imagines that when we speak about what is "critical," we have in mind a fully negative project, a practice of debunking and dismantling hegemonic presumptions about the world, and that critical theory intensifies skepticism and lacks transformative power and commitment to emancipatory ideals (Latour, 2004). The validity of his claim depends on a careful consideration of what "negative" means, and querying whether the negative deserves such a negative reputation. Perhaps, it is possible to agree that a "critical" approach is not content to reproduce those forms of thought that belong to modes of social life that reiterate modes of domination or subjugation. In this sense, a naturalized form of knowledge is negated in order

to open up a critical perspective on that form, and this serves as a condition of possibility of precisely those forms of intervention that Latour denies to the critical project – the history of an error inaugurated by Kant.

Latour writes:

The mistake we made, the mistake I made, was to believe that there was no efficient way to criticize matters of fact except by moving away from them and directing one's attention toward the conditions that made them possible. But this meant accepting much too uncritically what matters of fact were. This was remaining too faithful to the unfortunate solution inherited from the philosophy of Immanuel Kant.

(Latour, 231–232)

Latour seems to understand positivism as the object of critique, and he goes on to claim that matters of fact have to be reapproached in a way that affirms their potential and agentic powers. That may well be the case. But what version of critique has he identified with Kant, and is Latour right to imagine that critical theorists have all been ensnared by a view that fails to attend to matters of fact (and recast them as matters of concern) to discern their own critical potential?

For Latour, critique is undertaken by a subject whose main aim is to distance itself from, and so to negate, the realm of what is (considered as what *simply* is). Negation, for Latour, cannot account for the shared agency at work between subjective and objective fields. This misunderstanding, in his view, follows from a Kantian epistemology. Moreover, it fails to understand properly that the realm of “facts” and “matters of concern” offer critical possibilities themselves. Latour’s criticism could be easily refuted by a more nuanced consideration of the relation between subject and object, and between nature and life, in German Idealism that might prove to be not so very antithetical to his own views (Hegel, 2007). Another criticism could show that Latour misunderstands negation, especially the Hegelian notion of determinate negation, as part of a philosophy of immanence. Critical theory has offered an array of positions against skepticism, and these are overlooked when Latour understands skepticism to be the signature characteristic of critical theory. Finally, the Kantian position he associates with a hyper-subjectivism that abandons the realm of objective reality is neither a fair and grounded characterization of Kant nor of critical theory’s concerns.

Yet, Latour’s errant critique provides an opportunity to approach the “critical” aspect of critical theory in contemporary terms where we can see critique emerge from situations of crisis. Of course, critical theory has drawn extensively from the work of Kant, whose critical philosophy arguably furnished the very term “critical” for modern and contemporary philosophy and theory. For Kant asked about the conditions and limits of what could be thought, and counseled that we stay within those limits in order not to become speculative or dogmatic. Kant thought less about the historical conditions and limits of thought, although that very issue became more important for those who sought to bring Kant forward into a critical theory for the present. Indeed, there are always strong historical limits to what any of us can think when we are thinking critically about our times. We can see right away an important problem: how do we come to identify the limits of what can be thought within any particular historical horizon?

To ask this last question is not to *take distance* from historical conditions or the phenomena that appear to us within a specific historical horizon. The demand to translate among different historical schemes is a disorienting form of engagement with no guarantee that various horizons will come together in the end. Confronting the untranslatability of key terms constitutes a contemporary crisis for theory. The task of critical theory, then, is also one of thinking between or across temporal frames (which emerge from, and configure different

geographical locations), activating some of the problems associated with translation and untranslatability. Indeed, coming up against the limits of translatability, the epistemic limits, even the epistemic violence that occurs when we seek to override the untranslatable in the interests of imposing a single set of linguistic conventions on the field. A critical question: *how do the norms that constrain the definition of critical theory in advance do violence to modes of communication and expressivity that do not or will not assimilate into its established terms?* For critical theory to exist within a global framework, it has to wrestle with the conditions and limits of translation. If critique interrogates the conditions under which we can know what we know, and those conditions are constituted by incommensurable or conflicting temporal and linguistic horizons, then untranslatability is one characteristic of our contemporary knowing (Apter, 2013).

And yet, a provisional generalization remains possible: the mandate to undertake an interdisciplinary and multilingual project that seeks to understand critically the historical conditions of crisis still motivates the production of critical theory within a global frame. But it was also established by those who were undertaking intellectual work both within and outside the university, those who understood that they could be, and often were, expelled from the university or never admitted, facing censorship, fighting or fleeing fascism. If critical theory is sequestered from social engagement and activism, vacating the very domain from which the political problematic emerges, it deprives itself of the capacity to trace that very emergence. This important relation between working inside and outside of the academy is linked to the problem of the border between the university and its world. Such a critical practice neither takes distance from facts nor negates their existence or importance; on the contrary, a constellation of such “facts” impresses itself upon our thinking, and so the world acts on us and exercises a historical demand on thought. Critical thought is at once immersed in matters of concern, responsive to their demand, evaluative of their damage and their potential and, in this way, both engaged with the present and oriented toward the future, formed in, by, and against the impress of the world.

### Kant and Koselleck on the Tribunal

In spite of Latour’s advice to break with Kant, a return to Kant seems in order to understand how critique relates to the shaken ideals of both law and judgment, both of which are central to his work. The three Kantian critiques are ones that interrogate the conditions and limits of what we can know, but also what we can do, and that for which we may hope. Although Reinhart Koselleck (1959) mentions Kant very briefly in his *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*, he offers an important supplement, drawing attention to the “crisis” that is part of anything that is “critical” – there are also “critical” illnesses and “critical” turning points, and those are ones in which an immediate and thoughtful intervention is necessary. He proceeds by way of a conceptual history, which differs significantly from the Frankfurt School approach. And yet, both forms of inquiry seek to understand modes of thought, practices, informal and formal institutions and take as their task a thoughtful and knowledgeable response to what presents itself as most urgent, to a historical crisis that urgently makes its demand on thought. In a sense to be clarified, critique issues from within the very terms of crisis, linking the historical conditions of thought to thought itself.

Koselleck offers a genealogy of the idea of the critical worth considering as one seeks to understand how critique operates as something other than a subjective attitude in Latour’s sense. Koselleck is a historian who starts with the etymological problem of *critique* as it relates to *crisis*. Koselleck argues that critique emerges in the midst of crisis, querying how and whether forms of destruction or suffering can come to an end, and what, if anything, brings

about that resolution. Crisis is there as both a historical and conceptual condition of the critical. The ancient Greek “krino” carries several meanings, including to separate (to part or divorce), but also to choose, to judge, and to decide (Koselleck, 2006: 358). The Greek word *krínein* meant both “subjective critique” and “objective crisis.” It also implies the notion of measuring oneself, quarrelling, or even fighting. So in a crisis there is a sense of fighting, and this becomes important in *Critique and Crisis*, where the predicament of finding resolutions for religious wars is said to give rise to contemporary notions of critique and crisis. Critique does not exactly characterize a subjective decision, but denotes the critical time *before* a decision, the time in which a decision is taking form. Thucydides uses the term in his account of the Persian Wars to describe the acceleration of time indicating that a fight is about to conclude. A decision is about to be made, to come around, to take place (Ober, 2001). Of course, crisis also carries the sense of a “coming to a verdict” and so implies a legal procedure of some kind, if not a final legal judgment. Critique is a legal term, but the kind of decision-making process it characterizes extends beyond the juridical domain – especially when the justice cannot be found in law.

Koselleck holds that there was no easy way of distinguishing between the subjective exercise of criticism and the objective sense of a crisis in classical Greek usage, and that the division between them is inaugurated within modernity. So perhaps Latour takes off where Koselleck ends. But that begs the question whether there is a way that critique and crisis still operate together. Can one take up a contentious point of view within a crisis, that is, without any distance from the demand to decide? What seems subjective is actually part of the ongoing debate and, so both social and political. For Koselleck, the term moves from its legal status to a broader political one, such that crisis characterizes any number of political issues that call to be decided – elections, bills, accepting legal reports, deciding matters of exile. Crisis precedes and actually helps bring about potentially harmonious conclusions. The obligations of citizens to judge were precipitated by crisis and made no sense outside those terms. In an Arendtian vein, Koselleck held that to be a citizen implies the ability to judge (Arendt, 1964: 26–27). Indeed, judgment does not belong to a court of law; the court of law, as it were, inheres in the capacity to judge; and judgment is activated by a crisis.

Koselleck suggests that the way that illnesses were diagnosed was not altogether different from how trials were run. A crisis had to be followed by a judgment (or diagnosis). When the term was transposed from legal to social and political domains, it tended to be used as “a transitional or temporal concept (*Verlaufsbegriff*)” – designating a time *preceding* decision (Koselleck, 2006: 361). In time, crisis came to be considered as an objective condition – a financial or diplomatic crisis – yet every crisis has to be determined to be one, and the determination of a crisis depends upon a very specific kind of judgment. Koselleck was interested in those determinations of judgment that an epoch has come to an end or is nearing its end. The end of one time and the beginning of another, so critical judgment emerges precisely at the moment of temporal indeterminacy when one asks, *what time is it?* A crisis is resolved not through the restoration of a prior order – that would be a way of denying the temporal crisis itself. Judgment is at once formed by crisis and opens up the way through.

Koselleck tracks the medical, religious, and legal vicissitudes of crisis, and mentions only briefly that crisis also characterizes the accelerated dynamism of revolutionary processes. The contemporary field of crisis theory takes the Marxian background – and the theory of ideology – as its governing framework, foregoing in large part the genealogy that Koselleck provides. Koselleck claims that Marx understood crisis as the forcible outbreak of contradictions. Koselleck opposes that view, suggesting that we might think again about how diagnosis and prophecy have worked together to structure history outside the terms of historical determinism. Of course, we could establish a prophetic tradition operating within Marxism as well, although that is hardly Koselleck’s interest. In



the end, Koselleck establishes himself as a diagnostician, a medical historian, as it were, who seeks to establish the “pathogenesis” of modernity. Whether Marx is part of the pathology or its resolution remains unresolved in his view, but he quickly leaves Marx and Marxism aside without a full consideration.

Although Koselleck’s book considers Hobbes rather than Kant as it tracks the permutations of critique, the Kantian resonance remains: critique is fundamentally bound up with law, with judgment or decision, and, perhaps most importantly, with the institution of the tribunal. Koselleck writes, “as judgment, trial and general tribunal, the word *krisis* was used forensically. So the term contained both pro and con as well as decision.” For Kant as well as Koselleck, critique was, from the start, less a subjective activity than a juridical scene. The modern association of critique with subjective acts, and crisis with an objective condition, analogous to a medical emergency, presents a historical problem that calls for decision, calling up a new approach to critique itself. But decision has suffered a particular historical fate. Belonging to an objective situation of political disarray where legitimate authority and good judgment seem neither actual nor potential, critique emerges in the form of both diagnosis and arbitration. Critique is not decisionist, but decision itself takes the form of judgment, which includes the diagnosis of conflict and the anticipation of its resolution.

Koselleck notes that it was Pierre Bayle who linked the concept of criticism to reason (Koselleck, 1988: 108), precipitating a displacement of sovereignty from the objective station of the King or other political authorities to the exercise of the independent mind. This would seem to confirm Latour’s suspicion that critique is a purely subjective exercise within modernity. When Koselleck does briefly refer to Kant, he understands him as leading the charge of the sovereign critics who threaten the full displacement of sovereign political authority (Koselleck, 1988: 121). Reason becomes politically consequential since the subordinate subject who exercises judgment comes to exist on the same level as the king. We can conjecture that this is one potential meaning of the Kantian claim that critique is to be understood as a revolution at the level of procedure (Kant, 2007: 25).

It seems odd to attribute such a radical position to Kant and, in the end, it proves not to be sustainable. On the one hand, Kant paid tribute to Frederick the Great in “What is Enlightenment?” and argued explicitly that philosophy depends upon the state to safeguard its freedom of thought. On the other hand, Kant argued in the 1781 preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason* that “our age is, in especial degree, the age of criticism, and to criticism everything must submit” (Kant, 2007: 9). He went on to claim that since neither religious nor political authority could exempt themselves from the demand to submit to criticism, it would seem that criticism, now figured as a tribunal, is then installed as the superior, if not ultimate, form of judgment, one that does make subjective critical judgment sovereign in relation to state power. The implication of Kant’s own thought is not one that he would pursue. It would seem that if a state failed to submit to critique, understood as a public tribunal, that state would lose its claim to legitimate authority. Arendt was perhaps more willing to pursue this strain of Kantianism than Kant himself. After all, it is Kant who wrote that the right to rebel is incoherent, since it gives the people sovereign power, and only the state can have sovereign power. Specifically, he argues that a condition in which there can be rights is one that has departed from the state of nature, and “is possible only when there is some means for individuals to be governed by the ‘general legislative will’” (Kant, 1999: 125). Any state that embodies the general legislative will be better than no state at all in his view. What he calls “a rightful condition” requires the centralizing of coercive power in a state as the only means of bringing about reciprocal coercion and obligation. The right to resist a state could only then be authorized by the state, and so is not a coherent possibility. This seems true, however, only to the extent that popular sovereignty is considered a contradiction in terms of a catachresis. If only the state can embody sovereign power, then the people, understood

as the subjects of a state, have rights only by virtue of that state, and are thus paradoxically, if not fatally, subject to the state's sovereign power when they claim their right to depart from the state itself. Of course, that contradiction dissolves once popular sovereignty proves no longer to depend upon the state from which it breaks in a revolutionary way, that is, when it breaks without the permission to break, freeing itself from that dependency and exercising the freedom to establish a new polity.

Critique for Kant is figured time and again as a tribunal that subjects the claims of authority to review. Kant describes his First Critique as answering

a call to reason...to institute a tribunal which will assure to reason its lawful claims, and dismiss all groundless pretensions, not by despotic decrees, but in accordance with its own eternal and unalterable laws. This tribunal is no other than the *critique of pure reason*.

(Kant, 2007: 9)

Critique acts like law, even takes the place of law, reviews law, and is not exactly law. The tribunal that critique is cannot be housed "in experience" since it must belong to the faculty of reason in an *a priori* way, and so be something that we cannot precisely see or touch or know on the basis of the sensible world alone. And yet, it takes place in the sensible world, more specifically, in the public domain where critical adjudication is called for, and where a demonstration of truth must be provided. Critique does not take place through introspection, but through a "public" examination of the claims of religious and political authority. Those authorities "cannot claim the sincere respect which reason accords only to that which has been able to sustain the test of free and open examination" (Kant, 2007: 9).

When Kant claims that "this tribunal is nothing other than the critique of pure reason itself," he differentiates it from "the battlefield of these endless controversies [that] is called metaphysics" (Kant, 2007: 7). An adjudicative law emerges in the midst of crisis (or battle) to put an end to the apparently ceaseless conflict. This form of judgment seeks to transform a state of war or embattlement into one of civility and reason, if not perpetual peace. For at least in the preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant retells a saga of the rise and fall of monarchies, the vacillation between despotism and anarchy, and the rise of the rule of tedium in which human nature has turned against itself. And when critique emerges as a court of justice, it appears to end that sorry history – at last there is an adjudicator! However, this matter of "critique" is not a stationary court or a tribunal found in a specifiable location. Critique is also described as a kind of movement, indeed, a "path," one that he calls the "only one left" and the most difficult task, and also, a set of burdensome questions, some of which are impossible to answer.

This consideration of Kant leads us to two separate problems. On the one hand, there is a question of whether critique is subjective or objective, or whether it actually bridges that divide in the way that Koselleck suggested. Kant's metaphors are unstable here, for critique, he tells us, "one must look no further than oneself" and the valid judgments derived from reason. On the other hand, critique also seems to emerge in the midst of an ongoing conflictual juridical process, one that can also be regarded as a kind of historical pathology in need of a curative intervention. If Kant's text oscillates between a subjective and objective rendition of critique, positing, on the one hand, a mind that is above the law, positing judgment as a law-governed and law-giving exercise, and, on the other hand, a public deliberation, an open examination of competing claims of sovereign authority, it is perhaps because subjective reasoning must be demonstrated, made clear to any and all who seek to verify its claims. These subjective processes assume a public dimension, and "the tribunal" is a metaphor that crosses, and links, the idea of subjective reason and public disputation.

If, however, critique is a popular activity such as public debate in which the people are free to weigh the claims of authority such as those made on behalf of religion and the state, then critique belongs not to a singular subject, but to the public. And yet, Kant will also claim that critique can never be a *popular activity*, even though it is in principle possible for any rational being to engage in critique (Kant, 1970: 13). Hence, though possible for every human, there will never be a majority who can do it, since the vast majority, he maintains, lack either education or capacity. Within a span of a few paragraphs, a radical democratic potential is opened up only to be swiftly closed down, providing a brief glimpse of what the public exercise of critique might be. If the law belongs to the state, then the tribunal that is critique either belongs to that state or has an autonomous status. The latter includes non-state-centered forms of adjudication – truth and reconciliation commissions or public tribunals that pursue forms of conflict resolution and/or seek to hold states accountable for the illegitimate use of power.

### Refugee Crisis and the Suspension of Law

How does this Kantian discussion of critique bear on the post-Kantian forms of political crisis where modes of legal arbitration can be altogether missing or take spurious and violent forms that seek to shore up authoritarian regimes? Show trials, public prosecution of dissidents, and the increasingly normalized practice of indefinite detention raise the question of where, if anywhere, a tribunal can be found. The law no longer operates in the service of justice, but seeks to shore up the security of the state or the national territory, to exclude new migrants, to detain those who call the legitimacy of the state or its specific policies into question. Under conditions of indefinite detention, for instance, legal processes can proliferate that serve the aims of “security” and suspend the rights of due process, habeas corpus, the rules of evidence, the right to a timely trial and to a clear sentence or exoneration. Indeed, the legal processes involved in indefinite detention rarely lead to a trial, though sometimes do lead to hearings, where evidence is not disclosed and where the hearing ends with a renewed sentence for unknown reasons. Indefinite detention can be a way to contain migrant populations or to criminalize their efforts to migrate. It can also be a way of incarcerating people who are deemed to pose a security risk to the status quo of a state or an administrative power. Although the reasons for indefinite detention are different in the UK and in the occupied territories of the West Bank, the protocols are remarkably similar.

The tribunal of judgment figured by Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* has vanished in this scene, producing a contemporary crisis of considerable magnitude. The law does not arbitrate dispute; rather, legal processes become a modality of administrative power or administrative violence, forestalling potential dispute and the possibility of challenging the procedures of legal authority (Spade, 2015).

The temporality of indefinite detention is part of administrative violence, and when the temporal horizon is saturated in this way, the ideal of an operative and just tribunal appears to be an elusive ideal, if not a fiction. Indeed, fiction becomes, as a result, one of major modalities within which to think the contemporary problem of law, judgment, and justice. Kafka’s *The Trial* (published in 1925 but written a decade earlier) prefigured all too well the violence of the law as well as the violence of those administrative powers spawned in the ambient world of law. When one opens Kafka’s text, one expects the novel to follow a dramatic narrative sequence, moving from accusation, pretrial proceedings, trials that follow the rules of evidence, judgment, sentencing, punishment, or exoneration. And yet, one never moves past the accusation which becomes a pretrial proceeding without end. The judgment has already been made prior to any trial: punishment begins with the accusation, continues through the pretrial proceeding which itself becomes a form of indefinite detention – not within the prison wall, but within the life-world now structured by the absolute loss of the reliable tribunal.

A close reader of Kafka, Walter Benjamin writes within the world of a vanishing tribunal and the intensification of legal violence. Law is not the answer to violence if only because the law reproduces a violence of its own. Benjamin, however, made room for the extralegal and civil procedure of conflict resolution (Benjamin, 2002). Indeed, for Benjamin, questioning the framework of legal violence is surely *critical*, but will be regarded as “violent” by those who seek to contain and quash the threat to legal power and violence. The “technique of civil governance” is, importantly, not governed by any specific end – it resembles more closely a way of living with disputes or, rather, a way of learning to live with disputes without destruction. As a technique, it is governed neither by an instrumental logic nor by a teleological development. Ongoing, open-ended, characterized as “a pure means,” the technique of civil governance becomes another name for critique as a mode of life unregulated by law, as a form of arbitration, linguistic and extralegal.

In an arguably anarchist moment, Benjamin writes in “Critique of Violence” that “a totally nonviolent resolution of conflicts can never lead to a legal contract” since, for him, the legal contract reintroduces violence into the scene (Benjamin, 1920: 243). He later clarifies that “there is a sphere of human agreement that is nonviolent to the extent that it is wholly inaccessible to violence: the proper sphere of ‘understanding’, language [*die eigentliche Sphäre der ‘Verständigung’, die Sprache*]” (Benjamin, 1920: 245)]. The sorts of understanding that can be achieved through language, especially in the kind of understanding operative in the ongoing arbitration of conflict, constitute alternatives to legal violence. There is no sovereign tribunal to which conflicts are submitted: there is only a civil technique of governance, outside the law but not for that reason criminal, except in the eyes of a legal regime that seeks to maintain total authority over civil life.

For Benjamin, dispute and conflict are part of *civil* life. Perhaps there is no co-inhabited life without conflict and agonism and, if so, the question becomes: is it possible to cultivate an extralegal technique that accepts and works with conflict in an ongoing way, not to eliminate conflict, but rather to seek a form of resolution in a form of life? Of course, I take the liberty of elaborating some possible consequences of his view that he himself would not have pursued. The longing for a legal tribunal that would pronounce upon justice is coupled with the mourning over the impossibility of any such tribunal materializing in time and space. Benjamin read Kafka as elaborating the theological and political sphere of the *deus absconditus*. Critique would then be the site of both longing and mourning, irreducible to law, since the violence of law sets it infinitely apart from the ideal of justice. Critique, then, is bound up with the promise and failure of law, operating in its wake (Derrida, 2002).

The refugee crisis is a crisis for the refugee, but also for the xenophobe, and for the law. Indefinite detention has become a norm of the security state, a form of restraining populations in transit who are perceived to pose a security risk of some kind. The transfer of large numbers of people without clear legal pathways and with suspended or destroyed citizenship defines indefinite detention. The practice is often characterized by the absence of a clear allegation, the suspension of due process, rules of evidence, and the non-arrival of a trial. In the United States, anyone can now be immediately and indefinitely detained on the grounds that an allegation has been made that the person is a “suspected terrorist” or “belligerent.” This form of indefinite detention (without charge or trial) presumes potential criminality. But with the legal condition of refugees fleeing war and destitution in Syria or North Africa, the problem of “criminal” status emerges very differently. If people cross over the sea without clear legal passage, they may be charged with attempting to enter a country illegally. Yet those in transit are seeking to invoke internationally established norms of safe passage and a consideration of an asylum appeal. There is thus a crisis for law itself, given that an act that appears as a criminal infraction under a national legal code can appear as an entitlement and a right within the framework of international law. The crisis in this sense consists in the fact that

there is no ultimate legal tribunal or arbiter to decide the case and due process has been abandoned. If international law is set up to negotiate conflicts among local, regional, and national legal frameworks, what happens when international law comes into conflict with national law? No meta-tribunal exists for that adjudication. International law was supposed to be that tribunal, but is now party to the case.

Various countries have invoked national autonomy in order to break with the laws of asylum or the laws governing the laws of the sea, especially those that obligate ships to rescue people in emergency situations regardless of where they are from. Although none of those countries have made an explicit sovereign decision to kill, they have, through their invocation of national sovereignty, abandoned petitioning populations to indefinite detention or to death, disavowing the international covenants to which they are signatories. This tactical invocation of sovereignty facilitates a form of death dealing aided and abetted by those who make boats for refugees that are meant to break apart and spill people into the sea where their only options are death or rescue.

The tactical suspension of the obligations of international and regional covenants to refuse migration on grounds both demographic – or racial – and economic gives us one way to see how the legal terrain is itself a field of conflict with potentially fatal consequences. No binding power gathers and enforces those sovereign signatures on any of those treaties; the disparate sovereign states have agreed to provide oversight and yet they are the ones in need of oversight; their rogue operations highlight a loosely connected set of laws with no sovereign center; a state can shift from laws to regulations, from international to national frameworks, to regional agreements and back again; shifting the jurisdiction (national or international) under which it acts at any given time gives it the power to act as it pleases, bound by no one regulation or law.

Despite its complex genealogy, critique has always been bound up with crisis and with law, specifically a crisis in law that prompts the question about what sort of judgment is available when law proves to be unjust (Goodrich, 2008). Kant's suggestion that critical judgment operates as a tribunal in the mind or perhaps in the public sphere, or the mind that demonstrates its thinking in public terms (the publication of a book would be one such demonstration) suggests that a single and ultimate tribunal has gone missing. The historical demand for the tribunal makes itself known in forms of civil governance and resistance that often seek to carry the ideal of justice that laws fail to embody. A tribunal ideally hears all sides of a conflict. Critique, emerging in its shadow and embodying its function, emerges the midst of a historical crisis where dispute and conflict prevail and where the actual or potential outbreak of violence has to be arbitrated. This is a demand for judgment – and justice – in the midst of a historical crisis or conflict whose end cannot be easily predicted (Arendt, 2003).

For Benjamin, an extralegal mode of understanding is a technique for conducting common life that may do without violence, but not without conflict. The communities that seek to provide rescue for refugees at sea undertake a *critical* practice, responding to a historical demand when states fail to do so. Critique is politically obligatory during times when violence assumes sovereign, legal, and administrative forms, and where “judgment” is indefinitely postponed or obfuscated or becomes itself a form of legal violence.

Those refugees and advocates who demand rights of passage, humane treatment, and swift review of petitions all express forms of judgment that animate international law at the various sites of its abandonment. When those who honor international law by rescuing refugees in crisis are charged with “the crime of solidarity,” then the legal system that condones such a move engages in criminal activity. The meanings of law and criminality have become reversed, and that crisis calls forth critique. Here critique marks the failure and violence of law, constituting a call for an operation of justice that cannot be reduced to a merely subjective exercise. Civil governance is an open-ended process, according to Benjamin, where we might understand justice as a living pursuit in the midst of crisis and conflict, anticipating their resolution. Critical

thought names the juncture of the crisis and its intervention, figuring that intervention as a rearticulation of the condition where crisis gives way to critique.

It is difficult to know and oppose violence when its workings go unnamed or when those modes of sovereignty and law that have been charged with the arbitration of conflict now conduct forms of death-dealing and dispossession. Critique emerges when the reversal and its consequences are grasped, when the crisis is registered, in responsive judgment and the resistance to normalization. There the demand for justice animates and embodies the abandoned ideal, and where public modes of solidarity find ways to animate anew a sense of justice in the abandoned law by giving it an extralegal life.

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# CRITIQUE AND COMMUNICATION: PHILOSOPHY'S MISSIONS<sup>1</sup>

A conversation with Jürgen Habermas

*Interviewed by Michaël Foessel*

MICHAËL FOESSEL: It has become commonplace to link your work to the enterprise that the Frankfurt School initiated in the 1930s: the elaboration of a critical theory of society capable of breathing new life into the project of emancipation in a world shaped by technocapitalism. When you began your university studies after World War II, a different image of philosophy was prevalent in Germany: the less heroic image of an impotent philosophy compromised by National Socialism. What motivated you to choose this discipline? Did the pessimistic judgment on reason expressed in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* play a role in your initial choices in philosophy (the study of Schelling)?

JÜRGEN HABERMAS: No, that's not how it happened. I didn't go to Frankfurt until 1956, two years after the completion in Bonn of my doctoral thesis on Schelling. In order to explain how I came across critical theory, I'll have to go into a bit more detail. At German universities between 1949 and 1954 it was in general only possible to study with professors who had either been Nazis themselves or had conformed. From a political and moral standpoint, German universities were corrupted. There was, therefore, an odd divide between my philosophy studies and the left-wing convictions that had developed in discussions night after night about contemporary literature, the important theatrical productions, and film, which was dominated at that time above all by France and Italy. As early as my last years at the *gymnasium*, however, I'd obtained the works of Marx and Engels and addressed the subject of historical materialism. In view of these interests, the obvious choice of study would have been sociology, but this subject was not yet taught at my universities in Göttingen and Bonn. After my studies, I was granted a scholarship for an examination of the "concept of ideology." During this time, I familiarized myself with the theoretical literature on Marxism from the 1920s and above all with the Hegelian-Marxist tradition – and I was then electrified when Adorno published *Prisms* in 1955. I already knew the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Horkheimer and Adorno, but the tenor of this thoroughly "dark" theory did not correspond to the attitude towards life of young people, who finally wanted to do everything better.

But *Prisms* made a completely different impression on me. It was a collection of Adorno's great essays from the 1940s and early 1950s on Oswald Spengler, Karl Mannheim, Thorstein Veblen, etc. Today, it's no longer possible to imagine the contradiction between these sparkling texts and the mixed-up, clotted climate of the Adenauer era. The start of the Cold War was characterized in Germany by an anti-Communism that fostered the forced suppression of the perceptibly hushed up Nazi era. Into this ambiguous silence burst the sharply articulated words of a brilliant mind, who – undeterred by the anti-Communist zeitgeist – captured the mood of the day in dusted-off Marxist categories. The radical terminology and the complexity of the dark style pierced the fog of the early German Federal Republic. It was also the gesture of “absolute modernity” that hooked me. But in Adorno's essays I was confronted above all by someone who overturned the historical distance – which up to that point had been taken for granted – between the ongoing Cold War and the Marxist social theory of the 1920s, because he dealt with these categories in a very current, very contemporary way! If you recall: even Jean-Paul Sartre, who dominated the post-war stages with his theatrical plays, was at that time not yet really political as a philosopher. For us students, *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir struck a political chord far more than Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*.

When Adorno, who had read a few things of mine, then – via a journalist, Musil's editor Adolf Frisé – invited me to come to the Institute of Social Research, there was no holding me back. My wife still says today that I rushed to Frankfurt “with banners flying”. I still regard it as a stroke of luck that I became Adorno's first assistant in 1956.

MF: You often portray your own intellectual career as a “product of re-education”. After the German catastrophe, you were determined from the outset to re-evaluate the (generally negative) philosophical view of democracy. To what extent did this necessity play a role in your assessment of the figure of Heidegger, who – at least in France – has strongly influenced contemporary philosophy, which has borrowed a great deal from him? If we look for a moment beyond the personal involvement of Heidegger: doesn't the point at issue also touch upon the appeal of philosophy in a world that is threatened by irrationalism?

JH: To this day, Kant and the French Revolution are decisive for my understanding of democracy. In the immediate aftermath of the war, we lived in the British occupation zone and learned more about the Anglo-Saxon democracies. Against this backdrop and in light of the fractured history of German democracy, we attempted at the time to comprehend the incomprehensible regression into the abyss of fascism. This infected my generation with a deep self-distrust. We began to search for those nagging, anti-Enlightenment genes that had to be hiding in our own traditions. *Before* any preoccupation with philosophy, that was for me the elementary lesson to be learned from the catastrophe: our traditions were under suspicion – they could no longer be passed on without being subjected to criticism, but only acquired reflexively. *Everything* had to be passed through the filter of rational examination and reasoned approval!

When, in the summer of 1953, that is, still during my university studies in Bonn, I read a recently published lecture by Heidegger from the year 1935, the *Introduction to Metaphysics*, the jargon, the choice of terminology and the style told me at once that the spirit of fascism was manifested in these motives, thoughts and phrases. The book really unsettled me because I had regarded myself up till then as a student of Heidegger. The newspaper article, in which I poured out my great political and philosophical disappointment the same weekend, is therefore entitled: “Thinking with Heidegger against Heidegger.” At the time it was impossible to know that Heidegger had written anti-Semitic letters to his wife as early as 1916 and that he had become a convinced Nazi



long before 1933. The fact that he had *remained* an *unrepentant* Nazi, however, could be known by 1953 at the latest.

Since then, the uncritical reception in France, and the USA for that matter, has always struck me as strange. It seems to me completely absurd that today the *Black Notebooks* are treated like something new – and that some colleagues even attempt to sublimate Heidegger's anti-Semitism and the rest of his dull resentments into the history of being! On the other hand, I'm still convinced that the arguments of *Being and Time*, if read with the eyes of Kant and Kierkegaard, retain an important place in the history of philosophy. In spite of the political ambivalence of the style, I regard this work as a result of the long history of detranscendentalizing the Kantian subject: by appropriating the methods of Husserlian phenomenology in his own way, *Being and Time* also digests an important legacy of American pragmatism, German historicism and the kind of philosophy of language that originates from Wilhelm von Humboldt. Some critics read the book only from the perspective of a historian of political ideas. But then the reader overlooks the relevance of philosophical arguments and the waywardness of long-term philosophical learning curves. My friend Karl-Otto Apel always insisted that only in 1929 with *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* did Heidegger set the course for his fatal late philosophy – and subsequently assigned to himself a privileged access to the “destiny of truth.” From that point on, Heidegger increasingly abandons philosophical argumentation and becomes a private thinker. The transition from the Marburg Lectures, which he gave jointly with the theologian Rudolf Bultmann, to his inaugural address as rector in Freiburg was a shift from the individualistic interpretation of “existence” (*Dasein*) to the collectivist (or *völkisch*) reading, to the “existence of the people.” This turned Heidegger into a propagandist in 1933 and – after 1945 – into an apologist for the Nazi regime, or even into a spin doctor for Nazi crimes.

MF: Later, in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, you apply to contemporary French philosophy your criticism of unilateral incriminations of reason. In this context you make reference, especially with Foucault and Derrida, to the potential alliance between postmodernity and neoconservatism. Could you briefly recall the background to this verdict, as well as the reasons that later moved you to change it (think of the book you wrote with Jacques Derrida or your homage to the Foucault of *Enlightenment*)?

JH: In my generation there have been many misunderstandings between the philosophers on this side of the Rhine and those on the other side, and few attempts to get on instead of ignoring one another. One of the few exceptions is the admirable Paul Ricoeur. One explanation for this unfortunate situation is surely the Germans' strong orientation towards Anglo-Saxon philosophy. Added to this are linguistic and accidental misunderstandings. Your question reminds me of the confusion over the terms “young conservative” and “neoconservative.” I referred to Foucault and Derrida – admittedly in a polemically exaggerated and thus unfair way – as “young conservatives.” I was attempting to make them aware that German authors, whom they invoke above all others, are placed in a politically poisoned context. Heidegger and Carl Schmitt drew on deeply German, namely militantly counter-revolutionary sources, which stand in stark contrast to the intentions of a reflective Enlightenment and, indeed, left-wing traditions in general. In Germany these young conservatives were characterized with the slogan “left-wing people from the right-wing” because they wanted to be “modern.” They wanted to force through their elitist ideas of an authoritarian society welded together in uniformity by means of anti-bourgeois gestures. This activist mentality nourished itself on resentments against the Peace of Versailles, which was regarded as a humiliation. Carl Schmitt

and Heidegger became intellectual pioneers for the Nazi regime not by chance, but as a result of motives deeply embedded in their theories. I was always aware of the contrast with the intentions of Foucault and Derrida. My affective attitude can perhaps also be explained in that it was precisely distinguished French left-wingers who fixated on such people. Admittedly, I should have done a better job of controlling my emotions.

But you asked me about the reasons for the disagreement regarding the Enlightenment. As far as I understand, this controversy is not about the indisputable ideological role repeatedly played in the history of western modernity by the selective application of our western standards of egalitarian and individualistic universalism. They often served, and still do serve, to cover up the practice of double standards – both in the hypocritical justification of repressive regimes, and in the imperialist destruction and exploitation of foreign cultures. The dispute is rather over the correct philosophical explanation of this fact. We must recognize that any criticism of a hypocritically selective application of universalist standards must appeal to the standards of this very same universalism. To the extent that the discourse on moral universalism is carried out at the conceptual level of Kantian arguments, it has become self-reflective: it self-consciously realizes that it cannot criticize its own flaws but by an appeal to its own standards. It was Kant who overcame the historical kind of so-called universalism that is centered upon itself and limited to its own fixed perspective. Carl Schmitt had in mind this political “universalism” which was typical of the ancient empires. For these empires, only barbarians lived beyond the borders. From that rigid perspective one’s own supposedly rational standards were applied to everything foreign without taking into consideration the perspectives of the foreigners themselves. By contrast, only those standards can withstand criticism that can be justified from a shared perspective developed in the course of an inclusive deliberation requiring the *mutual adoption of the perspective of all those affected*. That is the discourse-ethical interpretation of a universalism that has become self-reflective and no longer assimilates the other to oneself. Universalism properly understood proceeds from the premise that everyone is foreign to everyone else – and wants to remain so!

In 1982, Foucault invited me to the Collège de France for six weeks. On the first evening we spoke about German films: Werner Herzog and Hans-Jürgen Syberberg were his favorite directors, whilst I spoke out in favour of Alexander Kluge und Volker Schlöndorff. Later we told each other about the curriculum of our respective years of philosophical study, which took something of a different course. He recalled how Lévi-Strauss and structuralism had helped him to liberate himself from Husserl and “the prison of the transcendental subject.” With regard to his discourse theory of power, I asked him at the time about the implicit standards on which his criticism was based. He merely said, “Wait for the third volume of my *History of Sexuality*.” We had already arranged a date for our next discussion about “Kant and the Enlightenment.” I was very shocked when he died in the interim. In the case of Derrida, fortunately I took the initiative just in time to clear up the misunderstandings between us. I subsequently visited him several times in Paris and he visited me in Frankfurt. We also met in New York and remained in telephonic contact – until the very end. I’m grateful for the cordial relationship of those final years. But since Bourdieu also died, it’s become lonely for me in Paris. Whom should I meet for lunch? I was all the more pleased about the interest shown by my young French colleagues when Jean-Francois Kervégan and Isabelle Aubert invited me late last year to an interesting conference in Paris.

MF: Your book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) laid the foundation for your philosophical standing in Germany and abroad. To what extent does this book,

which attempts a re-evaluation of the bourgeois ideology of the Enlightenment and the ideal of the “public sphere”, express a distancing from orthodox Marxism? Does this distancing require the renunciation of the project of “Realizing Philosophy” in favor of a reflexive method that rejects any “position that towers above” society?

JH: From its inception the Frankfurt Institute was anti-Stalinist – and all the more so after the war. There are also other reasons why I was never tempted by orthodox Marxism. For example, I was never convinced by the centerpiece of political economy, the theory of surplus value, in view of the intervention of the welfare state in the economy. During my youth I was certainly more closely aligned with left-wing activism than I was later. But also the early project of “Realizing Philosophy,” to which you’re alluding, was more idealistic and inspired by the *young Marx*. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, which was my post-doctoral thesis under the supervision of Wolfgang Abendroth, the only Marxist to hold a chair at a German university, at best points in the direction of socialist democracy. If you like, I was always a parliamentary socialist – in this respect I was in my early days influenced by the Austrian Marxists Karl Renner and Otto Bauer. My attitude to *Theory and Practice* has not significantly changed since I wrote the introduction to the new edition of this book in 1971. Academic studies are always written with the reservation that all research is fallible. This role must be clearly separated from the other two roles of a left-wing intellectual – from his involvement in political discussions in the public sphere and from the organization of joint political action. This separation of roles is necessary even if the intellectual attempts to combine all three roles in one person.

MF: One can say that your philosophical project, as it can be found in its provisional completion in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, strives to find a way out of the “battle of the gods” and of value relativism, which Max Weber spoke of in characterizing modernity. To what extent is this project linked to a new understanding of the term “reason”? To what extent do you think today’s condemnations of instrumental reason, given that they are once again finding a broad echo, are still inadequate for the purpose of avoiding the impasses of modernity?

JH: Max Weber’s “battle of the gods” cannot be reconciled with arguments, as long as it’s a question of competition between “values” and “identities.” One culture brings values, in which it recognizes itself, into a different transitive order than other cultures. The same applies to the identity-building self-conception of people. In both cases *existential questions* of a good or successful life can only be answered from the perspective of the first person. But the dispute about moral universalism concerns *issues of justice*; and these issues can in principle be resolved when all parties are prepared to assume *the perspective of the respective other* in order to resolve the conflict *in the equal interests of all sides*.

A little different is your question about the criticism of instrumental – I would rather say functional – reason. This question arises today, for example, in view of financial capitalism, which has gone wild and is beyond all political control. To put it in a nutshell: from a long-term historical perspective, with the rise of a capitalist economy a clotted piece of “second nature” has emerged within society, namely an economic system that regulates itself by obeying exclusively the logic of a profit-orientated self-utilization of capital. Marx recognized this result of social evolution as the real engine of societal modernization. As we know, in view of its unleashing of productive forces, he enthusiastically welcomed this fact. But at the same time he examined and denounced the tendencies inherent in capitalism that demolish social cohesion and make a mockery of the self-conception of democratically constituted societies.

During the second half of the twentieth century such tendencies were to some extent tamed by means of the welfare state in the countries belonging to the OECD.

By contrast, in our increasingly interdependent but still nationally fragmented world society, global financial capitalism, which has taken on a life of its own, still largely escapes the grip of politics. Behind democratic façades the political elites technocratically implement the imperatives of the markets almost without resistance. Trapped in their national perspectives, they have no other choice. Thus, they prefer to uncouple the political decision-making processes from the political public arenas, which are in any case dried out and whose infrastructure is crumbling. This colonialization of societies, which disintegrate from within and take up right-wing populist positions against each other, will not change as long as no political power can be found with the courage to take up the cause of achieving the political aim of universalizing interests beyond national frontiers, if only within Europe or the eurozone.

Neoliberalism insists on the rationality of leaving market mechanisms to their own devices. Your question now enquires as to how “rationality” or “reason” must be understood if one is not satisfied with the exclusive reference to patterns of rational choice or the functional rationality of self-maintaining systems. Social theory in the classical sense is distinguished from the individual disciplines of the social sciences not only by virtue of its relation to the whole but by virtue of its critical aspirations. With *The Theory of Communicative Action*, therefore, I’m attempting to explain the base for critical standards that are often hidden in pseudo-normative assumptions. My proposal is to seek out the traces of a *communicative reason rooted in processes of communication in social practices themselves*.

In the routines of their everyday actions, the acting parties mutually presuppose that they are acting responsibly and speaking about the same objects. They conventionally and tacitly presuppose that they mean what they say, that they will keep the promises they make, that the claims they make are true, that the norms they tacitly assume to be valid are indeed justified, etc., etc. These naive *everyday* communicative actions operate in a space of reasons which remain latent in the background as long as the reciprocal claims to validity are accepted as credible. But criticizable claims to validity can be negated at any time. And every “no” interrupts the routines; every contradiction mobilizes latent reasons. I term as “communicative reason” the capacity of social actors to operate in this space of reasons with a critical probe instead of fumbling blind. This ability manifests itself in saying “no,” in loudly protesting or in quietly annulling an assumed consensus. Furthermore, in the refusal to follow conventions for the sake of convention, in the revolt against intolerable conditions or in the tacit withdrawal – whether out of cynicism or apathy – on the part of the marginalized and the excluded. All social orders and institutions are established on the basis of reasons. We would not even bother to go to court in intractable conflicts if we did not expect a more or less fair trial. We would not take part in democratic elections if we did not assume that every vote “counts.” These are admittedly idealistic and often counterfactual assumptions but – from the perspective of the participants – *necessary* ones. Today we see what happens when these assumptions are obviously refuted by post-democratic conditions – increasing rates of election abstention. If the social scientist reconstructs such necessary assumptions from the participants’ perspective, he can base his criticism, for example of post-democratic conditions, on a form of reason that emerges *in social practices themselves*.

MF: All your work is characterized by the attempt to detranscendentalize philosophy, i.e. to renounce the paradigm of the subjective awareness of the certainty of oneself and one’s faculties. The surrender of the transcendental point of view reveals in particular themes such as discourse, intersubjectivity and the necessity to combine philosophy with the

social sciences. Does this mean for you that the concept of “subjectivity” has lost any normative validity?

JH: With the paradigm shift from the philosophy of the subject to the philosophy of language you touch upon an important issue. Hegel was already aware of the symbolic and historical embodiment of reason in the forms of the “objective mind,” for example in law, state and society. But Hegel then sublates this objective mind after all in the dematerialized thoughts of the absolute mind. By contrast, J.G. Hamann and Wilhelm von Humboldt or the young Hegelians, i.e. Feuerbach, Marx and Kierkegaard, regard the transcendental achievements as being realized only in the performative acts of subjects capable of speech and action and in the social and cultural structures of their lifeworlds. For them, apart from the subjective mind there is only the objective mind left, which materializes itself in communication, work and interaction, in appliances and artefacts, in the living out of individual life stories and in the network of socio-cultural forms of life. But in the process, reason does not lose the transcendental power of spontaneously projecting world-disclosing horizons. This “creative” power of imagination expresses itself in every hypothesis, in every interpretation, in every story with which we affirm our identity. In every action there is also an element of creation.

Pragmatism and historicism were involved in the development of this detranscendentalized concept of reason just as much as phenomenology, philosophical anthropology and existential philosophy. I myself would grant a certain precedence to language, communicative action and the horizon of the lifeworld (as the background context of all processes of communication). The media in which reason is embodied, i.e. history, culture and society, are symbolically structured. The meaning of symbols, however, must be *shared intersubjectively*. There is no private language and no private meaning that can be understood only by a single person. This precedence of intersubjectivity does not mean, however, that – to return to your question – to some extent subjectivity would be absorbed by society. The subjective mind opens a space to which everyone has privileged access from the perspective of the first person. This exclusive access to the evidence of one’s own experiences may not, however, belie the structural correlation between subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Every additional step in the process of the socialization of a person, as they grow up, is simultaneously a step towards individuation and becoming oneself. Only by externalization, by entering into social relationships can we develop the interiority of our own person. Only by marching in step with the communicative entanglement in social networks does the subjectivity of the “self,” i.e. of a subject that assumes relationships to itself, deepen.

MF: During the course of the 1980s you began a long-term debate with Anglo-Saxon philosophy, both on the front of political philosophy (Rawls, Dworkin) and on the front of the philosophy of language (Searle, Putnam, Rorty, Brandom, etc.). How would you characterize the contribution of the diverse Anglo-Saxon schools of thought to the awareness that philosophy has of itself and of its own limits?

JH: In political theory, for which you mention the names of John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin, the gap between continental philosophy, dominant in France and Germany, and Anglo-Saxon philosophy was never as pronounced as it was in the philosophy of language or in the philosophy of science, the two core areas of analytical philosophy. In all these fields I learned a lot from my collaboration and friendship with American colleagues, who belonged to the pragmatic school of thought in the widest sense – above all the connection of a fallibilist mentality with a non-defeatist concept of discursive reason. It certainly helped to be able to refer to a common background. Via the Emersonian Transcendentalism of the early nineteenth century, American pragmatism is namely

also rooted in German traditions – in Schiller, in German idealism, in Goethe's view of nature, etc. If you're asking in general about the contribution of the Anglo-Saxons to the self-understanding of philosophy and the necessary limits of post-metaphysical thinking, however, then it's necessary to differentiate more. Today, a deep split runs through analytical philosophy itself.

The hard, scientific core of the analytical philosophy was always alien to me. Today, it comprises colleagues who take up the reductionist Programme of the Unified Sciences from the first half of the twentieth century under somewhat different assumptions and more or less regard philosophy as a supplier for the cognitive sciences. The advocates of what we might call "scientism" ultimately view only statements of physics as capable of being either true or false and insist on the paradoxical demand of perceiving ourselves exclusively in descriptions of the natural sciences. But describing and recognizing oneself are not the same thing: decentering an illusionary *self-understanding* requires recognition on the basis of a different, *improved* description. Scientism renounces the self-reference *required* to be present in every case of re-cognition. At the same time, scientism itself utilizes this self-reference performatively – I mean the reference to us as socialized subjects capable of speech and action, and who always find themselves in the context of their lifeworlds. Scientism buys the supposed scientification of philosophy by renouncing the task of self-understanding, which philosophy has inherited from the great world religions, though with the intention of the enlightenment. By contrast, the intention of understanding ourselves *exclusively* from what we have learnt about the objective world leads to a reifying description of something in the world that denies the self-referential application for the purpose of improving our "self"-understanding.

MF: In view of an increasing distrust of the promises of democracy, and confronted with what you call the "colonization of the lifeworld" by the logic of the market, what is philosophy still capable of in this respect? To what extent is philosophy quite rightly still part of the emancipation project of the Enlightenment?

JH: As I said, philosophy, which, by the way, in its platonic origins constituted something of a religious world view, similar to Confucianism, inherited the important, even vital task of self-understanding, albeit with the intention to enlighten the self-understanding of man in a rational way, i.e. *on the basis* of improved knowledge about the world, including us as something in this world. I would like to expand on this sentence in two respects.

Under premises of post-metaphysical thinking, philosophy today, unlike myths and religions, no longer has the power *to create a world view of its own* – in the sense of an image of the world as a whole. It navigates between religion and the natural sciences, social sciences and humanities, culture and art, in order to learn and to dissolve illusions. No more, but also no less than this. Today, philosophy is a parasitic enterprise *feeding on foreign learning processes*. But it is precisely in this secondary role of a reflexive connection to *other*, already extant forms of the objective mind that philosophy can critically take into account everything we know or think we know. "Critical" means "with the intention to enlighten". This curious ability to lead to a decentered view of the world and of ourselves, by the way, was acquired by medieval Christian philosophy during the course of long-lasting discussions about "faith and knowledge." Philosophy can enlighten us regarding an illusionary self-conception by making us aware of the meaning that an increase in knowledge about the world has for us. In this way, post-metaphysical thinking is dependent on scientific progress and new, culturally available perspectives on the world, without itself becoming another scientific discipline, though it remains an academic activity pursued in the scientific spirit. Within universities philosophy has

established itself as a subject, but it belongs to the scientific expert culture without assuming the exclusively objectifying perspective of a discipline that is defined by the focus on a methodically limited subject area. On the other hand, philosophy, unlike religion, which is rooted in the cult of religious communities, must fulfill the task of rationally improving the self-understanding of mankind through arguments alone that, according to their form, are permitted to lay fallible claim to universal acceptance.

I furthermore regard the function of self-understanding as *vital*, for this was always coupled with a socially integrative function. This was the case as long as religious world views and metaphysical doctrines stabilized the collective identities of religious communities. But even after the end of the “Age of World-Views,” the pluralized and individualized self-understanding of citizens retains an integrative element in modern societies. Since the secularization of state authority, religion can no longer meet the requirement of legitimizing political rule. As a result, the burden of integrating citizens shifts from the level of social to the level of political integration, and this means: from religion to the fundamental norms of the constitutional state, which are rooted in a shared *political* culture. These constitutional norms, which secure the remainder of collective background consent, draw their persuasive power from the repeatedly renewed *philosophical* argumentation of the rational law tradition and political theory.

Today, however, the increasingly high-pitched appeal by politicians to “our values” sounds ever emptier – alone the confusion of “principles,” which require some kind of justification, with “values,” which are more or less attractive, irritates me beyond all measure. We can see our political institutions being robbed more and more of their democratic substance during the course of the technocratic adjustment to global market imperatives. Our capitalist democracies are about to shrink to mere façade democracies. These developments call for a scientifically informed enlightenment. But none of the pertinent scientific disciplines – neither economics nor political science or sociology – can, in and of themselves, provide this enlightenment. The diverse contributions of these disciplines have to be processed in the light of a critical self-understanding. Since Hegel and Marx it is precisely this that is the task of critical social theory, which I continue to regard as the core of the philosophical discourse of modernity.

### Note

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